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## Engaging the Traumatic Past in an Apocalyptic Present

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## Engaging the Traumatic Past in an Apocalyptic Present

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin portrays religion, namely Pentecostalism, as a complex and problematic force in shaping black identity. John Grimes spends the majority of the novel struggling to define himself outside of the paradigms of a religion that inherently condemns him as a sinner because of his budding (homo)sexuality. This difficult task perturbs John until his inner conflict boils over in the dramatic conversion scene. In this moment of conversion, John confronts his own troubled past and by proxy confronts the horrible totality of the tragic history of his people in order to attain redemption. John Grimes' conversion scene reveals Baldwin's belief in the possibility of redemption and liberation via the acceptance of, and summary reconciliation with, one's past outside of a strictly religious context and the necessity of confronting the troublesome past in order to inform a new liberated black consciousness.

The John Grimes presented in the opening section of the novel is consumed by self-loathing and doubt, believing himself to be truly born in, and consumed by, the sins of his flesh: "...he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive...thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver...he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak...And the darkness of John's sin was like the darkness of the church..." (Baldwin 12-13). From the outset of the novel John is plagued by the idea of his own sinfulness as defined by the church. His sin of masturbation, made graver by its homoerotic inspiration, makes him a sinner by nature under the mandate of heaven as presented by his father, who conveniently shares a name with the angel Gabriel, God's messenger. Not even the image of himself as a child—typically associated with innocence—is free of sin. Rather his naked baby picture displayed on the mantle is a cause of great distress for him: "But John could never look at it without feeling shame and anger that his nakedness should be here so unkindly revealed. None of the other

children were naked...” (Baldwin 25). Even in his most elemental form, John feels separate from the rest of his family because of his sexuality, and despite it being unknown to him, his different parentage. John’s preoccupation with nudity and its relationship to purity and innocence stems from his repetition of the sin of Ham—witnessing his father’s nakedness—and informs his feelings of guilt and sin throughout the novel.

The Curse of Ham factors majorly into the interpretation of John’s experience of both blackness and homosexuality. In the Genesis narrative, Ham, son of Noah, commits a somewhat ambiguous transgression against his father. The most widely accepted interpretations encompass assertions ranging from the belief that in merely seeing his father’s nakedness that Ham sinned enough to be cursed, all the way to the belief that Ham sodomized Noah. Both of these interpretations are relevant to John’s relationship with Gabriel, his surrogate father. As a homosexual black male, John is the recipient of the fullest extent of the curse placed upon Ham by Noah. This biblical story has also historically been used as a justification for slavery of the Canaanites—the descendants of Ham—under the Israelites, and used as an explanation origin of dark skin. John is victim of society’s perversion of holy texts such as the Bible in order to promote their own agendas by adhering to the letter of the law, rather than from the spirit of the law that Jesus calls for Christians subscribe to. Even within the already persecuted black community, John is further alienated by his sexuality. Biblical narratives are biasedly interpreted in order to provide false-righteousness and justification for the abhorrent actions of those who have marginalized the black peoples socially, religiously, economically, and physically through slavery.

John Grimes fulfills the role of slave to the enslaved in his troubled relationship with his family and the church. As David Goldenberg argues:

The second constituent element of the slave relation is his status as a “socially dead person”... he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order...not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to his parents and living blood relations, but by extension...on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants (Goldenberg 7).

John Grimes certainly occupies this position of genealogical isolation, to an extent that even he is unaware of: he does not know that Gabriel is not his biological father. John senses his own isolation, and Gabriel contributes to this feeling by rejecting his adopted son at every turn. Even in the most fundamental way—sexually—John is isolated from the rest of his family, and his sexual differences leave him in a personal diaspora even within the larger context of the diaspora that is the Great Migration. John feels no sense of belonging, and is radically separated from any relationship with his past, because he quite simply lacks any knowledge of it. This lack of memory parallels the violent theft of history and tradition enacted on the African people’s by slavers. John is neither connected to his family nor his heritage, and as a result is left floundering with only the skewed lens of religion through which to view and judge his own character.

