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The Internal Odyssey of Identity:  
James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and History

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in History

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by  
Brent Nelson Lamons  
August, 2006

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Dr. Elwood Watson, Chair  
Dr. Dale Schmitt  
Dr. Henry Antkiewicz

Keywords: James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, History, Identity

## ABSTRACT

The Internal Odyssey of Identity:

James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and History

by

Brent Nelson Lamons

This study investigates how James Baldwin thought about history and treats his first novel as an important document in extricating his construct of the past. A close reading of the work reveals that it is an examination rather than a symptom of two powerful forces that dominate Baldwin's psychology, his father and his history.

James Baldwin felt the individual interpretation of one's experience is just as important as the experience itself. The novel is an informative exposition of how people interpret their experience and how that interpretation affects their psychology. Through *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin recreates the personal history he knows little about and is afforded a psychological freedom he would have never known without its completion.

This study illuminates how useful fiction is to one's historical conscience and perception.

The research exposes how important a sense of history is to the formation of identity.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family. My wife, Christie, who is my ground wire and best friend, has shown me impervious support and love throughout this whole process. The view of my children, Maggie and Jack, sleeping in the crook of my arm has provided me with more inspiration than I can articulate here. I also dedicate this thesis to my treasured friend, Dr. Julian Stanley Brock. I love you all.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Elwood Watson for his guidance and advice throughout this process and his readiness to assist me in my academic endeavors. I thank Dr. Dale Schmitt for his thoughtful comments and willingness to always help in any way he can. I also thank Dr. Henry Antkiewicz for his interest in my research.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Most critics and scholars of James Baldwin agree that his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is his most important work. Opinions explaining why this is apparent vary. James Baldwin felt the piece was very important as well. He deemed it the novel he had to write if he was ever going to write anything else. The novel was a painful ten year production. Baldwin finished the novel in a small cabin in a small village in Switzerland. However, Baldwin never provided a sound explanation for the novel being so difficult or significant. This task, like interpreting what the novel means, is left to the reader's surmise.

This study is limited to the examination of James Baldwin's first novel and the essays he wrote after the completion of the novel. His first novel will be treated as an important document in the formulation of Baldwin's historical disquisition. The essays will be used for support material in understanding how Baldwin directly thought about history and how he felt his society treated his race history. An attempt to investigate every novel Baldwin had ever written and every diverse interpretation of them would be far too ambitious an undertaking. This study is relegated to the task of understanding how important Baldwin's first novel was to his construct of history and as a result to his sense of identity.

The novel centers on the religious/psychological conversion of a fourteen year old boy named John Grimes. John is a misguided, miseducated, and misunderstood African-American teenager who, on his fourteenth birthday, finds himself facing an internal conundrum of who he is. John has a confused sense of identity that has been confounded by his external influences. These external forces being the community he lives in and his physically and mentally abusive

step-father. John struggles to understand himself as a unique individual and comprehend what his experience and thoughts of that experience mean. All of John's internal anguish is exorcised in a religious seizure on the "Threshing Floor" of the "Temple of the Fire Baptized."

Experience is something each of the expository characters struggles with. The expository characters are John's father, Gabriel Grimes, his mother, Elizabeth Grimes, and his aunt, Florence. Baldwin forces each character to excavate his and her history in the form of prayer while at a Saturday night tarry service at their church. The characters feel a sense of shame in thinking about their past. However, no one feels a deeper sense of shame about the past than Gabriel, John's step-father. No one abuses or manipulates the interpretation of the past like Gabriel.

The autobiographical posture of the novel is unmistakable for anyone familiar with Baldwin's life. Baldwin had a religious experience similar to John's at the age of fourteen. This incident is described in Baldwin's book, *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin, like John, had a rigid, cold step-father who attempted to quash his sense of identity through abusive behavior. There could be many more parallels revealed that confirm how much Baldwin incorporated his own life and experience into the drama of the novel, but this task has been the focus of prior studies.

An important aspect of the novel is each title character's interpretation of his or her experience. For Baldwin, the interpretation of one's experience is just as important as the experience itself. Charles Scruggs asserts that, "Each character is haunted by his or her past, and each is trapped within his or her own ego."<sup>1</sup> Scruggs goes on to point out that, "the landscape of their memories is not factual but moral."<sup>2</sup> The characters recollect their past for moral reasons rather than searching for meaning in an honest excavation of it. Thus, individuals are not only

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Scruggs, "The Tale of Two Cities in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," *American Literature* 52, no. 1 (March, 1980), 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

responsible for their past but also for the interpretation of it. In this capacity, Carl Becker's theory that people are their own historian can be applied.<sup>3</sup> Through the medium of fiction, Baldwin produced a sense of history that is vital to a coherent sense of identity. James Baldwin extricates his construct of history in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Imperative to the exploration of this premise is the examination of how Baldwin thought about history. Although his was an unconventional historical method, it was still a historical method. There can be no attempt to critique Baldwin as a historian because he was an artist. He never claimed to be a historian. In fact, he disdained labels and hesitated to call himself an artist. Nonetheless, Baldwin's historical attitude must be considered before explaining how his view of history is untangled in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. A comprehension of his method for historical understanding provides a basis for a line of investigation that considers the following: how much his definition of history is drawn from his social experience in America, how he was educated about history and how that education affected his definition of it, how he reconciles the social and personal interpretation of history, and how important individual interpretation of the past is to the meaning of it in the present.

The exploration of Baldwin's notions of history is carried out by listening to his essayist voice. This could also be called his non-fictional accent. As an essayist, Baldwin leaves little to the imagination. He is forthright and direct in his essays. His essays provide a direct link to how he feels about a topic. His fiction clouds his meaning through created characters and motives. His essays allow analysis of the realities he has faced and the one that he is living. A close analysis of his essays reveals his unadulterated feelings about how important a sense of history is to a society and the individual within that society.

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<sup>3</sup>Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics*, (New York: F.S. Crofts and Co., 1935).

After having established the line of investigation with Baldwin's view of history, the problem of how Baldwin extricates his construct of history in his first novel can be examined. This problem centers on how Gabriel Grimes treats his personal history and how that affects his psychology and how his step-son John responds to Gabriel's damaged way of thinking. Gabriel represents a hollow way of thinking about the past and is an example of how an individual's psychology is damaged by that mentality. By analyzing Gabriel's character and what he meant to Baldwin, one can understand why he is such an important fixture in the extrication of Baldwin's historical construct. Gabriel is a composite metaphor for something that troubled and oppressed Baldwin's consciousness, his history.

John Grimes, Gabriel Grimes' step-son, is also an important element in the explanation of how Baldwin decodes his perception of the past. John's understanding of his experience and his thoughts of that experience is hindered by his oppressive father. By investigating what John's character represents and what his struggle means to Baldwin, his significance to Baldwin's extrication can be understood. By mining John and Gabriel's internal struggle one can understand why their struggle was so important to Baldwin's own.

A transdisciplinary approach is needed in the production of such an endeavor. Baldwin's two voices of essayist and novelist will be acknowledged throughout the work. The method of inspection also features two academic practices that when used in the same sentence instigates debate, literary analysis and history. At the outset, it must be understood that the treatment of Baldwin in this study will be that of an artist and not a historian. However, by combining these two methods of evaluation, an academic dexterity is created that allows the examiner to understand not only how Baldwin understood American history, but most importantly his own. Because Baldwin didn't know the whole truth about his personal history, by employing these

two methods of assessment one can better understand how important Baldwin's "historical imagination" was to his perception of history.

The aim of the study focuses on revealing how important the relationship is between the author and his work. In exposing how Baldwin's perception of history is initiated through the novel, an explanation for why *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is his most important work shall also be evolved. Baldwin as an artist was "his own test tube, his own laboratory," and the responsibility for his development as an artist lay in his own hands.<sup>4</sup> His artistic development might have been forever stunted if he had not in his first novel set out to "conquer the great wilderness of himself." By telling others of his pain, even if it was through fiction, Baldwin hoped to help others understand their anguish. His first novel was his way of illuminating the internal darkness that threatened to exterminate his definition of himself as a historical creation. The comprehension of this premise is fundamental in the construction of identity, specifically, in this case, James Baldwin's identity.

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<sup>4</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), 316.

## CHAPTER 2

### PREVIOUS LITERATURE

While there is a resurgence in the study of James Baldwin, as Dwight A. McBride points out, the scholarship is still lacking.<sup>5</sup> The study of Baldwin's first work is particularly in need of renewal and revision. The infatuation of critics with Baldwin's later fiction is the main focus of contemporary studies. However, many social commentators forget or rather don't realize how important his first work is. An attempt has been made in this study to re-examine the importance of his first piece. The approach and argument espoused in this re-examination is unique. Thus, a review of previous literature can only be concerned with those outmoded conceptions of the novel that have dominated the interpretation of it up until this point. However, other's notions of the novel are important to the development of the main argument put forth in this study. By knowing and understanding what has been said about *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, one can perceive what needs to be comprehended about it. These sources represent a menagerie of opinion and interpretation that was detrimental in the formulation of the examiner's cognitive approach to James Baldwin and his relationship to his first novel.

Anyone familiar with Baldwin's life must be aware of how *Go Tell It on the Mountain* had strong autobiographical nuances. W.J. Weatherby stated that the novel was about James Baldwin's "painful family memories." The resemblance of the characters in the novel to those in Baldwin's real life was very close. Weatherby stated that the most accurate of the characters was the father Gabriel Grimes. However, Weatherby has a flawed statement when he says, "He (James Baldwin) had no difficulty now in writing about his painful family memories."<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup>Dwight McBride, *James Baldwin Now*, (New York: New University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>6</sup>W.J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1990), 105.

validity of this statement is shaky. The novel was so painful and hard for Baldwin to write primarily because he was dealing with his family memories and lack thereof.

Weatherby went on to comment on how Baldwin's experience shaped his voice in the novel. Weatherby scoffed at the assertion made by Philip Vaudrin that, "it deals more with the lives of other people by far than it does with anything Baldwin himself could have experienced first hand."<sup>7</sup> Vaudrin made a strong point because the novel does intensely deal with the lives of other people but what Vaudrin and Weatherby fail to grasp is that all these lives in their fictional limitations and their non-fictional context have shaped Baldwin's artistry.

Many scholars feel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is Baldwin's most important work. The first individual to point out why this may be true was Robert Bone. Bone stated that the novel results in a "prose of unusual power and authority. One senses in Baldwin's first novel a confidence, control, and mastery that he has not attained again in the novel form."<sup>8</sup> Bone felt that Baldwin's first novel was so successful because he, "maintains an ironic distance from his material, even as he portrays the spiritual force and emotional appeal of storefront Christianity."<sup>9</sup> Bone also made a clever observation of symbolism when he expounded on how the last name of the family in the novel, Grimes, represented how Baldwin and the characters in the novel felt about the color of their skin in association with their existence. Bone believed that Baldwin intended to make the reader realize that dirt and impurity was an association that was deeply historical as it related to the image of the Negro in America. Bone's essay is one of the most thoughtful and collected pieces of analysis on the novel that has been produced.

James Campbell points out how important the figure of the father was to the development of the novel by discussing how one of the titles of early manuscript for *Go Tell It on the*

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 113

<sup>8</sup>Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 219.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 220.

*Mountain* was “In My Father’s House.”<sup>10</sup> Campbell also reveals that the first line of the novel, “strikes an autobiographical note.”<sup>11</sup> Campbell goes on to emphasize that John was a stranger unto himself and also to the outside world. John, like Baldwin, felt alien and that his identity was mistaken and misunderstood by himself and those around him. Campbell makes a strong connection when he states that, “it (the novel) is informed by deep autobiographical feeling, from which Baldwin had distanced himself during the writing of the novel and in the months immediately following its completion.”<sup>12</sup> It appears such a pronouncement is true, but Campbell limits his perception by not understanding that the novel was also informed by other deep feelings other than autobiographical.

James Campbell in his study traces the history of the novel’s production. He illuminates two titles the novel had before settling on *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. According to Campbell, the novel was called, *Crying Holy* and *In My Father’s House*. Campbell said that “*Crying Holy* took on the aspect of a prison, from which he (Baldwin) frequently attempted to escape through new projects, new titles, new first chapters.”<sup>13</sup> It appears that Campbell had never read these early drafts of the novel because Book one of the original *Crying Holy* was titled “Glad Tidings” with the subtitle of “The Prisoner.” Book one was changed to “The Sacrifice” before finally settling on “The Seventh Day.”<sup>14</sup>

Michael Fabre feels that the novel is about a dysfunctional and competitive relationship between a father and a son. Fabre stated that the father and son relationship throughout the novel, “is complicated by the inability of the fathers and sons (like husbands and wives) to come

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<sup>10</sup>James Campbell, *Talking At the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1992), 30.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 76

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>13</sup>James Campbell, *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett, and Others on the Left Bank*, (New York: Scribner, 1995), 27.

<sup>14</sup>James Baldwin Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

together.”<sup>15</sup> Fabre goes onto point that because John does not want to become like his father and realizes he despises him, he becomes the “anti-son” and because of this Gabriel then becomes the “anti-father.”<sup>16</sup> However, one might look at this another way; John became the “anti-son” because he had an “anti-father.” The subject of fathers fascinates Fabre. He says, “the novel plays with a constellation of fathers – unknown and mythical father, real and legitimate father, putative father, possible father, adulterous husband and father of a bastard.”<sup>17</sup>

The father and son concept in the novel is further observed and discussed by Horace Porter. Porter asserts, “Baldwin lets us know that a principal theme of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* will be paternal priority – the inescapable consequences of a father’s life working themselves out in the life of a son.”<sup>18</sup> Porter declares that the struggle between John and his father Gabriel is somewhat Oedipal. Porter also points out how Baldwin’s narrative style was heavily influenced by the writings of Henry James. He states the Henry James novel, *The American*, like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, “suggests the redemptive power of Art, Art as religion.”<sup>19</sup> Porter produces a number of original observances that help the reader get inside the mind of the author.

