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RELIGION AS A MARGINALISING AGENT IN BALDWIN'S *GO TELL IT ON A MOUNTAIN*

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ABSTRACT

Author James Baldwin describes the course of the fourteenth birthday of John Grimes in Harlem, 1935. Baldwin also uses extended flashback episodes to recount the lives of John's parents and aunt and to link this urban boy in the North to his slave grandmother in an earlier South. The first section follows John's thoughts, the second mostly his aunt's, the third his father's, the fourth his mother's, and the fifth again mostly John's. The title *Go Tell It on the Mountain* comes from a Negro spiritual song. The novel is steeped in the language of the King James Bible, and the Bible is a constant presence in the characters' lives; thus, a familiarity with Biblical stories can enhance the reader's understanding of the text. At the heart of the story three main conflicts intertwine: a clash between father and son, a coming-of-age struggle, and a religious crisis. Baldwin deals with issues of race and racism more elliptically in this novel than in his other works, but these issues inform all three of the text's central problem.

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Ten years in the making , *Go Tell It on the Mountain* launched Baldwin's career when it was published in 1953 to wide acclaim. The autobiographical novel told the story of John Grimes finding the Lord in a service in a Harlem church, on a day when the tensions of his family nearly claimed the life of his half- brother and the stifling dominance of his father, Gabriel, would be tested in the arena in which he found solace, strength, and vocation- the church. On the cusp of John's conversion in the church, the novel veers deep into the past of each of the principal adult characters, such that each person's distinct suffering, failure, temptations, and crimes, the rough record of failure and struggle that they had to undergo is evident.

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Indeed, according to some critics, these issues take central stage in the book, though subtly. John doesn't understand why his father hates him, reserving his love for John's younger brother Roy instead. He is torn between his desire to win his father's love and his hatred for his father (and the strict religious world this man represents). The boy believes himself to have committed the first major sin of his life a belief that helps precipitate a religious crisis. Before the night is over John will undergo a religious transformation, experiencing salvation on the "threshing-floor" of his family's storefront Harlem church. Yet this will not earn him his father's love. What John does not know, but the reader does, is that the man he thinks is his father "Gabriel" is, in fact, his stepfather; unbeknownst to John, Gabriel's resentment of him has nothing to do with himself but everything to do with Gabriel's own concealed past.

Baldwin sees the negro quite literally as the bastard child of American civilization. In Gabriel's double involvement with bastardy we have a re-enactment of the white man's historic crime. In Johnny the victim of this we have the archetypal image of a Negro child. By extending the metaphor Baldwin approaches the very essence of experience. The Negro child rejected by the whites for reasons he cannot understand, is afflicted by an overwhelming sense of shame. Something mysterious, he feels, must be wrong with him, that he is ostracized. In time he comes to associate these feelings with the colour of his skin- the basis, after all, of his rejection. He feels, and is made to feel, perpetually dirty and unclean:

"John hated sweeping this carpet, for dust arose, clogging his nose and sticking to his sweaty skin, and he felt that should he sweep it forever, the clouds of dust would not diminish, the rug would not be clean. It became in his imagination his impossible, lifelong task, his hard trial, like that of a man he had read about somewhere, whose curse it was to push a boulder up a steep hill" (29).

This quality of Negro life, unending struggle with one's own blackness, is symbolized by Baldwin in the family name, Grimes. One can readily understand how such a sense of personal shame might have been inflamed by contact with the Christian tradition and transformed into an obsession with the original sin. Gabriel's sermons take off from such texts as "I am a man of unclean lips", or "he which is filthy, let him be filthy still." The Negro's religious ritual, as Baldwin points out in an early essay, is permeated with colour symbolism: "wash me, cried the slave to his Maker, and I shall be whiter than snow! For black is the colour of evil; only the robes of the saved are white." Baldwin's protagonist, John discovers his identity. He belongs to those armies of darkness and must forever share their pain. To the question, who am I? he can now reply: I am he who suffers, and yet whose suffering on occasion is "from time set free." And thereby he discovers humanity, for only man can ritualize his pain. We are now very close to that plane of human experience where art and religion intersect. What Baldwin wants us to feel is the emotional pressure exerted on the Negro's cultural forms by his exposure to white oppression.

Baldwin depicts the insidious effects of systemic racism, producing for us a glimpse of the inhumanity that is the second and third generation result of the era of American slavery that took place virtually from the period of colonization through the American Civil War. The novel takes place in 1935, only 73 years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation (1862) and 70 years after Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant (April 1865), ending the American Civil War, and the ratification of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery (December 1865). Thus, the novel's characters are only slightly removed (a generation or two) from their slave ancestors. We learn, for example, in Part Two, that Gabriel's and Florence's mother was a slave, freed only by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War. As a result of this proximity to slavery, the characters of the novel suffer a special set of physical, psychological, and social circumstances: Gabriel and Florence, for example, have siblings they will never know because, as property, their siblings are taken from their mother for various reasons. The great migration to North originally holds promise of better times and circumstances for each character, but ultimately results in only a different, often more oppressive, level and manifestation of the racism they attempt to escape. These consequences of the American slave era and other

vestiges of this period that survived the Proclamation and the War constitute the racism that Baldwin depicts in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. It is second and third generation, slave-psyche racism, a racism based on the notion that one group of people is socially, genetically, and intentionally superior to another. This form of racism works its evil and malice on both the perpetrator and the victim.