John’s utter sense of isolation is made manifest during the apocalyptic vision accompanying his conversion: “His father, his mother, his aunt, Elisha - all were far above him, waiting, watching his torment in the pit...And no they could not help him anymore - nothing could help him anymore...he wanted wings to fly upward and meet them...but his struggles only thrust him downward...” (Baldwin 230). The language in this passage is a clear callback to Dante’s depiction of Satan’s prison in *Inferno*. Lucifer famously keeps his wings, but they are now bat-like and feeble: the icy wind that emanates from the beating of Lucifer's wings only serves to further entrap him in the icy prison of his own making. Within the frame of

Pentecostalism, John is forced to equate himself with Satan himself, buying into that self-same image that Gabriel has projected onto him. However, John is able to best his father in the vision by accepting his pigeonholed role as the son of the devil: “I heard you , spitting, and groaning, and choking – and I *seen* you, riding up and down, and going in and out. I ain’t the Devil’s son for nothing” (Baldwin 234). John turns the image of Satan that Gabriel has projected back onto him with the mirror of truth. John has witnessed his father’s own sins of the flesh, and aligns Gabriel with the image of Satan horribly gnashing his teeth in futility while trying to escape. In this moment, John has trapped Gabriel in the ideological prison that he himself had been trapped in. Now the guilty Gabriel is left as Atlas, holding up the weight of systematically constructed sin, rather than the innocent John.

In the darkest moments of his vision, John is accosted by Gabriel: “His father’s eyes stripped him naked, and hated what they saw” (Baldwin 231). Once again John is perturbed by his own nakedness in the eyes of others. It is interesting to note that his only true issue with nudity comes when being observed by others, revealing that it is the system of morals defined by traditional religion that is problematic, rather than some inherent ugliness present in John. Immediately following this undressing, John relives the moment in which he repeated the sin of Ham: “he scrubbed his father’s back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father’s hideous nakedness. It was secret like sin, and slimy like the serpent...” (Baldwin 232). Gabriel’s naked body is likened to that serpentine visage of Satan, and yet the burden of sin is placed on John simply for bearing witness to this awful image. Baldwin criticizes the racist application of the story of the curse of Ham, and by extension rejects the legitimacy of religious narrative in offering redemption for the black man. Instead, Baldwin has John recognize the fallacy of sin and judgement handed down by his father, and indeed all fathers to their sons:

“Then John knew that a curse was renewed from moment to moment, from father to son. Time was indifferent...” (Baldwin 233). Baldwin points out the timeless nature of sin passed patrilineally that embodies the burden of slavery and blackness for African Americans. John is finally able to overcome his fear and shame at his own nakedness by recognizing at the prompting of the “ironic voice”—composed of the history denied him by society and father—that he “has everything his daddy got,” and finally rejects the hypocrisy of Gabriel’s judgement: “I hate you. I don’t care about your golden crown. I don’t care about your long white robe. I seen you under your robe, I seen you!” (Baldwin 234). John recognizes that under the guise of religious authority, his father is still merely a man like himself, and an incredibly flawed one at that. John is able to separate his father from God, and himself from Satan, and for the first time sees the dual nature of man: He is both Noah and Ham, both Cain and Abel, both God and Satan.

Zora Neale Hurston provides useful information to contextualize John’s vision: “The vision is a very definitive part of Negro Religion. It almost always accompanies conversion...The place of retirement is one most likely to have some emotional effect upon the seeker” (Hurston 85). John’s vision occurs in the church because it is the center of his emotional conflict. The church simultaneously defines and imposes his feelings of sinfulness and isolation as impressed upon him by Gabriel. Baldwin brings the issues with religion to the forefront without totally rejecting it as a pathway to freedom. Rather he calls for a new utilization of faith as a means of mending the wounds of the past through reframing and confronting trauma. John’s conversion becomes an opportunity for the rest of the community to achieve some level of personal redemption as well. Joseph Brown introduces the concept of the vision as performance: “The very construction of the performance leads to the inducement of the trance-state necessary for mystical engagement. This is also true of the story. We should find the same principles of