Another study concerned with fathers and sons in James Baldwin’s fiction was written by Edward Jackson. Jackson’s study is a broad look at many writings of Baldwin’s fiction and the father and son relationship present in each. Jackson points out how John cannot accept his heavenly Father because he hates his earthly father who is supposed to be the symbol of Christianity in their family. Jackson points to how, “Baldwin uses the biblical legend of the

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<sup>15</sup>Michael Fabre, “Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,” *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Kenneth Kinnamon, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), 123.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>18</sup>Horace Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 115.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 107.

curse of Ham to illustrate the guilty father and rejected son syndrome.”<sup>20</sup> While his point is thoughtful and focused, the limitation of Jackson’s study is that the novel encompasses a great deal more than a dysfunctional relationship between father and son.

Louis Pratt asserted that the novel was a perpetual exposition of struggle. Pratt stated that the whole novel centered on people’s struggles. The first struggle Pratt describes most successfully and agreeably is the character’s struggle with their past. Pratt then switches to a religious tone in the discussion of the “struggle of the flesh.” Pratt does a respectable job of observing connections in the character’s feelings of fear of the flesh, the fear of falling from grace and attempting to escape punishment for what sins and crimes have already been committed in their not so distant past. Pratt ends with a point on how most of the characters in the novel are infatuated with the love of power rather than with power of love.<sup>21</sup>

Clarence Hardy closely examines the important element of religion in Baldwin’s first work. Religion is extremely important to the novel’s drama. Hardy realizes this. He explores how others have responded to the work. He highlights two critic’s comments that the novel was “an ironic indictment of Christianity” and how the other “saw only the ‘memory of Christianity’ in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Hardy’s review of the work explores the links between Christianity and how African-Americans in the context of the novel view themselves. Hardy states, “Baldwin in his first novel does engage, even if less explicitly, how black self-loathing and Christianity are interwoven in black life.”<sup>22</sup> Hardy declares that Baldwin makes his characters associate their Blackness with dirtiness, shame, and sin. There are glaring examples of this. One of which can be found in the name of the subject family in the novel, Grimes. Hardy

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<sup>20</sup>Edward Mercia Jackson, “Fathers and Sons: An Analysis of the Writings of James Baldwin,” (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1975), 17.

<sup>21</sup>Louis H. Pratt, *James Baldwin*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

<sup>22</sup>Clarence Hardy, *James Baldwin’s God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 30.

also points this out and allows the reader to realize how important the novel was to Baldwin's relationship to Christianity.

Carolyn Sylvander makes points that are closely related to the argument of this study. Sylvander declares that the novel's point of impact lies with the author's use of history, "personal and collective – on an individual, whether or not that individual is aware of it."<sup>23</sup> The two characters that do not realize how history has impacted their lives are Gabriel and John. Gabriel does not want to realize it and John desperately does. Lynn Orilla Scott supports this notion and takes it a step further in stating that the novel was also an example of how history can be abused when passed from generation to generation.<sup>24</sup> However, she fails to realize that the characters abuse their history by distancing themselves from it. Thus, history in the novel can be understood to be something that is felt by the characters, an unspoken burden that oppresses them all in some way.

Another spark of Sylvander's genius is when she relates John to whom she feels is his biblical counterpart, Ishmael. Sylvander states, "Ishmael, the disinherited outcast, comes to us here in the form of John, figuratively if not literally disinherited, and suggests the disinherited, outcast black in American history."<sup>25</sup> Baldwin had deep feelings of being disinherited and rejected by his father and his society. Sylvander's observations of the novel tactfully link how these feelings were integrated into his first work.

The novel also exudes a strong religious theme. Roger Rosenblatt observes that everyone in the novel "wants to change, because everybody wants to be saved, and salvation here is

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<sup>23</sup>Carolyn Sylvander, *James Baldwin*, (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1980), 36.

<sup>24</sup>Lynn Orilla Scott, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 102.

<sup>25</sup>Carolyn Sylvander, *James Baldwin*, (1980), 42.

connected with change.”<sup>26</sup> Rosenblatt makes a solid observation that illuminates how salvation is related to a form of liberation from the expository character’s former selves. Rosenblatt goes on to say that, “There is supposed to be salvation and safety in the church.”<sup>27</sup> The characters use the church as a form of escape from the pressures and realities of the outside world. However, the characters, especially Gabriel, find in their religion an escape from the darkness and shame of their past lives. Thus, religion for each character is a form of survival and escape. However, in using religion in this way each character’s grip of reality is weakened and damaged.

Stanley Macebuh correlates Baldwin’s real life experience with the religious aspect of the novel. Macebuh contends that the novel was an attempt by Baldwin to rid himself of the personal corruption his church had instilled in him. He also points out Baldwin’s bitter feelings against the church and how the novel was an assertion of Baldwin’s long “quarrel with God.”<sup>28</sup> Macebuh goes on to declare that, “such a quarrel could only with great difficulty be made the essential theme of a successful novel.”<sup>29</sup> He believes that John resembles Baldwin because of his apprehension toward religion and fragile durability of his conversion. Macebuh further points out that the personification of the God in the novel is that of a vengeful God for vengeful minds. Macebuh exhibits a unique ability to tap into the religious psychology of both the author and the characters he produces.

The hermeneutics and structure style of the novel are closely examined by Shirley Allen. Allen asserts that, “there are at least three different types of irony in the novel.”<sup>30</sup> She continues, “In order to transcend the limitations of this point of view, Baldwin uses irony in the

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<sup>26</sup>Roger Rosenblatt, “*Out of Control: Go Tell It on the Mountain and Another Country*,” *James Baldwin*, ed. by Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 81.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>Stanley Macebuh, *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*, (New York: The Third Press, 1973), 51

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>Shirley Allen, “The Ironic Voice in Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,” *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. by Therman B. O’Daniel, (Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), 30.

narrator's diction, irony of statement, and event in the action, and an ironic voice as a character."<sup>31</sup> The type of irony that Allen most successfully articulates is the, "ironic voice as a character." Allen traces the irony specifically within the character of John. She highlights the irony between the fictional character of John and of his real life counterpart, James Baldwin. Though she toggles back and forth between ironic voice of the character and the author, most of her assessment is an inter-textual exploration of incongruity within John Grimes' inner voice.

A good example of misguided perception of the novel is presented by Roger Clegg. Clegg asserts that one never really knows the characters of the novel are Black until three pages into the work. Clegg goes on to claim that, "*Go Tell It on the Mountain* could have been written with white characters."<sup>32</sup> Clegg greatly underestimates and miscalculates the influence of the culture the novel is centered on. Such an assertion is foolish for the novel could never had been written with white characters because it is laced with implicit and explicit tones of how racial injustice affects and shapes the character's point of reference and worldview.

Rosa Bobia in her exhaustive work to understand James Baldwin's reception in France, stated that some critics, "insist on using Baldwin's novel as a socio-political document in the process of which, its literary value tends to be ignored."<sup>33</sup> She went on to assert that in France that many saw him more as a political activist rather than a novelist. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was not treated as a work of art as it should have been initially. Bobia concludes that the reception of Baldwin's first work in France can be summed up by saying it was an "intimate relationship of Black American literature and Black American music, the expectation of exotic

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>32</sup>Roger Clegg, Review of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *The American Enterprise* 10, no. 1 (January 1999), 84.

<sup>33</sup>Rosia Bobia, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin in France*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 17.

elements, and a tendency to universalize the historical and social nature of African-American literature.”<sup>34</sup>

Trudier Harris is one of the foremost academics who has studied James Baldwin. In her work *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, Harris produced an atypical interpretation of Baldwin’s first work. Harris is very sensitive to the strong masculine themes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and highlights how those themes detract from the richness of character for the women in the novel. Harris declares that, “The black women in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) are all limited in the emotional relationships they form with the men in their lives.”<sup>35</sup> Harris continues, “They are taught to be other-centered, to be preoccupied with the things that form a part of their lives beyond themselves and too little occupied with their own hopes, dreams, and aspirations.”<sup>36</sup> The women in the novel, Harris contends, are conceived as “willing scapegoats for the male ego.” They sacrifice and are made to do so in order to allow a silencing of their gender. This relegates them to their traditional role of being a silent subject with only a presence to offer. Thus, the emotional and narrative development of the women in the novel is limited by James Baldwin’s unwillingness to allow them to escape the role Black society and society in general have constructed for them.

The most recent piece of criticism was also edited by Trudier Harris. Harris’ work is a compilation of five essays concentrating on various aspects of the novel that had not been explored. Harris wrote the introduction to the work and highlighted everything from its “background and composition” to the critical tradition of the novel. The work features five essays by Michael Lynch, Bryan R. Washington, Horace Porter, Vivian M. May, and Keith

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup>Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 12.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

Clark. The two strongest essays in the anthology are Bryan Washington's and Horace Porter's. Harris' anthology is by far the best and most recent piece of scholarship on the novel. It is a breath of fresh air on a subject in dire need of renewal. The scholarship on the novel, up until Harris' work, was festering under outdated notions of what others have repeated and supported, yet have not expounded on for some 60 years. Harris' work provides a fifth dimension to the novel's perception that hopefully will instigate a bigger resurgence in the critical reading of Baldwin's first novel.

Washington focuses on the intense emotions the character John felt for the character Elisha in the novel. He also considers the ever present influence of Henry James in the novel and how James' conception of homosexuality can be contrasted to the novel's hidden message of it. Washington goes on to say that there is a strong sexual ambiguity and confusion littered throughout the novel that seems to distort and underscore the issue of sexuality the in work. Washington states that, "he (Baldwin) is unable to rescue homosexuality, for which James's texts prove the model, from homophobia, for which James also provides the model."<sup>37</sup> Washington characterizes the homosexuality in the novel "the love that dare not speak its name."<sup>38</sup> Washington felt Baldwin was serving a dualistic master; one spiritual (God) and one literary (James). While Washington writes a probing essay he cannot answer his own question and leaves the reader with this thought: "Baldwin's dual allegiance will not permit the full disclosure, the complete articulation, of a looming homosexual alliance."<sup>39</sup>

In Horace Porter's essay he illuminates how preoccupied Baldwin was with historical dehumanization of Blacks that was part of the white southern tradition. The piece also discusses

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<sup>37</sup>Bryan R. Washington, "Wrestling with "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name": John, Elisha, and the "Master," *New Essays on Go Tell It on the Mountain*, ed. by Trudier Harris, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

and examines the novel's use of black rage and its uses. Porter exclaimed, "Two themes inextricably linked in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* involve the perpetual existence of black rage and the manner in which such rage can either be self-destructive or transformative."<sup>40</sup> Porter continues to say that, "These two themes are connected to the image of the South in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* because, as Baldwin sees it, the incipient black rage is partly the legacy of the South playing itself out in the individual as well as collective lives of blacks in the North."<sup>41</sup> Porter also examines Baldwin's use of memory in constructing each character's psychological dynamics.

A very well-rounded and firm grasp of the novel and the themes prevalent throughout is presented in David Leeming's literary biography of Baldwin. Leeming was Baldwin's secretary and personal assistant for many years and a talented writer in his own right. Leeming reveals many themes and aspects of the novel from the autobiographical to the novel's development and eventual completion. However, Leeming's strongest contribution to the interpretive cannon of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is his discussion of the muted homosexual theme found in the work. Leeming states that the homosexual tones in the novel were muted because of the time and place the novel encompassed. Leeming declared that the novel was about love. The novel, Leeming contested, was a way for Baldwin to both search for and explore his feelings of sexuality and was the instigating factor for the creation of his second novel, *Giovanni's Room*.<sup>42</sup>

The focus and direction of this thesis was also informed by dissertations. Two that are worth mentioning were written by Kenneth Russell Reid and Jocelyn Eleanor Whitehead

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<sup>40</sup>Horace Porter, "The South in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: Baldwin's Personal Confrontation," *New Essays on Go Tell It on the Mountain*, ed. by Trudier Harris, 64.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 65

<sup>42</sup>David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, Inc., 1994).

Jackson. Both of these dissertations would serve the scholastic community of James Baldwin better if they were available to a broader audience.

Jackson studies the existential elements present in the novel. The study also deals with the abstract notion of identity and the confusion of it. Jackson states that the, “novel more importantly prefigures Baldwin’s search for the integrated ‘I.’”<sup>43</sup> She declares that many of the expository characters in the novel embrace the confinement of the spiritual world but at the expense of any real possibility of emotional release or self-discovery by attempting to escape what they cannot, their experience. She goes on to assert that the novel instigated the beginning of the “existential posture” that her work already examined. The character’s attempt to transcend their experience creates a blurred vision of self within the interior of each individual. Jackson’s study gets at the heart of the existentialist vein of interpretation of the novel and how such an interpretation aids in the conception of the novel’s abstractions in the character’s identities.

The second dissertation of importance written by Kenneth Russell Reid discerns that the novel was so successful because of the writer’s ability to control his subjects. Reid observed that Baldwin never became too involved in the lives of the characters he produced. Baldwin’s aesthetic distance he achieved in the novel made its message so strong and believable. However, Reid made a mistake in his assessment when he discussed John’s development within the drama of the novel. Reid declared that John was the only plausible product of his environment. There could have been any number of possible products as the result of the environment that John was raised in. A good example of a very different result of this would be the character Roy, John’s

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<sup>43</sup>Jocelyn Eleanor Whitehead Jackson, “The Problem of Identity in the Essays and Selected Novels of James Baldwin,” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1973), 181.

younger brother. John's circumstance and environment could have produced any number of possible characters with very diverse emotions and plausible responses.<sup>44</sup>

Most reviews of the novel, with the exception of those found in anthologies, merely provide synopsis and plot summary of the novel or reiterate what has been established in critical essays about the novel. Few reviews in the form of independent articles in journals and newspapers could be found that established and followed a linear argument. Many critics' understanding of the novel and discussion of it is too broad and falls short of a singular, focused examination of Baldwin's first work. Many of the reviewers of Baldwin's other work used *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as a yardstick to measure the success of the novel under examination. From the time of the novel's publication until his novel *Another Country*, his first work was widely written about. However, some Baldwin scholars feel that *Another Country* was his most important piece. There was a resurgence of critical response to his first novel after the publication of *The Fire Next Time* that came about during the 1960s.

