

The Works of James Baldwin: Expression of Estrangement and Isolation

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Abstract

Baldwin is one of America's most eloquent spokesmen, insistently pursuing personal and racial freedom in the morally and intellectually impoverished society. Baldwin chooses to see the problem of human relations in his novels. Baldwin perceives that the value of the Negro's special experience is its double-edgedness, the Negro's separateness from both Europe and Africa. Baldwin is keen on displaying the scars and wounds of oppression, exploitation, negation and denial. His novels represent the plight of their respective communities from which they hail. Baldwin's works portray the sense of isolation and resultant suffering in the attempt to find a personal identity in the society. Baldwin sees that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. Eventhough Baldwin stresses the human bondage that exists within the black community; he also recognizes, in this imagination at least, the deep, universal bonds of emotion that tie the hearts of people regardless of their colour of skin. Feeling isolated, the black community in America tries to seek refuge in religious rituals. The final and most pervasive assumption found in Baldwin's art is that all of mankind is united by virtue of their humanity.

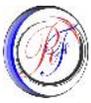
Key words

Sense of community – rejection – isolation – incapable of loving others - mankind united by virtue of humanity.

James Baldwin was one of the most versatile and influential artists of the post-World War II generation, creating memorable short stories, novels, plays, essays and children's books. The concept of the writer as prophet is revealed in Baldwin's writings. The artist functions as a social corrective; he alone is capable of helping the people to reconcile exalted images of themselves with truth about them. It is this truth which they actively seek to avoid because the terror of their deeds is too great for them to confront.

The paradox here is that the artist is of the people, a part of the people, and yet he is alone. Isolation, a condition which the people must avoid, is a circumstance that the writer must accept. Isolation becomes a necessary wedge between the writer and his society, but he can never allow his contact with that society to become severed. Though a product of the people, he must nevertheless maintain certain remoteness from his society in order to cultivate the position of objectivity which is indispensable to the prophetic role of the artist.

The final and most pervasive assumption found in Baldwin's art is that all of mankind is united by virtue of their humanity. Consequently, the ultimate purpose of the writer, from Baldwin's perspective, is to discover that sphere of commonality where, although differences exist, those dissimilarities are stripped of their power to block communication and stifle human intercourse.



Baldwin perceives that the value of the Negro's special experience is its double-edgedness, the Negro's separateness from both Europe and Africa. The problem is most in Baldwin's discussion of the Negro's past, and it is especially serious because he calls one to face the past honestly and to resist the temptation to invent a false one.

Beginning with the publication of his first and most highly respected novel **Go Tell It on the Mountain**, he garnered praise for exposing the racial and sexual polarization of American society and for challenging readers to confront these differences. Baldwin is one of America's most eloquent spokesmen, insistently pursuing personal and racial freedom in the morally and intellectually impoverished society. He sought to probe and penetrate the roots of protest literature, the anger and the rage, in order to discover a recognizable human emotion which reflected not only the reality but the potentiality of man.

Baldwin remarked in **The Devil Finds Work**, "Every trial, every beating, every drop of blood, every tear, were meant to be used by us for a day that was coming – for a day that was certainly coming; not for us, perhaps, but for our children" (17).

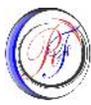
In An Interview with James Baldwin in the year 1988, Baldwin told Quincy Troupe,

I began to feel more and more homeless in terms of the whole relationship between France and me, and America and me has always been a little painful, you know. Because my family's in America I will always go back. It couldn't have been a question in my mind. But in the meantime you keep the door open and the price of keeping the door open was to actually be, in a sense, victimized by my own legend (36).

In his first novel, **Go Tell It on the Mountain** Baldwin analyzes his own terrific experiences of isolation as a child through John, with an openness that is the hallmark of all his writings. His own mother served as the model for the hero's mother Elizabeth, the symbol of the suffering, patient, guilt-stricken woman who goes out to protect her children from the wickedness of the street.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is a magnificent novel of black consciousness. Baldwin's use of the surname 'Grimes' for the different characters of the family whose 'grim' life stories are told is symbolic of the Negro American's ceaseless battle in America with his own 'blackness'. He portrays through the older characters the life and aspirations of the Negro men and women in the South and how a change in their outlook occurs at a later stage after coming north.