construction employed by those who produce literary performances” (Brown 60). This concept is helpful when interfacing with Baldwin’s usage of the vision. Indeed, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as a whole can be treated as the type of “literary performance” that Brown describes. Baldwin establishes the historical context of the novel through the “Prayers of the Saints” section. Baldwin constructs the “performance” of “The Threshing Floor” in order to allow John to confront the past that is mysterious to him, but has been elucidated to the reader—creating a sense of companionship with Baldwin, the author, separate from any connection with John as narrator. Brown posits that: “The great achievement of the novel is that, at the end, John Grimes has endured—come through—a revelation that saves his life and restores him to a radical wholeness that had been thwarted by the deliberate abuse of his putative father” (Brown 61). John achieves this wholeness of spirit within a religious context but through secular means. It is his confrontation with, and summary rejection of, the temporal passing of sin and guilt from father to son since the time of Noah that allows John to be saved. In reframing the biblical narrative of redemption through Christ’s sacrifice into the context of a bastard homosexual black teen’s conversion, Baldwin challenges the traditional narrative of religion, and introduces a more secular solution to the spiritual problems plaguing a Diasporic people still recovering from slavery.

Carol Henderson describes this route to redemption in “Knee Bent, Body Bowed: Re-Memory as Prayer of Spiritual Renewal in Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*”: “Prayer manifests itself as a dialogue between the “spirit” and one’s memory.” Because memory is static, Baldwin allows the concept of re-memory to function as a device which allows the sinner to reexamine the past through the process of prayer...the speaker reinstates a new forum from which memorial confrontation may occur” (75). John confronts his memories in his vision through the

touchstone of his spirituality, and is able to confront and overcome the traumas of his past, and the past of his ancestors. The reader can extrapolate John's conversion to Baldwin's promotion of a new model for interacting with—and potentially mending—the problems of the past via a hybrid historical/spiritual lens. Carol Henderson outlines a related theory:

Socially, the African-American church functions as a medium of great political influence, and power, literally delineating matrixes that dictate ideals of gender, class and salvation...Baldwin vividly presents and critiques these notions, offering the reader a glimpse into a world that not only must contend with the ideals of religion, but must also refigure these notions with the paradigmatic influences of the street...that skew one's ability to live a life of spiritual pureness and virtue (Henderson 77).

Baldwin certainly calls into question the typically redemptive function of the African American diocese, but it is more of a reframing within the context of rejection of religion as solution rather than simply the addition of the influences of “the street.” In the novel, the church functions as a source of social stagnancy for the black community—even John's conversion on the threshing floor is paradoxically not an entirely religious experiences—rather the church represents the false hope that Baldwin derides. There is no epiphanic salvation for the church members, only John transcends his inner turmoil, John who is decidedly alienated from the congregation and indeed religion itself throughout the novel.

Jerry Bryant posits in “Exorcising the Demon” that: “John is converted, not to the church, but to the whole life of his people. The redemption he finds is not through the grace of God but through the affirmation of himself” (Bryant 185). This reliving of the past that Bryant and Henderson allude to is the basis of Baldwin's model for a secular redemption for the oppressed African and African-American peoples. As Bryant nuances John's conversion: “...in the finals

throes of a semi-religious conversion, John Grimes is a picture of the new black who has struggled through the murk and fear of emotional repression to a mature and chastened acceptance of his condition” (184). For Baldwin, conversion is not a movement towards exclusivity, the flawed ideal that Florence strives for, but rather a tendency towards inclusivity and wholeness. Through his vision, John does not enter into a separate group of enlightened individuals; instead John confronts the traumatic history of his forebears and moves towards solidarity with all the oppressed. John’s conversion provides him the strength necessary to confront his father.

The final paragraph of the novel reveals the true extent of John’s newfound power: “And he felt his father behind him. And he felt the March wind rise, striking through his damp clothes, against his salty body. He turned to face his father—he found himself smiling, but his father did not smile” (Baldwin 263). Two biblical scenes are invoked here: first, Gabriel is positioned behind John, mirroring the biblical scene of Satan standing behind Christ during his temptations in the desert, and second, John’s turn to face his father mirrors that of Lot’s wife turning to catch a last glimpse of the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah. However when John turns back, he does not turn into a pillar of salt as Lot’s wife did. John remains unmolested because he has overcome the challenges of the past: he has already passed his true test on the threshing floor.

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