From the sixties forward, there was very scant treatment of Baldwin's first work. Rolf Lunden's critique of the novel is excepted from the latter statement. Lunden wrote his article in the early eighties and focused heavily on the articulation of the African-American religious tradition in America. As Barbara Olson points out Lunden felt that the novel was neither a letter of vindication for circumstance nor an "ironic indictment of Christianity."<sup>45</sup> Lunden dispels the traditional myths that had been evolved by most critics citing that the novel, "is not a Christian novel, in the sense that it tries to convince the reader to come to Christ, but it is a novel about

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<sup>44</sup>Kenneth Russell Reid, "James Baldwin's Fiction: Literary Artistry in Special Pleading," (Ph.D. diss., Kansas State University, 1971).

<sup>45</sup>Barbara Olson, "'Come-to-Jesus Stuff' in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*," *African-American Review* 31, no. 2 (Summer, 1997), 296.

Christian experiences and Christian values.”<sup>46</sup> After Lunden’s interpretative undertaking of the novel no real scholarship on the novel surfaced until Trudier Harris’ work in 1995.

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<sup>46</sup>Rolf Lunden, “The Progress of a Pilgrim: James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,” *Studia Neophilologica* 53 (1981), 115.

## CHAPTER 3

### JAMES BALDWIN ON HISTORY

Carl Becker felt people were their own historians. James Baldwin felt the same way. He knew the interpretation of his life and his experience lay in his hands. Becker stated that people create “useful myths” about the past.<sup>47</sup> Baldwin believed people created “myths” about the past however how useful they are was debatable. Baldwin declared, “The truth about the past is not that it is too brief, or too superficial, but only that we, having turned our faces so resolutely away from it, have never demanded from it what it has to give.”<sup>48</sup> Baldwin agreed with Becker that everyone is their own historian on some level, and that historians should create useful histories, but should do away with any legend about the past that is untrue. Baldwin believed that any myth constructed and perpetuated about the past can never be healthy for understanding oneself and one’s personal and collective past. However, such an attempt will not be without its critics, for Baldwin is seen by most scholars as an artist. There is no doubt that Baldwin is an artist. Nonetheless, artists serve many purposes. In James Baldwin’s case his “art” allows him to reveal a dimension of human complexity that trained disciples of history oftentimes miss. This dimension is informed by his own personal experience and by “depth of involvement” with the so-called “American Experience.” In Baldwin’s social diagnosis of how Americans treat or America treats its past his method of understanding and constructing history and how that affects the individual’s psychology can be traced.

Baldwin’s historical disquisition is by no means without its flaws. Baldwin’s emotional attachment to his experience in the history he describes and interprets stunts his perception of

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<sup>47</sup>Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian*, (New York: F.S. Crofts and Co., 1935), 231.

<sup>48</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (New York: The Beacon Press, 1955), 136.

how others feel and have written about American history. Thus, Baldwin's view of history is sometimes more autobiographical than historiographical. Baldwin's academic negligence in writing about and thinking about history is one of his flaws in thinking about history. Baldwin's flaws and strengths in historical thinking are discussed throughout the chapter. Astute distinction is required for an even handed assessment of James Baldwin historical consciousness.

Baldwin strove to understand himself as a historical creation. In this task his social circumstance affected not only his view of the world around him but also himself. His environmental influence had limited his understanding of himself because it endorsed a corrupt way of thinking about history. However, his situation was limiting because of his biological circumstance. Baldwin felt the interior life was a real life. It was in this sphere that interpretations of past and present either collided or never met. Baldwin thought in the case of the American consciousness, they never met. This internal strife was a big problem for Baldwin and one he became obsessed with. Because of this, America could never hope to achieve any sense of being a historical creation. Baldwin stated that, "the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly."<sup>49</sup> In his social diagnosis of his country's historical negligence, or amnesia, Baldwin found the basis of his historical understanding and his method of assessing the mistreatment of the past by society and how that affected the psychology of the individual within that society. The characters in his novels provided him with a portal by which he could assess how the social abuse of history affected the psychology of the individual.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (The Beacon Press, 1955), 6.

<sup>50</sup>C.W.E. Bigsby stated concerning Baldwin's characters and their textual relationship to history, "History, memory, and belief are at odds with the drive for self-creation and the need for personal alliances which can deny the reality of boundaries. Thus, his characters tend to adopt an ambiguous stance with regard to time." Thence, Bigsby saw Baldwin's characters identities and development being stifled by history. This point is in congruence with how Baldwin felt history was an oppressive force for he expresses it through the characters he creates. C.W.E. Bigsby, "The Divided Mind of James Baldwin," *James Baldwin*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 116.

An important element in understanding the epistemological construction of James Baldwin's view of history is his point of reference, i.e. how he formulated his historical attitude. James was an African-American raised in Harlem who had lived his earliest years in poverty and had been exposed to the harsh realities of racial injustices at an early age. He had, up until the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a confused sense of his sexuality, place, and ultimately his identity as a result. Baldwin discovered the only way he could ever achieve a sense of self and place was to use the past he had so long become estranged from and abandoned. Baldwin felt that the individual must understand his/her history and "Know whence you came. If you know whence you came there is no limit to where you can go."<sup>51</sup> Baldwin deeply wanted to know whence he came and the beginning of his historical ontology began with his first novel.

A key concept in understanding Baldwin's view of history is his conceptualization and impetus he places upon experience. Baldwin exclaimed that, "one writes out of one thing only – one's own experience." It appears that Baldwin was specifically writing from his personal experience with a society obsessed with innocence and purity. Baldwin took issue with Americans as they strive to evade their experience. Baldwin said, "Those who evade all genuine experience, have therefore no way of assessing the experience of others and no way of establishing themselves in relation to any way of life which is not their own."<sup>52</sup> A dismissal of experience was a form of moral, historical, and self evasion. Baldwin observed that Americans have divested themselves of their experience. This created a limitation of human connection with all that has come before and all that will come after. Of origins Baldwin exclaimed, "one may leave the group that produced him – he may be forced to – but nothing will efface his

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<sup>51</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 8.

<sup>52</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 7, 41.

origins, the marks which he carries with him everywhere.”<sup>53</sup> Baldwin knew he could never escape what had come before and, thus, searched for ways to examine his “marks” as best he could and debunk the myth that innocence could ever be preserved.<sup>54</sup>

Baldwin stated that Negroes, “have no other experience besides the experience on this continent and it is an experience which cannot be rejected, which yet remains to be embraced.”<sup>55</sup> However, experience for Baldwin was not easy to assess for it is difficult to embrace. It was shameful. In fact, it was quite painful and trying in some cases. “People don’t want to understand or excavate their past because of their fear of experience.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, to excavate one’s experience and attempt to understand it, one also must dig deep in one’s consciousness and examine attitudes and feelings that one would like to forget, but cannot afford to.

The element of connection with one’s past is important to Baldwin’s understanding of himself and the world around him. Baldwin stated, “the American Negro has the need to establish himself in relation to his past.” Baldwin went on to say, “that this depthless alienation from oneself and one’s people is, in sum, the American Experience.”<sup>57</sup> In trying to achieve this connection Baldwin wanted to find how or, “in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me to other people instead of divide me from them.”<sup>58</sup> Baldwin had a strong affirmation that the Negro’s past has been taken from him, and that his, the “Negro’s,” shameful

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<sup>53</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 10.

<sup>54</sup>Lawrie Balfour suggests that Baldwin gives two responses to American racial history. One is labeled “the rage of the disesteemed.” In this, Baldwin feels that the oppressed are more than just powerless victims of a cultural lie. The second response to “American racial history” is innocence. Balfour, states that by innocence Baldwin, “means a willful ignorance, a resistance to facing the horrors of the American past and present and their implications for the future.” Balfour laces this interpretation with an explicit imperative and concern she felt Baldwin had for American Democratic principles. Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 42.

<sup>56</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody*, 240.

<sup>57</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes*, 123.

<sup>58</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, (Vintage Books), 4.

history “was carried, quite literally, on his brow.”<sup>59</sup> Before the completion of his first novel, Baldwin desperately wanted to know how he could recover what had been taken from him. He would later come to the realization that what had been taken from him would be forever lost without an act of invention that can be found in his first and most important work.

All this discussion of experience leads the examiner to the conclusion that Baldwin’s search for connection implies recognition of common experience. Baldwin, in this sense, was guilty of creating a paradox. In his essay “A Question of Identity,” found in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin states there “can be no such thing as a common experience.” Rather for Baldwin, experience is a very “private” and “a very largely speechless affair.” Thus, the question is raised, “What kind of experience is Baldwin speaking of, national or personal?” Baldwin’s definition of experience is a deeply personal one. Although he speaks of how the nation rejects or denies its experience, it is how this sense of rejection affects the psychology of the individual. Hence, the question becomes one that rests with the individual. Baldwin declares people cannot deny their experience or “depth of involvement” with their country and the surrounding world, however limited that may be. The question involves an implied sense of responsibility for one’s own development.<sup>60</sup>

As society’s “beast in the jungle of statistics,” Baldwin was made to feel shameful about his history. Baldwin stated that the Negro’s history is shameful because Negroes are made to believe so. “Shameful; for he was heathen as well as black and would never have discovered the healing blood of Christ had not *we* braved the jungles to bring him these glad tidings. Shameful; for, since *our role* as missionary had not been wholly disinterested, it was necessary to recall the shame from *we* had delivered him in order to easily escape *our own*.” The words were italicized

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<sup>59</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes*, 29.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid*, 124.

in the previous sentences because it shows how deeply Baldwin feels himself to be an American. The words “we,” “our,” and “role,” could have been replaced with words like “my country,” “America,” “the West,” and “duty.” However, he used these pronouns because he felt himself to bear a certain responsibility in perpetuating this shameful history. Baldwin never stated what this responsibility was, but instead declared he was merely a “witness.” What responsibilities do witnesses have? As the Negro accepted spiritual redemption, Baldwin felt “he,” the Negro, never received social redemption. Instead, the Negro was forced to accept the image “we then gave him of himself.” Thus, the idea that the Negro’s history was shameful had been taught to them, bred in them, Baldwin might say, and it is for the fear of questioning this teaching that they adopted it as their own.<sup>61</sup>

Baldwin stated that “the most crucial time in my development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a bastard of the west.”<sup>62</sup> Baldwin possessed strong feelings, as many African-Americans at that time and before did; he was a social outcast, an imposter or stranger on the only soil he had ever known. The subhuman treatment Baldwin experienced during his life by society led him to the conclusion that country he pledged allegiance to, did not pledge allegiance to him and never would. Baldwin said, “It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe you life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you.”<sup>63</sup> Baldwin experienced a deep sense of betrayal and denial by his country not only of himself but of his history. Further, the fact that Baldwin never knew his real father heightened his sensitivity to being a “bastard” in the social arena.

Deep feelings of disconnection brewed within Baldwin. If his country denied or disowned him, that country also denied the truth about a collective past. In the latter sentence

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<sup>61</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 29-30.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, (New York: St. Martins/Marek, 1985), 404.

and throughout the work, pronouns such as “him” often refer to African-Americans. Thus, America, an America that Baldwin knew and understood was predominantly white, did not just deny him but rather all African-Americans. In the present context, by denying African-Americans involvement in the “American Experience,” America, “White America,” distorted the truth of its past and constructed a false image of both the “Negro” and of American history that both Negroes and Whites were a part of. This alienation was deliberate on the part of Americans in Baldwin’s eyes. Baldwin said, “In our image of the negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful, the beast in our jungle of statistics.” Baldwin felt like a beast from the way he had been treated by his society. Baldwin’s look at how Americans perceive their past was motivated and informed by his first hand experience with racial injustice in America. Baldwin asserted, “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America – or, more precisely, is the story of Americans.” Baldwin severely limited himself on this point because America, or the story of it, is much more than the story of one race of people; it is the story of many races of people that is America. It appears that Baldwin was concerned that one cannot look at any one race’s American history separately from those of other races; it would be an artificial attempt to understand history. Like all stories there are many versions, this was especially true of the American story; Baldwin’s perception must be understood to be only one of many.<sup>64</sup>

This, Baldwin believed, leaves Negroes with a perfectly hideous and horrible view of their collective history. The way that society treated Negroes and the way society treated their history creates a marriage of concepts for Baldwin. Baldwin perceived that society treated their past the same way “it,” society, dealt with the Negro. Baldwin states that the Negro represents

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<sup>64</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 28, 24.

all the pain, suffering, evil, sin “we are compelled to deny.”<sup>65</sup> This view of the past only gets worse for Baldwin. In his essay “History as Nightmare,” Baldwin agreed with James Joyce in stating, “History is a nightmare from which I am struggling to awaken. We have all heard what happens to those who slept too long.”<sup>66</sup> If this was the case for Baldwin, one can not help but wonder how Baldwin would respond to a question like, “what happens to those who have not slept long enough or to those who have yet to fall asleep?” Baldwin felt the past was horrible because society made it so. One of the reasons for this horror was that the lack of connection Negroes felt with their past, and society resulted in the fractured understanding of their interior.

Baldwin asserted that, “The making of an American begins at that point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history, and himself adopts the vesture of his adopted land. This problem has been faced by all Americans throughout our history – in a way it is our history – and it baffles the immigrant and sets on the second generation until today.” Baldwin in this statement implied that this willing detachment or estrangement from one’s past had become, in a sense, an American tradition. Baldwin alluded to the point that if one wishes to become a true American one must deny all that has come before. It was this tradition Baldwin so eloquently observed that nurtures a damaged perception of identity and history. Baldwin stated that when he followed the line of his past he did not find himself in Europe, as most White Americans would, but rather in Africa. Baldwin felt he was an interloper, an intruder in America’s historical make-up. He was made to feel by his society that his experience is not an “American Experience.” If his experience was not an American one, then what type of experience was it?<sup>67</sup>

The practice of attempting to alienate and be divorced from one’s origins is dangerous. Baldwin observed that such an attempt was being made by most Americans. Baldwin stated that,

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid, 43.

<sup>66</sup>James Baldwin, “History as Nightmare,” *The New Leader*, (October 25, 1947), 15.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, 27, 7.