In **Go Tell It on the Mountain**, as young people, Elizabeth and Richard had seen New York as an escape from an intolerable situation in the South. For Elizabeth, it meant release from a tyrannical aunt; for Richard, from a racist society. The city also had held out a promise. Elizabeth viewed New York as a refuge for her innocent love, and Richard imagined it as a crucible containing the intellectual and aesthetic heritage of civilization. They soon



discovered that the city's freedom was a double-edged sword. If no one zealously watched over them, no one cared about them either.

John desires to find a sense of community. But Baldwin has shown that both Harlem and New York have failed the black child in his search for community. John is denied the sustenance of the earthly city but is given its horrors; it either rejects him or tries to destroy him.

Baldwin's hero John suffers from a severe sense of isolation from the family because he is a victim of his mother's discipline obeying many don'ts as the cost of his upkeep in the family, having to satisfy his elders. Being aware of his subordinate status in the family at several places in the narrative, he compares himself with Roy and feels bewildered and confused.

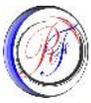
Go Tell It on the Mountain superbly portrays the sense of isolation and resultant suffering in the attempt to find a personal identity in the society. Baldwin is keen on displaying the scars and wounds of oppression, exploitation, negation and denial. His novels represent the plight of their respective communities from which they hail. Feeling alienated, the black community in America tries to seek refuge in religious rituals.

Baldwin himself became a preacher at the age of fourteen. He knew the world of church well. Fear was the principal motive of Baldwin's conversion. Undoubtedly he was writing of his own experience and speaking of the great anguish caused by it, in **Go Tell It on the Mountain**. Here in a subtle way, Baldwin portrays black consciousness too.

In **Giovanni's Room**, Baldwin wants the white religious zealot who placed the African on the auction block to be held accountable for his failure to demonstrate the Christian protectorate that he promised in Christ. Further, he wants the white biological forefather, through the repentance of his heirs, to face the retribution of damnation for the heinous crime of denying, enslaving, and murdering his own sons.

In **Another Country** Baldwin soundly castigates a country that would cause Rufus's fate to be as it is, and he blames America for being a loveless society, a society whose character is such that its inhabitants are incapable of loving either themselves or each other thereby causing one's own self and others to experience the feeling of isolation. Baldwin chooses to see the central problem of the novel as a problem of human relations. It is not a 'race' novel; for that matter most of its characters are white. It would seem to be about race because of its powerful opening chapter, but even there it is clear that Rufus's essential problems are the results of hang-ups other than race though race plays a part. Rufus is a central symbol and his problems are simply an extension of the problems of the other characters: their sense of alienation, their inability to relate, to establish love relationships beyond the most tenuous.

The musician in the works of Baldwin is more than a metaphor; he is the embodiment of alienation and estrangement, which the figure of the artist becomes in much of twentieth



century literature. Most of his characters have, at the center of their portrayal, an isolation from the society, the culture, and even from each other. They are also commentaries upon the brutal, emasculating, feared, and fearing, the land from which they are so estranged. The musician is also for Baldwin an archetypal figure whose referent is Black lives, Black experiences and Black deaths.

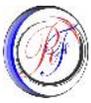
He is the hope of making it well enough to escape the danger of being Black, the living symbol of alienating from the past and hence from self and the rhythmical link with the mysterious ancestral past. That past and its pain and the transcendence of pain are always an implicit part of the musician's characterization in Baldwin. Music is the medium through which the musician achieves enough understanding and strength to deal with the past and present hurt (Williams 102).

In **Another Country** Baldwin does not underestimate the power of love, mysterious as its operations seem to be; but it is the power of hate that one really feels as one reads the novel.