The processes and philosophies that enable and defend the subordination of one group of individuals to another, based on propagating and advocating artificial values and ethics for economic or status reasons, tend to infect both the victims and the victimizers. Our very nature and culture cause us to defend what we do as morally right or definitely not wrong or, at least, morally neutral. Here and there, evil individuals may do evil things with the full knowledge that what they are doing is evil; however, most of us feel a need to convince ourselves and, most often, others that what we do is, at least, not wrong. When issues of great magnitude for or against one population to the advantage or detriment of another population especially when the outcome is to subordinate one group to another are given a rationale in defence of their existence, that rationale, usually steeped in arrogance and insensitivity on the part of its proponents, establishes and propagates irrational delusions of righteousness and natural superiority coupled with false standards of value and ethics in both the super ordinate and subordinate populations. These "delusions" of superiority are, in subsequent generations, generally accepted as moral or ethical truths.

It is a kind of major premise, almost a cultural reflex, something we believe or say or do without really knowing why. Hence, at some point in the American ethos that supported slavery one or both populations may generally believe and endorse religious fabrications, such as the African-American blackness being the mark of Ham, or uphold distorted cultural values, such as lighter skin tones are "better" than darker skin tones. The victims of such thinking may adhere to illusions of freedom and power, such as those found in physical and sexual conquests; they may harbour diminished expectations or standards of success and satisfaction; or they may resort to any escape possible, either through opiates (such as alcohol) or exaggerated adherence to religion and religious activity. Baldwin demonstrates this effect of racism in each of his major characters. Consider, for example, Florence's aversion to blackness; she uses skin whiteners (symbolic of self hatred), and she dislikes "common niggers," a symptom of a racist cataloguing within the race. Or consider the sadly casual explanation of how Rachel (Florence and Gabriel's mother) had lost her other children: ". . . all of whom had been taken from her, one by sickness, two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master's house." In the two main characters, John and Gabriel, however, Baldwin shows the effects of racism most vividly.

John is the central character in the main plot (the boy maturing physically and religiously); Gabriel figures most prominently in its major theme (the tragic effects of racism on a people and a society). Each is the product of his environment, and each reflects the debilitating nature and consequences of the racism in his environment. The views of John and Gabriel regarding racism are polar opposites. John is still a child, naive and inexperienced; Gabriel has suffered the realities of his subordinate position in a racist society; he is embittered, hardened, and defeated. While John recalls the kindness of a concerned teacher when he was sick, Gabriel can think only of injustices that African Americans endured where he grew up and where he lives. Gabriel proclaims whites to be wicked and untrustworthy, warning John that, when he is older, he will find out for himself how evil they really are. John has read about racism and the injustices and tortures that blacks had endured in the South, but he has experienced none of these things himself. Because John has had no overt, negative experiences with whites, "it was hard for him to think of them burning in hell forever," as Gabriel promises they will.

John, of course, is not without racist attitudes, however. In fact, John illustrates the most tragic and insidious variety of racism: racism directed against one's own people and hence oneself. While disparaging the compliments of those of his own race, John revels in the fact that he has also been singled out for praise by whites. Baldwin writes "John was not much interested in his people . . ." and "It was not only coloured people who praised John". When his white school principal tells John that he is a "very bright boy," John sees a new life opening up, but when his neighbours tell him that he will be a great leader of his people, he is unmoved.

Oppression is always about power of some sort, and the power in Mountain appears to be heavily skewed in Gabriel's favour, particularly within his family and his church. In the larger context, however, in issues relating to having dominion, sovereignty, or control over one's life, Gabriel has been emasculated, an idea brought graphically to life by the powerful image of the castrated African-American soldier in "Gabriel's Prayer." Gabriel's dominance of family is an illustration of a diminished and distorted standard of power. Gabriel is the product of the racist environments in which he has existed from birth. He has suffered the anxiety and confusion of the Southern, newly freed, slave environment; anticipation and separation anxieties associated with the Great Migration; and the angst and ego-devastating environment of the Northern oppression and bigotry. Although not an excuse for his cruel behaviour, it is an explanation for it. Gabriel cannot confront the society that marginalized him and give expression to his frustration and anger; thus he uses his family and the church as outlets for his emotions.

Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is thematically and structurally concerned with this social intercourse. This cycle of oppression, Baldwin seems to argue in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, stands in the blind spot of African America's desperate quest for racial redemption in a white supremacist social economy. Baldwin's novel is one of the few narratives of African-American literature that handles racism, sexism, sacred and conscious. Baldwin depicts the Grimes as a microcosm of post-emancipation African American- a community preoccupied with washing away the indelible stain of blackhood.

The novel is of racial relations showing how the white/black opposition only has meaning within a context of racial domination and power, thereby calling uncompromising attention to the gap between American democratic ideals and actual political practices. Baldwin was committed to the project of constructing alternative and oppositional modes of signification and in restoring racial integrity to the captured Africans, which would align him somewhat close with the projects of Amiri Baraka.

Baldwin's intention to reveal the problems of a negro's life and the religious aspects of the Pentecostal experience and in John's case the difficulties in finding identity, can clearly be defined. Although, Baldwin spent a long time of his life abroad, he always remained to be an American writer with great successors. It's his interest to reveal the problems of the society, especially dealing with the topics of racism, religion and homosexuality. *Go Tell It on a Mountain* brings together two important aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature the history of American race relation and the role of religion.

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