“We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key – could we but find it – to all that we later become.” One cannot be understood as unhistorical creation. In Baldwin’s way of thinking Americans felt the past was dead, of no use, static. Baldwin warned that it was a “sentimental error” to believe the past was dead. Baldwin saw the past as a dynamic, moving, and indivisible from one’s present circumstance and being.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, society’s treatment of experience and the past perpetuated a myth. In this perpetuation society created a corrupt image of its history. Baldwin said, “An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.”<sup>69</sup> An invented past leads to the perpetuation of a myth that creates falsehoods about the past and the identity of the individual. However, the illusion and the perpetuation of this myth of America were brought about by the individual who unconsciously adhered to this fantasy. Baldwin felt that the American dream was nothing more than what it was, a dream. The sense of responsibility is linked to the concept of freedom. People are free to construct their own versions of the past and how they understand the world around them. However, with this freedom comes a grave responsibility to be honest about one’s reality. Baldwin warned that this disillusioned myth will eventually come to a stop when there is “a collision between one’s image of oneself.” This was a harsh and painful realization. Baldwin stated that are two things one can do about it, “you can meet the collision head on and try and become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, an individual’s view of history is what one makes of it and “ ‘all history as the history of historian’s minds’.”<sup>71</sup> As all are their own historians to some extent,

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 27, 29.

<sup>69</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (Vintage Books), 81.

<sup>70</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 153.

<sup>71</sup>Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 47.

they are given a freedom to tell the story of their past how they like. This is dangerous but unavoidable. The illusion or image of the past is constructed within the mind of the individual for better or worse. The construction and the logic behind the construction vary depending on the motivations of the individual. History gets formed by various people with different agendas.

This damaged construction of the past America promulgates an incoherence of identity and responsibility. While Baldwin realized that he lived in what was considered to be a free country, he revealed a great paradox in describing how dependent America was in clinging to the false image of its past. Baldwin wrote, “Freedom like all freedom, has its dangers and its responsibilities.” America has abused the freedom it so proudly endorsed. Its cognitive development as a country in constructing its identity and history has hindered its progress on all levels.<sup>72</sup>

History is, thus, constructed in a troubled and perverse atmosphere that is America. Baldwin asserted that one, “cushions himself against the shock of reality” in dealing with history.<sup>73</sup> One refuses to recognize history at all and clings instead to its image; in the case of America its distorted image. The image of history to Baldwin was very important to how he understood other people to perceive their past. Baldwin’s country and his relationship to it was his subject. One of the most important dimensions to Baldwin’s perception of this subject, in order to understand its present state of affairs, was examining how the country’s heritage is treated. In the case of America, it was a dishonest and fanciful construction. The more alarming revelation for Baldwin was that his countrymen, for the most part, took pride in that heritage.

Baldwin said that people create an illusion of safety to guard themselves from the truth they know deep within they can never escape but are trapped by the illusion they are able to.

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<sup>72</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody*, 9.

<sup>73</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes*, 127.

Baldwin stated that Americans, by denying their past and its uses, were seeking to preserve or rather, salvage an innocence that has long been lost. In Baldwin's view, Americans found a refuge or "haven" in a false sense of the past. Americans hope to be protected against the painful past they can never avoid or deny.

However, Baldwin stated that these distorted psychological havens constructed by Americans to guard their innocence from the past have a price. "Havens are high priced. The price exacted by the haven dweller is that he contrives to delude himself into believing he found a haven."<sup>74</sup> This delusion brings about a peculiar way of thinking. Baldwin feels that America and the individuals who live there are under such a delusion. Thus, the national sense of confusion eventually becomes a personal one. The disillusion comes as a product of attempting to evade the past. The fabrication leads to person's eventual psychological destruction.

Baldwin became even more distressed by the disturbing realization that White Americans must be conscious of such a control they have over the Negro and the transmittal of the past. However, Baldwin here gave the American too much credit. The years the white American had sustained and fought to preserve this authority had created a cultural numbness to the feeling of others, especially to that of Negroes. If White Americans shunned or denied the honesty of the "American Experience," how can they ever hope to understand, care, or examine the participation of others in that experience? Their want for a preservation of authority was a self-involved political vehicle in that they may retain the power to control how the image of the past and of the Negro was constructed in America.

However, this was what Baldwin felt must happen in order to be freed from the false image and illusion of the past America promotes. The roles Baldwin spoke of that ensure the power structure, the power structure that keeps the Negro and truth of the past muted and in

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<sup>74</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody*, xii.

place, in America were both social and historical. Baldwin said, “Roles we construct are constructed because we feel that they will help us to survive and also, of course, because they fulfill something in our personalities: all roles are dangerous. The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play.” Thus, where there is a loss of control in American society there is a deconstruction of authority, the authority that all these empty roles have been produced. This authority had given Americans the fortitude to believe such a bold untruth. Baldwin declared that the American explanation of the past was a tissue of lies that was an excuse for power, dominion over how people think and view the country and its heritage.<sup>75</sup>

The destruction of this control or power would result in an exposure of a national farce that had so long given Americans identity. Thus, the White American would be living the “American Dream” no longer, and would be forced to awaken from this swaddling slumber. This would demand a reconstruction of the American past, a feat that was both “painful” and “horrible.” This exposure can only be achieved by the American excavation of consciousness and experience. It was a realization Baldwin felt that the country was not ready for, and predicted it never would be, for the price was too high.

Control was a key issue with Baldwin for he felt that as an African-American he was to a certain degree controlled by his society and its definitions of him and his “group.” In his essay, “Stranger in the Village,” the last essay in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin was writing in a tiny Swiss village. It was also in this same Swiss village that he finished his most important work, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Nonetheless, though he was in a European country with European people surrounding him, he still felt controlled. This conception of control was a very private thing for Baldwin because he felt the only thing he had control over was his mind and he felt that was slipping away. These people, however unconscious they were of the fact, psychologically

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid, 219.

controlled Baldwin. They had an oppressive grip on the way he perceived and constructed himself and the world around him for the villagers moved with, “an authority which I will never have, and they regard me quite rightly, not only as a stranger in their village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they – however unconsciously – inherited.” That the people in this village might never know or be conscious of this fact did not ease or comfort Baldwin’s feeling.<sup>76</sup>

Because Baldwin wanted to remain true to his experience, the perception he has of history was deeply informed by his knowledge of the racial problem that had plagued the national consciousness since America’s infancy. In his social critique, Baldwin felt his countrymen treated their past this way because of white America’s issues with control and power. Also, for Baldwin, this involves the question of the Negro and his place in society. Thus, the question ideologically was both racial and historical for Baldwin. In the marriage of both these concepts the American wanted to sustain the roles that he/she had constructed for people in society. Americans wanted to avoid change. Baldwin stated that, “Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one identity, the end of safety.” This end of safety would also change the power structure that had been some three hundred years in the making. It would also afford White America a certain loss of control he/she mistakenly felt they had over their past and their present. This would severely inhibit how White Americans felt they controlled their destiny by controlling how the past, in the American consciousness, was contrasted with the truth and sustained.<sup>77</sup>

Baldwin assigned a great responsibility to his country and how it, collectively, transmitted its history. It was an analysis of how power was misused and the past, or rather the

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<sup>76</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes*, 164.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid*, 117.

idea of it, was abused. Baldwin felt that America's treatment of its past created a national conundrum, an American confusion. Baldwin said, "American confusion is based upon the unconscious assumption that it is possible to consider the person apart from all the forces which have produced him." Baldwin went on to say that "this assumption, however, is itself based on nothing less than our history, which is the history of the total, and willing alienation of entire peoples from their forebears." Thus, the individual's roots were imagined and never real. In this atmosphere one's past was a network of untruths that increased the distance between oneself and the world around him.<sup>78</sup>

In Baldwin's assessment of how America treats the past revealed how the country's perceptions were constructed and perpetuated. Further, this assessment also illuminates why such a version of the past was adopted and clung to. How this collective perception affected the social consciousness was important. However, it was how this misconception and misuse of the past affects the psychology of the individual that concerned Baldwin most.

It is difficult to understand how Baldwin correlated a broad experience, such as the "American Experience," for Baldwin believed that experience was a "very private thing." Yet Baldwin, when talking about the country he loves to hate, spoke of it as if it were one individual with one soul and one dictum. The individual living in American society held to the myth of a reality he knew was false but refused to question. This was done for reasons of survival for both White and Black Americans. White Americans do this because of the uneasiness at the prospect of exposing the true past they have purposely and historically distorted. This would also mean a loss of power or control for White Americans over the way individuals in the country perceive and know American history. Baldwin felt that Black Americans could never really question this institution of interpretation for fear of their lives. Hence, there was constructed two different

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid, 136.

reasons one for preservation of power, the other the sanctity of life. Thus, White Americans by refusing to accept or face their history and denying the Black Americans their place in that history created an acceptance of roles and validation of mediocrity.

The fact that a country or a civilization is made up of thousands, millions, of individuals is very important. It is how individuals know, use, and understand their past that is most important in their development, and Baldwin makes clear that people are responsible for their own development, but, ironically, also suggests that individuals are responsible for everything else too. At the heart, Baldwin's method engages the exterior and the interior of the individual, and reveals how much one's exterior becomes one's interior. One must understand oneself, all of oneself, in order to ever understand the world around him or her. All this informs Baldwin's inclusive way of thinking about history.

Baldwin understood if there was ever to be an honest assessment of America's past the task and the responsibility lay with the individual within that society. Those individuals in society who refuse to accept and understand their true history, cling to the myths perpetuated about their past, and accept the tissue of lies transmitted will never achieve identity. "What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors." In order to destroy the myths about the Negro and the past in America there will have to be a fervent intellectual effort by the individual.<sup>79</sup> According to Baldwin, every individual, both White and Black, will have to expend this effort.

The responsibility to question and correct this misconstrual of roles lies with the individual, Black and White. Baldwin was particularly brazen with ideas in assessing American protest fiction and especially of how authors Harriet Beecher Stowe and, his early mentor, Richard Wright, contributed to the acceptance of myth. In his essays "Everybody's Protest

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<sup>79</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 330.

Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin pointed to how this mentality affected writers. In the assessment of both these books, Baldwin pointed out the intense rage of each of the protagonists but eschewed how this rage strengthened society’s damaged view of the Negro and of the past rather than weakening it. Baldwin said of “Uncle Tom” that he was confirmation that there was a “formula created necessity to find a lie more palatable than the truth.” Baldwin went on to say of society that this had been, “handed down and memorized and persists yet with a terrible power.” His contemporary evidence of this was Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Baldwin said that, “Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth.” It was the rage of these two authors that blinded their consciousness and allowed them to affirm the Negro’s image in society. Because of this type of thinking by Wright, who was a real life version of Bigger Thomas, and Bigger being a descendant of Uncle Tom, “Bigger has no discernable relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people – in this respect, perhaps, he is most American – and his force comes, not from his social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of a myth.” This is a good example of how damaged views of the past affect the psychology of those individuals attempting to articulate their experience and treatment.<sup>80</sup> Bigger Thomas was the embodiment of one who had a damaged sense of self because of a deluded sense of history his society promoted. Bigger was the “incarnation of a myth” because he had surrendered to it.

For Baldwin, it was a question of education, knowledge of oneself, an intellectual effort to create one’s identity. Baldwin said that one of the functions of education was to, “create in a

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid, 16, 22-23, 35.

person the ability to look at the world for himself, make his own decisions.” It was also the purpose of education to enable a person to examine and interpret his/her own experience in order to achieve or forge an identity. One of the key tasks of this intellectual effort was intense and honest self-examination. Such a self-reflection included a diagnosis and interpretation of one’s experience, one’s past.<sup>81</sup>

However, Baldwin made clear that this was no easy task. Baldwin declared that people aren’t naturally reflective. Reflections are distorted to compliment the circumstance at the expense of truth. Baldwin stated that examining his experience was difficult and “in effect” was prohibited “by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation.” Further, “intellectual effort,” Baldwin asserted, is very distrusted and suspicious in society, “probably because *we* suspect that it will destroy, as I hope it does, that myth of America to which we cling so desperately.” This reality put forth by Baldwin doesn’t make the process of self-examination and examination any easier.<sup>82</sup>

In pontificating on the difficulties of being self-reflective, Baldwin stated in a sexist manner that, “It may be impossible for anyone to tell the truth about his past. You drag your past with you everywhere, or it drags you.” Telling the truth about one’s past to oneself was very vital in Baldwin’s imperative of self-examination. It was so difficult because, “there are so many things one would rather not know!” However an honest assessment of one’s past was crucial to the development of consciousness and to the understanding of oneself. Baldwin felt it was one’s duty, indeed, responsibility, to understand all the forces that have shaped one’s life and produced that individual and made him/her a historical creation. Baldwin stated that one can never understand oneself as a historical creation “unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves,

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid, 326.