Each of the major characters is suffering from a most profound isolation: estrangement from the past. Cass, in choosing to marry the son of a Polish carpenter, has been condemned to live in social exile from her aristocratic New England family; and Richard, in turn, has exchanged his Polish ancestry for the dubious fame and recognition which he achieves as a writer. Rufus becomes estranged from his family because of his licentious life style and his white mistress, Leona. Ida earns the contempt of her parents because she dares to become involved with a white sexual partner. Vivaldo's isolation from his alcoholic father and his relationship with Ida make him the black sheep of the family. Eric has been banished for his youthful, illicit intimacies with his black Alabama friend, LeRoy; and Yves has long since despised his mother, who seemed to enjoy bargaining her favours with the German soldiers. But the cross of alienation becomes too heavy for these people to bear, and they cry out in agony as they search for the redeeming power of love.

What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. What the novel reflects and at no point interprets is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn. **Another Country** tells Americans the sick truths about themselves.

If Beale Street Could Talk shows that at heart Baldwin was not a pessimist. In it Baldwin vividly expresses his feeling that Black Americans have learnt the truth about themselves through the children. And this conviction, however ephemeral it may have been, contributes to his wishfulness and optimism of the seventies. He has come to know the truth that black Americans can free themselves as they learn more about white Americans and that "the truth which frees black people will also free white people" (129). Eventhough Baldwin stresses the human bondage that exists within the black community, he also recognizes, in



this imagination at least, the deep, universal bonds of emotion that tie the hearts of people regardless of their colour of skin.

For Baldwin, the bondage that exists on Beale Street is hardly visible from outside. City life, as depicted by American realists from Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser down to James. T. Farrell and Richard Wright, often brings out isolation and loneliness to the residents. The city is a noisy, crowded place, yet people scarcely talk to one another. New York City, Baldwin's home town, also struck Baldwin as emblematic of the impersonality and indifference that plagued city life in America. On his way to the South on a writing assignment, he stopped by the city to rest and to readjust his life, spent on foreign soil for nearly a decade. But all he heard was, he has said in **No Name in the Street**, “[. . .] beneath the nearly invincible and despairing noise, the sound of many tongues, all struggling for dominance” (51).

It is ironic that the impersonality and estrangement which permeate Beale Street compel its residents to seek a stronger and more meaningful relationship with others.

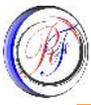
The suffering, bewildered people in **If Beale Street Could Talk** trapped in what is referred to as the garbage dump of New York City, blacks constantly at the mercy of whites, have not even the psychological benefit of the Black Power and other radical movements to sustain them. Though their story should seem dated, it does not. And the peculiar fact of their being so politically helpless seems to have strengthened, in Baldwin's imagination at least, the deep, powerful bonds of emotion between them.

In **The Fire Next Time** Baldwin says, “There was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair [. . .]” (57). Basically, this is the attitude toward Christianity that is expressed by the supporters of the Black Arts Movement. Christianity becomes a white man's religion, devoid of all love and compassion, designed to justify the social, political, and economic subjugation of the black man. The result of this influence, they contend, was the devastating assumption that endurance of the pains, the sufferings, the humiliations, and the frustrations inflicted by white society was a necessary prerequisite to the joy and happiness of the after life.

Baldwin told Kenneth B. Clark,

It is part of the dilemma of being an American Negro; that one is a little bit colored and a little bit white, and not only in physical terms but in the head and in the heart, and there are days - this is one of them - when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it ... (363).

Baldwin has come to represent for 'white' Americans the eloquent, indignant prophet of an oppressed people, a voice speaking, in an all but desperate, final effort to bring the Negroes out of what he calls their innocence. This voice calls them to their immediate duty for the sake of their own humanity as well as their own safety. It demands that they stop regarding the Negro as an abstraction, an invisible man; that they begin to recognize each Negro in his 'full weight and complexity' as a human being; that they face the horrible



reality of their past and present treatment of Negroes, a reality they do not know and do not want to know.

As Bone says,

There are psychic causalities on the Negro side as well. No human personality can escape the effects of prolonged emotional rejection. The victim of this cruelty will defend himself with hatred and with dreams of vengeance, and will lose, perhaps forever his normal capacity for love. Strictly speaking, this set of defenses, and the threat of self-destruction which they pose, constitute the Negro problem (13).

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