<sup>82</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes*, 7

and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be.” By overcoming the difficulties that were involved with telling the truth about one’s past, one becomes conscious and aware of the forces that have shaped their life.<sup>83</sup>

The problem then becomes one of memory and how what people remember or choose not to remember affects their psychology. Baldwin treated history as a force, and as memory is an agency of this force, a vehicle that aids in the psychological construction of history, it has a direct effect on an individual’s perception of reality, past and present. Baldwin perceived that history was made on an individual basis. Thus, a dishonest view of one’s past, a view that the individual refuses, will hinder the interpretation of his or her experience. It also obstructs the whole educational process of self-examination, for it creates a vacuum, and Baldwin stated that “education cannot occur in a vacuum.”<sup>84</sup>

To lie about one’s past is to lie about oneself. There is an incoherence that can never be mended by a delusional view of one’s experience. In addressing how a myth is perpetuated about one’s past Baldwin stated, “If one is compelled to lie about one aspect of one’s history one is also compelled to lie about it all.” Thus, one lie feeds another and perpetuates into an instrument of self evasion and alienation. Alienation from one’s past is distancing from oneself.<sup>85</sup>

In the individual’s inability to face or accept his past is bred a psychological disease. For Baldwin, this disease is revealed as a “trap.” In Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village,” he states that “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” The disassociation the individual creates between the past and the present constructs for that individual a psychological

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<sup>83</sup>James Baldwin, *Price*, 641, 317.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid*, 658.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid*, 329.

prison in that he or she will “surely perish.”<sup>86</sup> The psychological disease is brought on and perpetuated by an unwillingness to examine and understand those forces that make the individual “historical.” The individual is locked in the past because that past is locked in them. Baldwin defines this: “To be locked in the past means, in effect, that one has no past, since one can never assess it, or use it: and if one cannot use the past, one cannot function in the present, and so one can never be free.”<sup>87</sup> Baldwin eschewed in his work *Evidence of Things Not Seen* that what one refuses to remember controls that individual unconsciously and dictates his life.<sup>88</sup> Baldwin affirmed his premise by stating that, “in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self.” Baldwin went on to state that “This is also true of nations.” For to “become a social human being one modifies and suppresses and, ultimately, without great courage lies to oneself about all of one’s interior, uncharted chaos, so have we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history.” For Baldwin, dishonesty about the past or one’s experience was a vicious cycle of self-paralysis that damaged the psychological construct of history and, ultimately, identity.<sup>89</sup>

The corrective Baldwin offered in avoiding or dealing with this personal incoherence was to face, accept, examine, and understand one’s past. By doing this the people’s construct of history can be free of myth and delusion, and strengthen the coherence of their present condition. Baldwin demanded a reconciliation with one’s past and experience, not a divorce from it. The individual must find connection. “Where all human connections are distrusted, the human being

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<sup>86</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes*, 163.

<sup>87</sup>James Baldwin, *Price*, 383.

<sup>88</sup>James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), xiv.

<sup>89</sup>James Baldwin, *Price*, 318.

is quickly lost.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, with the critique of how society and individuals within society treat history, Baldwin’s personal construction of history was this:

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one’s point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.<sup>91</sup>

Baldwin understood history to be a force he felt in the presence of his everyday life. As an African-American, Baldwin believed that history had shaped his life before he had had time to live it. He felt from the way his race’s collective history had been transmitted his character and identity had been predetermined. This was what Baldwin was talking about when he talked of history’s “tyrannical power.” America’s misinformed and damaged perception of the past had dictated and fostered a false sense of identity for individuals living within the society. Baldwin pointed out that this was especially true of African-Americans. In Baldwin’s thought, Americans have been fed a lie about the past and the Negro in America was the receptacle for Americans guilt, shame, and dishonesty. To be honest about a collective and personal past is to be liberated from the delusion that limits self-definition and is being perpetuated in America about America’s real, not romanticized, past.

After having examined how he thought about history on both social and private levels, or how he felt people should treat history and how it was most often mistreated, there must be an

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 389.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 410.

analysis of his method. In this analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of Baldwin's method shall be revealed and explored.

Baldwin's method of knowing and understanding the past or constructing his history was unconventional. His understanding of the past was informed by his racial experience in America. Thus, Baldwin's perception of history was based upon tensions created by race. In his insistence that the individual embrace and labor to understand all the forces that have shaped one's life, Baldwin realized that the forces that had shaped his life had dealt with race. This was his experience that he contended was all that one can ever write out of.<sup>92</sup> In this sense, Baldwin tended to narrow history to the question of race, but always made his point universally human. However, it was the duty of the historian to narrow the written topic to a certain extent while relating the slender or specialized subject to the wider periphery.

It is in Baldwin's method of assessing the past that his "art" and his "history" collide and do not always complement one another. One of the most notable pitfalls of Baldwin's historical conversation is his blinding generalizations. These grand assumptions are faulty because they blur the line between the individual, society, and collective responsibility.

For example, in Baldwin's conversation with Margaret Mead that was documented in the work *A Rap on Race* he tends to treat society as an individual and the individual as society. Baldwin attempted to make societies organisms. Baldwin said, "If I don't accept what I, Jimmy, have done, whatever it is – it doesn't make any difference what it is – if I don't accept it I'm trapped in it." Baldwin continued to say that if this was true, individuals were trapped by what they deny, "then it must be true of civilizations."<sup>93</sup> At this point in the discussion, Mead, who was a famous anthropologist and whose specialty was the examination of civilizations, disagreed

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<sup>92</sup>Baldwin, *Notes*, 7.

<sup>93</sup>Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lipponcott Company, 1971), 181.

and replied that, “Civilizations aren’t individuals, Jimmy. They’re not individuals, they’re not organisms.” Baldwin’s difficulty with this concept came in distinguishing the individual from society. While the individual was a part of the make up of society, he or she cannot be held responsible for everything that happens within that society.

Further, on the subject of generalization, Baldwin often times accused his country of driving him to France. He made the issue of his fleeing the country a national burden, and accused the republic, the entire republic, of being the culprit. In his discussions with Margaret Mead, Baldwin stated that when looking for response after the “March on Washington” the “Republic” responded by bombing “four black girls... into eternity in Birmingham. That was the response the Republic gave.” Mead was appalled at Baldwin’s accusation and stated that she was a part of the republic and she did not give that answer. Thus, Baldwin’s dangerous use of generalizations when discussing responsibility for things that happened in the past can be observed. Baldwin’s mother also lived in the republic. One wonders how Baldwin might respond to the following question: “Since your mother is part of the “Republic” that you speak, did she give this answer as well?” Baldwin’s mother was the dearest person in his life.<sup>94</sup>

Another problem with Baldwin’s historical point of view was his emotional attachment to his subject. As Kenneth Reid stated in his dissertation Baldwin often writes, “as much from the heart as from the head.”<sup>95</sup> However, this was justified for when Baldwin was writing about history he was talking about subjects that had shaped him, his country, his faith, his race, and his experience with all these. This emotional attachment was a problem. Since Baldwin wrote so passionately and authoritatively on the subject of the past, he failed to create any aesthetic distance between himself and his subject. In talking about history, his subject would be the past

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid, 222.

<sup>95</sup>Kenneth Russell Reid, “James Baldwin’s Fiction: Literary Artistry in Special Pleading,” (Ph.D. diss., Kansas State University, 1971), 4.

- personal and public. Some distance is needed with this subject. This is very difficult for Baldwin because he, as an artist, tended to make his public personal and his personal public. Doing this, narrowing history, is not a bad thing if one keeps a certain aesthetic distance, Baldwin loses sight of the periphery and makes it too personal. For example, in his essay “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin stated that “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America – or, more precisely, is the story of Americans.” Baldwin, here, due to his lack of distance from his subject, America, was frozen in his own language and perception. Baldwin severely limits himself on this point because America and Americans, or the story of it and them, is more than a story of one race of people. Thus, Baldwin’s intense emotional faculty often obstructed his understanding of history on the collective level or rather the social arena.<sup>96</sup>

Baldwin’s language used to discuss history was problematic. Baldwin often times used the words “past” and “history” interchangeably. This presents a problem of definition. The past and history are not the same things. In his attempt to reduce history to its lowest terms by providing a simple definition of it, Carl Becker stated that, “History is the memory of things said and done.”<sup>97</sup> One could tweak Mr. Becker’s definition and make it more precise by adding the phrase, “in the past.” The past is the subject of history, and history is the construct of all attitudes about the subject. Baldwin stated that, “To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.”<sup>98</sup> This sentence confuses definitions of the “past” and “history.” Baldwin, here, treats the two as the same thing. A more coherent rewriting of this statement would read: “To accept or understand one’s past is to begin constructing one’s history not by drowning in it but using it.” Hence, Baldwin was not without his misconceptions of differences in the words “past” and “history.” However, it is how he

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<sup>96</sup>Baldwin, *Notes*, 24.

<sup>97</sup>Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian*, (F.S. Crofts and Company), 235.

<sup>98</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 81.

understands and constructs history. Keith Jenkins declared that, “The past and history float free of each other, they are miles apart. For the same object of enquiry can be read differently by different discursive practices whilst, internal to each, there are different interpretative readings over time and space; as far as history is concerned historiography shows this.”<sup>99</sup> Jenkins wished to make the reader aware that there were many diverse ways to interpret a single text. No two interpretations are exactly the same. Baldwin frequently made the mistake of thinking the past and history were the same thing. Because of Baldwin’s lack of knowledge and training with historiography, he failed to illuminate how others have written about America’s historical problem of race. Baldwin often mislead the reader into thinking the past and history do not float free from one another. His inability to be objective hindered his analysis of history.

While Baldwin’s interpretation of history was unconventional it was, nonetheless, his interpretation. In talking about the task of the individual in understanding history and the epistemological fragility of one’s interpretation of history, Keith Jenkins concluded that there was one past but many histories. In Baldwin’s case the criteria were somewhat different because of Baldwin’s methodology. His methodology was concerned most with the interior of the individual, the personal history. This should not disqualify the emphasis Baldwin placed on the external forces, for the external forces one is and has been faced with has a profound affect on the interior of the individual. Thus, an adjustment of Jenkins statement to accommodate Baldwin’s perception should read, “many pasts – many histories.”

For Baldwin, history came down to question of self and knowledge and usage of personal history to connect to others and create identity. Just because his method can’t be traced or pinpointed to Marxist, Hegelian, or Nietzschean interpretations of history does not and should not limit Baldwin’s construct or its uses. There can be no single method of conducting historical

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<sup>99</sup>Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, 5.

inquiry that leads to a “truer,” more correct, and objective view of history. If there does exist such a thing, what then is the criteria? What is the use of writing and thinking about history?<sup>100</sup> Thus, Baldwin’s method of constructing history was more autobiographical than historiographical. It was personal. It lay with the question of self and identity. Baldwin didn’t read other historians in order to understand his history better. He looked within himself and excavated his past and strove to understand it, and struggled to face it.

Thus, Baldwin’s view of history was produced with the perception that public distortion of the past damages the personal definition of it. As people are their own historian, individuals have the responsibility and the freedom to think about the past how they please. However, Baldwin felt that in America this freedom had been abused and had resulted in the production of a society of damaged historians. Baldwin, as an African-American, wanted to be liberated from the image and myth that had been perpetuated about him by a communal false sense of history. This damaged view of history had manufactured a cultural and personal crisis of identity. Baldwin felt he was a stranger internally, he didn’t know who he was. He believed his society was responsible for the creation of that stranger. Baldwin wanted to understand himself in his own context and in his own right. The examination of personal history and interpretation of experience was at the root of Baldwin’s relationship with the past. He wanted to know his origins so to achieve a sense of internal connection that he felt was so important to the construction of identity.

However, Baldwin only knew half an answer for “from whence he came” and this led to Baldwin’s perpetual quest for identity and constant struggle to know his history. Baldwin never knew his father, never knew anyone in his family other than his real mother, stepfather, and siblings and because of that fact always felt like an interloper and exile, both personal and social.

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 15.

He never knew the truth of his origins on collective and personal levels. His understanding of history was a personal one, it is here at this battleground that his “art” and his “history” collide and instigate his mind to produce works like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* was a distillation of emotion for Baldwin. It represents how he once felt about his history, tried to avoid it, escape it like the character Gabriel in the novel. It also represents Baldwin’s struggle with the pains of excavating a past he would rather forget. Redemption is found when the protagonist, John Grimes, resists his stepfather’s distorted way of thinking about experience. Gabriel is a person who has a damaged view of his past and is controlled by all that he refuses to remember. His character was the primer for Baldwin’s historical understanding and disquisition.

## CHAPTER 4

### GABRIEL GRIMES AND THE EFFECTS OF A DISTORTED SENSE OF HISTORY

Most discussions and treatments of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* focus on the psychological and religious development of the main protagonist of the novel, John Grimes. Specifically, *Mountain* scholarship deals with how the religious development affects the psychology of the individual. However, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is more than just a story about the religious conversion of a fourteen year-old boy. It's about how people think about and use or rather, misuse, their history and how that affects their visions and understanding of self. Without question, John Grimes is an important character in the novel but the character Gabriel Grimes is of equal importance and makes John's character plausible. Gabriel Grimes represents a mode of thinking that is dangerous and gangrenous to the psychology of an individual. This mode of thought involves how people interpret their past and how, from that interpretation, they construct their view of history.

In order to investigate how Gabriel constructs his personal history, his past must first be explored. Baldwin reveals Gabriel's history and also Elizabeth's and Florence's in the second section of the novel. Baldwin forces the characters to excavate their past through a meditative form of self-reflection disguised as prayer. Through the use of flashback in the novel Baldwin reveals some important background information about Gabriel's past which helps explain his motives and responses to that past. Baldwin does this in the section of the novel titled, "The Prayer of Saints." This section is divided into three small sections that excavate the pasts of the main expository characters in the novel: Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth. After learning Gabriel's past, his actions and motives are more easily contextualized and understood by the

reader and it sets the tone for explaining Gabriel's psychological disease and how he is affected by it.

Baldwin forces Gabriel to mine some of the most painful and defining moments in his life. Gabriel consistently engages in "self-evasion" by avoiding the examination of his past. He doesn't care about understanding or using his past in any way. Through this exercise of "self-evasion", avoiding an inclusive understanding of past experiences and how they have shaped him, Gabriel develops a damaged and dismembered view of himself and the past he has lived. Gabriel becomes psychologically estranged from those events that have shaped his life and given him his point of reference.

Religion is a very important aspect of the novel. Baldwin became a preacher at the age of fourteen, and wound up leaving the pulpit three years later. While the focus of this chapter is to understand and explore how Gabriel Grimes views history and why that is important to Baldwin, the religious symbolism of his name, Gabriel, should not be overlooked, for it means something to Baldwin that will be revealed at the conclusion. Gabriel's character has a deep meaning for Baldwin in both the religious and paternal sense.

The religious importance will be first discussed. In the book of Daniel in the *Bible* Gabriel, the angel, was an interpreter of a vision. He revealed to Daniel the meaning of his dream and extricated his vision. In the book of Luke in the *Bible*, Gabriel was sent to Mary to tell her she would be giving birth to a son whom she was to name Jesus. The archangel Gabriel was also sent to Zechariah to tell him that his wife Elizabeth would soon become pregnant with a child she was to name John.<sup>101</sup> Baldwin's naming of his main protagonist, John, and his mother, Elizabeth, can also be linked to a Biblical context. Gabriel in the Bible is a messenger, as Gabriel Grimes is in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

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<sup>101</sup>Lk. 1. 1-38 NIV(New International Version)

The paternal representation of Gabriel's character is much like Baldwin's real father. Like David Baldwin, James Baldwin's father, Gabriel is violent and quick to temper, rigid and oppressive, mysterious, and searching. Baldwin's father and Gabriel are mysterious. Baldwin says of his father, and it also applies to the character of Gabriel, that, "There was something in him, therefore, groping and tentative, which was never expressed and which was buried with him." Both David Baldwin and Gabriel Grimes are full of hate and suspicion and are "eaten up with paranoia." Baldwin states in an interview taped in the documentary "The Price of the Ticket," that there was something in his father that could "never bend but only break."<sup>102</sup> The same is true of Gabriel Grimes. Also like Baldwin's father, Gabriel is part of "the first generation of free men." Further, both fictional and non-fictional fathers were fiery and charismatic orators in the pulpit. Baldwin says of his father that is also true of Gabriel, that, "He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life." As in real life for Baldwin, so it was in his fiction of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* that the father works as an oppressor and stranger.<sup>103</sup>

In order to understand how and why Gabriel thinks about his past the way he does, his past must first be revealed. Though Gabriel is considered a saint in the present drama of the novel, his past is not so honorable and clean. In his distant past Gabriel indulged his taste for sex, drink, and violence every chance he had. Gabriel's mother, a former slave, encourages his indulgence of "womenfolk" to an extent. His mother believed that this indulgence could help his future as a man, "so that he would know how to be with women when he had a wife." However, his mother did not encourage the extent that he carried out his indulgence. Gabriel has a different "harlot" every night. He finds he has an unquenchable thirst for sex that is nearly

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<sup>102</sup>*The Price of the Ticket*, digital video disc, directed by Karen Thorsen (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 1989).

<sup>103</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 88, 87.

impossible to suppress. Gabriel engaged in frequent masturbation as well. Many an evening he “spent his holy seed in a darkness where it could only die.”<sup>104</sup>

Gabriel’s lustful desire was not the only reckless activity of his youth. Baldwin states, “he drank until hammers rang in his distant skull; he cursed his friends and his enemies, and fought until blood ran down; in the morning he found himself in mud, in clay, in strange beds, and once or twice in jail; his mouth sour, his clothes in rags, from all of him arising in the stink of corruption.” This type of behavior deeply troubled his mother. His irresponsible actions also embittered his sister, Florence. Because Gabriel was a man, he was given favor and priority over his older sister. He went to school, and got the best of everything not for any other reason other than he was a man. Their mother did not think of this “as sacrifice, but as logic.” Gabriel received all this priority despite the “sinful” way he lived his life.<sup>105</sup>

Gabriel is eventually baptized. This has little immediate effect on Gabriel. The narrator, Baldwin, recalls, “Years later, Deborah and Florence had stood on Deborah’s porch at night and watched a vomit-covered Gabriel stagger up the moonlit road.” Not too long after this, Florence leaves and heads north. In a moment of suicidal guilt, Gabriel the morning after achieving one of his sexual conquests repented of his sins and begs for God’s mercy and forgiveness. Baldwin dramatizes the event: “And there leaped into his mind, with the violence of water that has burst the dams and covered the banks, rushing uncontrolled toward the doomed, immobile houses... the memory of all the mornings he had mounted here and passed this tree, caught for a moment between sins committed and sins to be committed. The mist on this rise had fled away, and he felt that he stood, as he faced the lone tree, beneath the naked eye of heaven.” Gabriel’s conversion took place on this hill underneath the “lone tree.” Baldwin affirms, “And this was the

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<sup>104</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1985), 73, 95.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 94, 72.

beginning of his life as a man.” This was also the beginning of his life as a Christian and “servant in the faith.”<sup>106</sup>

It isn't too long after his sister, Florence's, departure that he, in his “new condition,” becomes close to Deborah. Deborah is a childhood friend of Florence and had been raped by white men early on her life. She is a very strong Christian, patient, kind, and quiet, introverted and devoutly firm in her faith. Indeed, her faith was all that she had for she had lost her purity. Her family had died off and she had lost her “purity” unwillingly to an anonymous white man in a field one night in her youth. Gabriel and Deborah marry some years after his religious conversion, Florence's departure, and his mother's death. Gabriel becomes a preacher, a position he held with great pride. He thinks himself the “Lord's anointed.”

Gabriel has an adulterous affair years into their marriage with a woman named Esther that produced his bastard child, Royal. In order to maintain his image, he sends Esther North. Esther dies while giving birth and Royal died later in a gang fight. Gabriel had fallen from “Grace” for the first time since his religious alteration. Gabriel could not believe and does not want to accept his “fall” for he thought his faith too strong to ever break. Florence says, “Folks got their dirt to do. They going to do it, no matter where they is. Folks got a lot of things down home they don't want nobody to know about.” Elizabeth replies to Florence by saying, “Like my aunt used to say, she used to say, folks sure better not do in the dark what they's scared to look at in the light.” His “fall” is an episode in his life he always would work to forget but never could.

At the end of the section Deborah uncovers his transgression and confronts Gabriel. Deborah confirms, “Gabriel... that Royal... he were your flesh and blood, weren't he?” Gabriel admits to his crime and is “brought low.” In all of her religious power Deborah finds it very

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<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 75, 96-97.

difficult to forgive Gabriel. Esther never forgives him either and curses him as a coward and “shameful.” Thence, Gabriel is supposedly forgiven of his sin by God but he is never forgiven by the people he has hurt and ruined and also not really forgiven by himself. His “burden was heavier than the heaviest mountain and he carried it in his heart.” It was something he could never escape, though he wants to think he has. His past like his “mother’s eyes” would always “follow him everywhere.”<sup>107</sup>

Gabriel’s past is painful and troublesome for him to reflect upon. It is an exercise he does not regularly partake of. The secrets of his corruption are hidden within his heart, “where only the truth can live and where the truth is hidden.” Gabriel avoids thinking about and attempting to understand his past and what it means to his present. His historical estrangement is deliberate. Gabriel never engages in self-examination. He has no desire to comprehend himself as a historical creation. He wants to be divorced from his past, and bury those painful memories that make him who he is. He feels that in order to be “holy” he must forget his past and concern himself only with the future. Thus, he becomes a stranger unto himself and to everyone else.<sup>108</sup>

Gabriel sees his past as unredeemable and useless. He feels it is dead. Baldwin makes clear that it is a “sentimental error” to believe the past is dead. Baldwin feels that one’s own experience is all that shapes one’s present situation and the understanding of that condition. In Gabriel’s evasion of his experience he constructs a damaged view of his history, himself, and the world around him. In this evasion, he also is confined to a mental prison in which he will forever dwell.

The technique Gabriel employs to achieve this detachment and estrangement from his past is extremely selective. His transmission of his history is extremely selective not to just other

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<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 184, 147, 93.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 157.

people but himself. He knows the truth about his past, but doesn't want to understand its meaning. Throughout the novel Gabriel never reveals himself to anyone. To the characters of the novel he is a very secretive figure, a stranger. Nobody knows the truth about his past except for him. The narrator of the novel declares, "No one, none of the saints in any case, had ever reproached or rebuked his father, or suggested his life was anything but spotless." Florence, his sister, knows enough to gravely tarnish his "holy" image but does not know the whole truth. She possesses a letter that was written to her by Deborah with Deborah admitting her knowledge of Gabriel's infidelity. At the end of the novel Florence reveals her gnosis of his shameful past and Gabriel is struck with fear that she may reveal his moral "corruption."<sup>109</sup>

Gabriel's greatest moment of uneasiness and discomfort comes with the realization that Florence knows "his secret." This also creates a shift in his character that divests him of spiritual power. A confusion, bitterness, and rage flood his psychology. At Florence's prodding for information and confession, Gabriel states, "The Word tells us, to let the dead bury the dead. Why you want to go rummaging around back there, digging up things what's all forgotten now? The Lord, He knows my life – He done forgive me a long time ago." Florence replies, "Look like, you think the Lord is a man like you; you think you can fool Him like you fool men, and you think He forgets, like men. But God don't forget nothing, Gabriel – if your name's down there in the Book, like you say, it's got all what you done right down there with it. And you going to answer for it, too." Gabriel hazards, "You be careful how you talk to the Lord's anointed." Gabriel continues, "God sees the heart." Florence responds, "Well He ought to see it. He made it! But don't nobody else see it, not even your own self!" Florence concludes by saying, "I know you thinking at the bottom of your heart that if you just make her, her and her bastard boy, pay enough for her sin, your son won't have to pay for yours. But I ain't going to

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 51.

let you do that. You done made enough folks pay for sin, it's time you started paying." The novel never reveals if Florence gave this letter, this "instrument for her brother's destruction" to Elizabeth. One only perceives the threatened action. The knowledge that someone else knows of his "fall" adds to Gabriel's already paranoid and nervous propensity.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, with the exception of Florence, no one living knows anything about what he has done in his former life. Gabriel likes it that way and lives his life so that he may forever protect his disgraceful secrets. He constructs an invented past, a web of lies that has no bearing on the coherence of his present condition. Baldwin informs that, "an invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought."<sup>111</sup> Gabriel has an invented past and because of that an invented self. Gabriel prefers invention because it expresses and corroborates his hates and fears perfectly.<sup>112</sup>

The fear that his secret might be revealed haunts Gabriel. By denying his experience to himself and not letting others know what he has done in his past Gabriel only perpetuates a myth about himself and his history. Baldwin says that the majority of Americans do the same thing. Gabriel desperately clings to this myth. He is defending himself against a fear. Baldwin asserts that, "To defend oneself from a fear is simply to insure that that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced."<sup>113</sup> Fears as well as history must be faced. This defense mechanism not only confirms that Gabriel will be eventually conquered by his fears but that he will also be controlled by them, and this also controls his vision of the world. After Deborah's death Gabriel moves to the north hoping to shed the invisible, but heavy, chains of his mind. This is unsuccessful for he wants, "to do, as it were, his first works over, seeking again the holy fire that

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 212-214.

<sup>111</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Vantage International, 1991), 81.

<sup>112</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (1955), 110.

<sup>113</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (1991), 27.

had so transformed him once. But he is to find, as the prophets had found, that the whole earth becomes a prison for him who flee before the Lord. There is peace nowhere, and healing nowhere, and forgetfulness nowhere.”<sup>114</sup>

Gabriel can be considered an “unhistorical man” by Nietzsche’s standard. Whether he realizes it or not, Gabriel is an “unhistorical man.” Nietzsche declares that, “By the word “unhistorical” I mean the power, the art, of forgetting and of drawing a limited horizon round oneself.” Rather than trying to understand his past, he abandons and denies what he has experienced and come before. Nietzsche states that, “He (man) wishes simply to live without satiety or pain, like beast; yet it is all in vain, for he will not change places with it.” Pain is a feature that haunts Gabriel’s life and especially the prospect of his past. He has a painful past to excavate. He desperately wants to forget what he has done, for he has ruined people’s lives, created “bastards,” and left a path rife with hurt. Nietzsche goes on to say that no matter how hard one tries, “he cannot learn to forget – but hangs on the past; however far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him.” Gabriel is not ignorant of his history, but he is ignorant of the meaning of that history as a result of his willful negligence of using his past to understand his present. Gabriel wants to be like the beast and live “unhistorically” for his knowledge of his history is a “dark invisible burden.” Gabriel has no historical sense. He wants to go through life as a “rootless flower”; this is impossible says Nietzsche. Nietzsche says, “the tree feels its roots better than it can see them.” This is also true of Gabriel Grimes.<sup>115</sup>

The discussion of how Gabriel feels about the past prompts considerations about why he thinks this way, what were the influences that bent his mind and damaged his understanding of experience. The biggest influence on Gabriel’s life is the church. Baldwin describes in his essay

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<sup>114</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, (1985), 136.

<sup>115</sup>Fredrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, transl. by Adrian Collins, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), 69, 5, 19.

“My Dungeon Shook,” that everyone needs a “ ‘thing,’ a gimmick to lift him out, to start him on his way.”<sup>116</sup> Baldwin’s and Gabriel’s “gimmick” is the church. Gabriel’s religious acuity hampers he how thinks about the past. He feels that his sins are forgiven and also forgotten. The day of Gabriel’s religious conversion Baldwin, or the narrator, recalls, “When at last he lifted up his eyes he saw a new Heaven and a new earth; and he heard a new sound singing, for a sinner had come home.” Gabriel exclaims, “I looked at my hands and my hands were new. I looked at my feet and my feet were new.” Gabriel feels he has a “new condition.” As for spiritual renewal and cleanliness he does have “new condition,” but he also has a previous condition that must always be remembered and faced. Thus, Gabriel sees his “new condition” granted him by religious powers to be “arbitrary and fortuitous.”<sup>117</sup>

However, this is illogical in a historical sense for his reckless past is what instigates his desire for redemption. Further, his want for redemption is also fed by a fear that he will pay for the sins committed in his past. Thus, Gabriel’s concern is not the past but rather the future. He fears, “To go down into the grave, unwashed, unforgiven,... where terrors awaited him greater than any the earth , for all her age and groaning, had ever borne.”<sup>118</sup> Thus, he looked to the past not for answers but for ridicule and fear. His concerns, from a religious standpoint, involve shedding the “old” and putting on the “new”; casting off all experience and anticipating the future. Gabriel’s use of religion protects his moral high-mindedness at the expense of weakening his sense of reality. Baldwin says, “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that

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<sup>116</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 24.

<sup>117</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 97.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 94.

innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.”<sup>119</sup> Hence, religion is a form of escape for Gabriel but also retards his perception of his reality, his present as it relates to his past.

It isn't by accident that Gabriel thinks this way about religion and ultimately history. His mother, a former slave, has a tremendous effect on how Gabriel thinks about religion and, thus, history. Florence, Gabriel's sister, moves north leaving Gabriel to watch after his mother. Gabriel has no father present in his family life, so his mother is the only parental influence he has ever known. Her name is Rachel. Gabriel's deep sense of guilt can be traced back to his mother's treatment of him. While Gabriel does have a lot to be guilty for, all the drinking, fighting, and the sex, in his younger years, before his encounter with Esther, his guilty feelings and his rage are inherited from his mother. His mother projects her feelings of guilt and rage onto Gabriel as if he were a canvas for her troubles. Trudier Harris points out how Rachel also does this in a more degrading way to Gabriel's sister Florence. Harris states that Rachel instills a “devalued” conception of self to Florence.<sup>120</sup> However, Rachel also does this with Gabriel. She is constantly attempting to make Gabriel repent of his sins. She fears for Gabriel's future and that if he tarries in sin too long he will be banished to hell. His mother's treatment of him instills a perpetual sense of guilt within Gabriel. Rachel has a slave mentality that gives her identity. Baldwin states of the American Negro slave, “He is unique among the black man of the world in that his past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow.”<sup>121</sup> However, there is something more to Rachel's past that makes her feel guilt and pain. One wonders where this stern sense of guilt comes from in Rachel. What had she done in her past she was ashamed of?

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<sup>119</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 175.

<sup>120</sup>Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 14.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 169.

Baldwin's mining of Rachel's past is limited. Conversely, Baldwin's language makes this wonder implicit at certain points. One point is when Florence revealed she was leaving and has won the argument of her staying with her mother. Baldwin writes, "She (Rachel) had granted Florence the victory – with a promptness that had the effect of making Florence, however dimly and unwillingly, wonder if her victory was real. She (Rachel) was not weeping for her daughter's future she was weeping for the past, and weeping in an anguish in which Florence had no part."<sup>122</sup> Why would Rachel be weeping for the past? What happened in her past to make her feel that way? One can only conjecture.

Rachel has been severely psychologically scarred by her past, and like most slaves found refuge in religion. Baldwin feels that God and safety are synonymous. Baldwin continues, "The word 'safety' and brings us to the real meaning of the word, 'religious' as we use it." By being religious, Rachel feels she is free to forget her past and never has to look upon it or face it again. Like Gabriel, the idea of her past is very disturbing and painful. Though her memories are painful for different reasons, the way she treats her past is much like Gabriel treats his. She never talks about it or transmits her feelings about it. Gabriel and Florence know very little about their mother's past other than she was a slave. However, one cannot help to observe that both children must have been curious as to why they were fatherless. Rachel conceals her history much like Gabriel does and clings to her faith for answers rather than her own experience. By Florence fleeing her mother's house she escapes the inheritance of her mother's mentality, yet, Gabriel accedes, accepts, and uses this mind-set for its all he knows and ever will know.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 79.

<sup>123</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 16.

After tracing Gabriel's historical attitude to his religious understanding and to that of his mother's, the next issue is: Why does Gabriel treat history this way? What are his reasons? Gabriel's method of understanding, or misunderstanding, history revolves around dishonesty and willful denial of all "genuine experience." One of Gabriel's biggest reasons for this is to protect the secrets of his corrupt past from everyone's knowledge. Gabriel feels he is the "Lord's anointed." The exposure of his secret past would mean a loss of authority for Gabriel and blemish on his record for all others to judge and scorn. Gabriel feels he is pure and that he is the "Lord's anointed" and takes pride in this myth. It is also a fabrication he is fully aware of. Since the Lord has forgiven him, Gabriel also takes false comfort in knowing that his sins have also been forgotten.

Gabriel has invented a past that is artificial. He does this in order to protect the truth of his past from other's knowledge. This mechanism also preserves his religious image as the "Lord's anointed" to others and to himself. This is how Gabriel proudly identifies himself. Baldwin reports George Lamming having quoted Djuna Barnes saying, "Too great a sense of identity makes a man feel he can do no wrong. And too little does the same." Therefore, Gabriel is a dangerous character for Baldwin says, "No one is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart: for his purity, by definition, is unassailable." Gabriel feels that religion has given him safety that he will never have to pay for his sins and he has started with a clean slate. However, Gabriel has not given into true safety but rather the illusion of it. Gabriel in denying his past is attempting to salvage something he can never recover, his innocence and purity.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, (New York: Vantage International, 1993), 41, 229.

Another reason for Gabriel's historical method is that he has not had a glorious and moral past. This makes the memory of such an experience painful and difficult to think about. In Thomas J. Cottle's essay, "The Reflection of Values," he quotes John Dewey saying that self-reflection "involves a 'willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance.'"<sup>125</sup> Gabriel is never willing to endure such a condition and clings instead to his delusion. Baldwin says that, "it is, admittedly, a difficult task to try to tell people the truth," and "to be forced to re-examine a way of thinking."<sup>126</sup> Thus, the sheer weight of his past actions is enough to make Gabriel want to forget what he has done. Gabriel, "is thus protected against reality, or experience, or change, and has succeeded in placing beyond the reach of corruption values he prefers to not examine."<sup>127</sup>

However, Gabriel's internal strife cannot be blamed for all his bitterness and forgetfulness about his past. The external forces working against Gabriel are not in his favor. After Deborah's death, Gabriel flees north hoping to not only bury his embarrassing past but also escape a system of racial injustice that makes him fear for his life on a daily basis. By fleeing the South perhaps he would find a better life. In the south the White populace was obsessed with the Negroes, watched their every move, and wanted to kill them off. The north's treatment of the Negro is different. Baldwin felt, while the south was obsessed with his, the Negro's existence and tried to exterminate it, the north hardly acknowledged his presence. The north demasculinized and dehumanized the Negro in a different way. Baldwin stated that in leaving the south and heading north to escape "Jim Crow" one finds a different version of it. Hence, Gabriel's social atmosphere facilitates his feelings of bitterness and rage. Rather than

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<sup>125</sup>Thomas J. Cottle, "The Reflections of Values: A Response to Toni Morrison by Thomas Cottle," <http://www.umich.edu/~mqr/cottle.htm>. 1.

<sup>126</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, (1993), 97, 114.

<sup>127</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 133.

threatening his life that was the case in the south, in the north, his membership and existence in the country was denied. Thus, his social atmosphere has had a very strong influence on his definitions and perceptions of history. Gabriel doesn't want to be responsible for his history and wants to use others around him as scapegoats for his guilt.<sup>128</sup>

This contributes to Gabriel's lost sense of power. Baldwin stated that, "It is not a pretty thing to be a father and be ultimately dependent on the power of and kindness of some other man for the well-being of your house." Thus, Gabriel's external forces also have a resounding effect on how he understands himself and the world around him. It is mentioned in the previous chapter how Baldwin thinks that Negroes are made to feel that their history is shameful. How they are made to feel they have no history or connection to the country to which they owe their identities. The effects of this type of mentality are apparent in Gabriel. His feelings of disconnection and rejection by his society promulgate the sentiment experienced by one who feels his "groups" and history is shameful. Thus, Gabriel has a double burden of shame. He is shamed not only by his past actions, and the misunderstanding of those actions, but also by his society that makes him feel shame for a history that he is the victim of.<sup>129</sup>

As a result of this way of thinking, Gabriel's psychology is impacted in different ways. The first is in his demeanor. Gabriel suffers from a personal incoherence. The memory of his immorality creates a marriage of emotions. Gabriel gives the impression of someone under constant stress. He is paranoid and carries a secret, yet implicit, sense of guilt. These feelings are intensified from those already in place with the memory of his "fall." Gabriel also harbors feelings of hatred. Not necessarily of people around him but himself. Baldwin declares that, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once

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<sup>129</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 115.

hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.”<sup>130</sup> Gabriel is too hedonistic of his pleasures to be able to deal with his pain effectively. Baldwin writes, “He hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenseless city of his mind.” The latter part of the sentence implies Gabriel’s weak mind. Gabriel is a man-child that has an immature consciousness of himself and the world around him. He has an undeveloped consciousness because he refuses to excavate and understand that consciousness. While Gabriel hates the sin or “evil” that lives within him, he also hates himself for that “evil” is a part of him and his make-up. As the myth of his past and himself is perpetuated, so do these emotions of hate, fear, and guilt germinate.<sup>131</sup>

The emotions of hate and fear are often played out by Gabriel in violent rage against his children and wife. Gabriel beats his children frequently and is very quick to anger. The root of his violence is rage; the root of his rage is hate. This hate begins with the discomfort Gabriel feels within himself. Gabriel recoils in his uneasiness and acts out in violence. Baldwin says of a man who retreats from his discomfort, “He retreats from his uneasiness in only one direction: into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature.”<sup>132</sup> This abrasive behavior is evident in Gabriel’s personality in the novel. His stern disciplinary regimen makes his youngest son Roy question his parenting practices. Roy exclaims, “I just don’t want him beating on me all the time. I ain’t no dog.” John and Roy’s mother, Elizabeth, replies, “Your daddy beats you because he loves you.” A little later in the discussion Elizabeth informs Roy that she might not always be around and does not know “how long the Lord’s going to let me stay with you.” Roy replies, “That’s alright. I know the Lord ain’t as hard as daddy.” Gabriel’s unfeeling ways make it hard for him to understand others and their pain and instill in him an emotional numbness that

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<sup>130</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 101.

<sup>131</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 94.

<sup>132</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 67.

feeds his bitterness and rage.<sup>133</sup> This “rage and mystery can be a source of comfort,” and it is part of Gabriel’s comfort. Gabriel’s rage cannot be “hidden” but can only be “dissembled.” Baldwin states that, “this dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt.”<sup>134</sup> Gabriel’s hatred for others actions is the contempt he holds for himself. Gabriel cannot forgive himself for what he has done. Baldwin asserts, “Because one cannot forgive oneself, one cannot forgive others, or, even, really see others – one is always striking out at the wrong person, for only some other, poor, doomed innocent obviously, is likely to be in striking distance.”<sup>135</sup>

Gabriel is in the grips of a psychological disease. This disease is slowly chipping away at Gabriel sense of reality and history. Because Gabriel refuses to understand and face his history, he has no conception of his identity. Gabriel is trapped by his psychological construct of history. Baldwin states, “It is a terrible thing, simply, to be trapped in one’s history, and attempt, in the same motion (and in this, our life!) to accept, deny, reject, and redeem it – and, also on whatever level, to profit from it.”<sup>136</sup> Gabriel’s incoherence of his identity stems from his thinking that he has been emancipated from his antecedents. One can never be liberated from his or her past. Gabriel’s disease is psychological because he feels he can be liberated from it. He feels that the meaning of his spiritual renewal and prowess creates a historical renewal and liberation. He wants to feel is safe from all judgment and consequence. He does not want to own his history. However, Baldwin states, “renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not – safety, for example, or money, or power.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 23-25.

<sup>134</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 165.

<sup>135</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 643.

<sup>136</sup>James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 56.

<sup>137</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 92.

Gabriel takes refuge in a delusion that serves only to perpetuate the “lie” he has constructed about himself and his past. Gabriel is trapped in a history that he does not understand, does not want to understand and until he understands it, he cannot be released from it.<sup>138</sup> Baldwin states, “The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible, from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight.” Gabriel feels his history. He is only concerned with the future rather than the past and for this reason will always possess a stagnant perception of himself and the world around him.<sup>139</sup>

This psychological ailment brought on by his damaged construct of history hinders Gabriel’s relationship to other people. His conscience is numb to the feelings of others. The denial of his past will blur his vision and understanding of himself. He can never know who he is because he can never, and doesn’t want to, understand who he used to be. If he cannot understand himself he can never hope to understand other people and their reality. In most all of his relationships, the other person is victim to and oppressed by Gabriel. Gabriel’s relationships nourish his inferiority complex and insecurities.

When Gabriel met Elizabeth, John was very young and she was a single mother with a “bastard” child. Gabriel sees this as a chance to redeem himself by redeeming Elizabeth by marrying her and making John his own. There is a similar intention involved with his marriage to Deborah who had been raped early in life and had ever since worn a “scarlet letter.” Much like Gide’s *Madeleine*, Elizabeth is a victim of Gabriel’s “overwhelming guilt, which connected, it would seem, and most unluckily, with her own guilt and shame.”<sup>140</sup> In the case of Deborah,

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>139</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 29.

<sup>140</sup>James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 158.

the key to her liberation from her persona and the image that others held of her was “in his hands.”

Another disturbing effect of this illness is that Gabriel wants other people to pay for his history. He wants to disown his guilt and his past. He tries to trap those around him and lock them in the cage of reality that he cannot and does not want to understand. This becomes apparent in his treatment of Elizabeth. James R. Giles confirms, “Gabriel, who has been most unsuccessful in suppressing his “old Adam,” transfers his guilt to his second wife, Elizabeth, and her illegitimate son, John.”<sup>141</sup> He also does this with Esther.<sup>142</sup>

After finding out that Esther is pregnant, Gabriel acts as though he is not responsible for the “baby kicking” in Esther’s belly. His holiness somehow makes his fall unreal and redeemable. Esther is repulsed by his reaction and declares that, “You just think back to that first night, right here on this damn white folks’ floor, and you’ll see it’s too late for you to talk to Esther about how holy you is. I don’t care if you want to live a lie, but I don’t see any reason for you to make me suffer on account of it.” Gabriel’s image of himself has faltered and he wishes Esther to bear the burden of his guilt and shame. Esther continues, “I ain’t ashamed of *it* – I’m ashamed of *you* – you done made me feel a shame I ain’t never felt before. I shamed before my God – to let somebody make me cheap, like you done done.” “I guess it takes a holy man to make a girl a real whore.” Gabriel sent Esther away to have her baby without him and decided “to let it all be forgotten, and begin his life again.” Gabriel tries to perform a similar feat on his

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<sup>141</sup>James R. Giles, “Religious Alienation and “Homosexual Consciousness” in the *City of Night* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,” *College English* 36 (Nov. 1974), 378.

<sup>142</sup>Robert Bone expounds on this scapegoat mechanism. He says, “Gabriel’s psychological mechanisms are white. Throughout his work Baldwin has described the scapegoat mechanism that is fundamental to the white man’s sense of self.” Bone highlights the point Baldwin made in some of his essays that the white community wanted to invest the Negro with their guilt and shame. This is how Gabriel treats his step-son John throughout the novel. Bone concludes his thought by saying, “Let him, the son of the bondwoman (John), pay for the price of my sins.”. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 224.

step-son John. John feels the wrath and disapproval of his father in almost everything he does. Gabriel is bitter toward John because he envies his innocence. Innocence is something Gabriel knows he can never recover but does not stop trying. Shame and guilt of his past would always haunt Gabriel in his forgetfulness.<sup>143</sup>

Gabriel represents many things for James Baldwin. All these things have in relation one central subject, history. Gabriel is a metaphoric symbol that reveals Baldwin's struggle to accept, understand, and face his past. As Roger Rosenblatt points out all of Gabriel's life is a contradiction. Rosenblatt is also so observant to acknowledge the paradox in the name Gabriel Grimes. He states that his name is a "contradiction of terms: the angel of filth."<sup>144</sup> Gabriel's character exposes Baldwin's confusion he feels about himself and the past he has lived. This confusion breaks down meaning. Baldwin states, "Hidden, however, in the heart of this confusion he encounters here is that which he came so blindly seeking: the terms on which he is related to his country and to the world." Baldwin's confusion is also America's confusion that – "the American confusion seeming to be based on the very nearly unconscious assumption that it is possible to consider the person apart from all the forces that have produced him."<sup>145</sup>

Much like Gabriel, Baldwin wanted, before *Go Tell It on the Mountain's* completion, to be divorced from his origins and disown his past. Baldwin's motives for this detachment were different from Gabriel's, but the principle was the same. Baldwin stated that those who, "having attempted, on a more or less personal level, to lose or disguise their antecedents, are reduced to a kind of rubble of compulsion." Baldwin at the age of nineteen fled to France in hopes of putting

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<sup>143</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 132-133, 135.

<sup>144</sup>Roger Rosenblatt, "Out of Control: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*," *James Baldwin*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 78.

<sup>145</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 136.

his painful past behind him. When his past followed him across the Atlantic, Baldwin came to face to face with something he had tried to be free from, his history.<sup>146</sup>

The character of Gabriel has much in common with Baldwin. Both Gabriel and Baldwin are Black and never knew or experienced the presence of their biological father. This means something for Baldwin. As stated in the previous chapter, to be Black meant something to Baldwin that it might not for other African-Americans. Baldwin felt he was a bastard of the West, a rejected step child of western culture. Baldwin felt African-American history was taken from them. Baldwin states, “When I was growing up I was taught in American history books that Africa had no history and that neither did I.”<sup>147</sup> Gabriel never knew his father and neither did Baldwin. Thus, Baldwin and Gabriel are “bastards” in the social and biological sense.

Gabriel’s character is important for Baldwin in another way too. It has to do with feelings of oppression and confinement. Baldwin’s father is an oppressive force just as his history, or thought of his history, is. Baldwin’s memory of his father is painful for his father caused him so much pain, mentally and physically. Baldwin says, “I am speaking as an historical creation which has had to bitterly contest its history, to wrestle with it, and finally accept it in order to bring myself out of it. My point of view certainly is formed by my history, and it is probable that only a creature despised by history finds history a questionable matter.” However, Baldwin realized that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together in the same society and accept the same criteria.<sup>148</sup> It is a question of responsibility for Baldwin. People are

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<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>147</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*, (New York: St. Martins/Marek, 1985), 406.

<sup>148</sup>James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 21.

not only responsible for what happened in their past, but also how their past is to be interpreted and understood, or in Gabriel's case, misunderstood.<sup>149</sup>

Gabriel is not trapped by his past but rather by the psychological construct of it, how he thinks about or treats it. Baldwin was also locked in this trap, for Gabriel's attitude and personage, how ever close to his father's it was, is Baldwin's creation. Baldwin states in a sexist tone, "A person's freedom can only be judged in terms of flexibility, his openness towards life; it is not his situation that makes him free, but himself." Gabriel has no "flexibility" or "openness towards life." His life, like Baldwin's up to the point of *Go Tell It on the Mountain's* publication, was a closed book even to himself.<sup>150</sup> Gabriel's idea of history was not a construct of meaning but a destruction of truth and equally, self.

Gabriel is like the character David in *Giovanni's Room* because David refuses to tell the truth about himself and his past and desperately wants to recycle his innocence. Thus, "the room," *Giovanni's Room*, is a weigh station for the self and is a room that David wants to escape. However, Baldwin states that, "He will never leave Giovanni's room; the whole earth has become Giovanni's room and will be until the day he dies, because he lied to himself about something sacred – because he wanted to remain innocent." "The room" is mental and a metaphoric place for Baldwin. Gabriel, like David, is forever confined to this room due to his dishonesty with himself and his "failure of innocence." David Leeming calls it a "general failure – the failure to see the reality of others."<sup>151</sup>

Thus, Gabriel acts as a messenger to Baldwin as he does to Mary in the Bible. Baldwin's secret message is this: Gabriel rejects his past, denies connection to it because the country that

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<sup>149</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 410.

<sup>150</sup>*Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>151</sup>David Adams Leeming, "An Interview with James Baldwin on Henry James," *The Henry James Review* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1986), 55.

he lives in rejects and denies him, and by doing that denies the truth of its past. Gabriel falls into the trap of denying his history just as his country does. His country rejects him, his existence, and his place in the American experience. If his country denies his history, how can he accept it? From what example can he draw meaning and perdition, if not that of his country, and not even his own mother? Gabriel is a damaged individual who has had bad examples that have greatly influenced his deranged way of thinking.

However, Gabriel is more than just an object lesson of how an individual should not use his or her history. His character abets Baldwin in comprehending two major things he does not clearly understand; his father and his history. For Baldwin, these two things are very closely related. Both of these are a major part of Baldwin's development as a human being and as an artist and Baldwin understands this. However, Baldwin feels both of these things have been taken away from him. Baldwin was operating in a "strange" and perplexing historical duality.

David Baldwin was his step-father. Baldwin knew nothing of his step-father's history and background other than he had been raised in the south. Of his real father he realizes he knew nothing about him at all other than he willfully donated his sperm to his mother one day or night. He knew nothing of his family lineage and felt disconnected from his past. In addition, he lived in a country he felt denied that he had a history, and that country had taken that history from him and "his." In a Nietzschean notion, Baldwin felt he was a "beast" and had no psychological sense of history both personally and publicly. In the character construction of Gabriel, Baldwin unties the psychological double knot of his father and his past, the thing that is made so painful to face and accept because of his father.

Like Gabriel's sense of the past, Baldwin in the ten year production of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was estranged from the meaning of his past. Baldwin's past, as well as Gabriel's, was

as L.P. Hartley stated, “a foreign country.” It is a “foreign country” of the mind. Like Gabriel, Baldwin did not like to visit this “foreign country.” Baldwin, further akin to Gabriel, was alien in this country and longed to become a local. He knew it was his only hope for connection and survival.

Gabriel is the stranger within Baldwin that Baldwin would rather not know or understand but has to face in order to comprehend himself as a historical creation. He signifies two forms of psychological oppression for Baldwin, his father and his history. In the examination of Gabriel and how he treats his history, Baldwin disentangles his feelings about his past and what it means to his present condition. Hence, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is an examination of what oppresses Baldwin rather than a symptom of it. Gabriel represents Baldwin’s stagnant definition of self, the “old.” However, equally important to his disentanglement of his construct of history is the character of John Grimes. John and Gabriel as characters complement one another and make Baldwin’s extrication plausible. John Grimes offers a re-creation of that self, Baldwin’s revision of himself and his construct of history, the “new,” the resistance to an inert way of thinking.

## CHAPTER 5

### REDEMPTIVE RESISTANCE TO THE TRAP

One thing John, Elizabeth, and Florence have in common is that Gabriel is a source of antagonism and oppression for them. Florence has no real love for her brother. She is the only one who realizes he is living a lie, yet Gabriel is confident he deserves to be given the title of a “Saint.” Even worse, everyone except Florence believes he is righteous, including Elizabeth. Elizabeth furtively does not agree with how Gabriel treats her children or her but feels so inferior to him because he knows all the secrets of her past. She is controlled by Gabriel’s self-imposed image. However, no one suffers from Gabriel’s oppressive demeanor as much as John. Most of the time, John is the target of his father’s wrath. Gabriel wants to invest others, especially John, with his hate, fear, paranoia, guilt, and shame because he does not want pay for what he has done in his past. There is confusion here because no one living, except for his sister Florence, knows the truth about his past. John’s struggle to resist his father’s damaged and dead end way of thinking is a redemptive force that strengthens his awareness of himself and the world around him.

John Grimes is a fourteen year old boy whose psychological and spiritual development the novel centers upon. John is a very intelligent teenager. The awareness of his intellectual capacity is fortified when the principal of his school enters the classroom unexpectedly one day and tells John, “You are a very bright boy. Keep up the good work.”<sup>152</sup> John feels his intelligence is not a weapon but rather a shield. The narrator states that, “he apprehended it totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that other people lacked;

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<sup>152</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1985), 20.

that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself.”<sup>153</sup> John feels his intellect gives him identity, who he is, “and, part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father.” It is something no one else can reach or comprehend; it is his. The narrator declares, “It was his hatred and his intelligence that he cherished, the one feeding the other.”<sup>154</sup>

The discussion of John’s strongest traits, his intellect and his hatred, illuminates the question of his inheritance. John’s biological father, Richard, whom John never knows, was a very well read and intelligent man. John does not realize that Gabriel is his step-father at any point in the novel. Although he feels his father is mysterious, John is under the assumption that Gabriel is his real father. John never questions this. Richard also possesses a strong hatred for White people and intelligence like John. Thus, “Intelligence and defiance are in his blood.”<sup>155</sup> John’s inherited sense of hate is retarded by the hate borne in him by Gabriel. Unlike Richard, Gabriel hated both White people and himself. Richard commits suicide while Elizabeth is pregnant with John. Thus, John never truly knows “Whence he came.” John’s intellectual gifts were undoubtedly inherited from his biological father but his vision and view of the world can be attributed to Gabriel’s influence. John rejects the inheritance being forced upon him by Gabriel.

John Grimes’ character is a mixture of literary figures. He is much like Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man.” Like Ellison’s character, John’s misguidance creates a misunderstanding of himself and the perception of the world he lives in. John is also reminiscent of Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas. Like Bigger, John clings to his hatred and feels that his rage is an identifying force within him. However, unlike Bigger, John desperately wants to understand these feelings so as to better understand himself. John is also similar to James Joyce’s Stephan Daudelus in

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<sup>153</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>155</sup>Horace Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*, (1989), 116.

*Portrait of a Young Artist*. John, like Stephen, is very emotional and introspective in his thinking much like an artist. John also possesses an artistic curiosity, similar to Stephen's, that feeds his intellectual need for an understanding of what his life means and why. John is a healthy mixture of all these characters and most importantly, James Baldwin.

Baldwin illuminates John's internal struggle through mining his deepest thoughts and notions and creating a deep inner monologue within John's character. Baldwin acts as a witness and reporter, rather, to John's innermost voices. John's life has been pre-ordained for him. John feels that everyone in his community, including his own family, misunderstands him. The consensus of the community that he lives in is that he will be a preacher like his father one day. This conjecture greatly disturbs John. It creates a psychological collision between how he sees himself and how society sees him.

The thought that he might one day become a preacher like his father struck fear in him. He did not want to be like his father. In John's mental apprehension of becoming like his father the uncertainty of his father's religion, "the narrow way," is conveyed. John feels that, "In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's, and a job like his father's, where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil."<sup>156</sup> John didn't want his father's life; he wanted one of his own.

Gabriel is a bitter and hateful man who feels the need to make others the victims of his guilt. Little did John know Gabriel's reason for projecting such feelings was to divest himself of them. Everything John struggles with has something to do with his father. His father, or his father's image and influence, is a very oppressive force that dominates and stifles John's definition of himself.

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<sup>156</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, (New York), 34.

An example of this is John's struggle with the concept of religion and how the image of his earthly father hinders the acceptance of the Heavenly Father. The narrator reports, "John's heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father."<sup>157</sup> While Gabriel was a preacher at one time and is considered among the "holy" and one of the "Saints" in the present drama of the novel, he had not preached a sermon in a very long time and had lost some of the religious fire he once possessed. Gabriel had become more silent and withdrawn in his later years. Those closest to him felt he and his life were enigmatic. Furthermore, John felt that if bowing before his Heavenly Father meant that he would have to surrender to his earthly father's assumptions and way of life, such an action might very well be impossible. John finds it difficult to accept something he knows nothing about.

Gabriel uses John like a parasite uses a host. Gabriel wants to invest in John, and, to some extent, Elizabeth, his strong feelings of guilt, hate, fear, paranoia that he has not only inherited but also perpetuated and grown. Gabriel wants to suck John dry of his will and make John an urn that he can bury his past in and avoid facing the truth of his reckless experience. It is one manner by which Gabriel denies his experience. Gabriel wants to bequeath unto John all the pain and delusions he holds about himself and the outer world. Horace Porter identifies this as theme of paternal priority in the novel. Porter asserts the novel exposes, "the inescapable consequences of a father's life working themselves out in the life of a son."<sup>158</sup> In John, Gabriel sees an opportunity, a scapegoat, to perpetuate the myths he holds about himself and the world around him.

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<sup>157</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 21.

<sup>158</sup>Horace Porter, *Stealing the Fire*, 114.

Gabriel is a product of a society that engages in a similar vein. This activity or transfer, rather, makes others pay for one's crimes or wrongdoings committed in the past. Baldwin feels that Negroes are treated as scapegoats in society. White Americans invest the Negro with all the guilt, shame, paranoia, and fear that they would rather not be responsible for or own. Gabriel's mother is also a product of this way of thinking and successfully planted this system of dysfunctional thinking in Gabriel. Gabriel, unconsciously, is carrying out a tradition that has been handed down to him. In the wake of society's treatment of him as a Black man, it may well be the only tradition he or his people have as far as White American society is concerned.

Gabriel's treatment of John negatively affects John's psychology. In the novel John has a great discomfort with himself, a nagging angst that is omnipresent in John's interior. The narrator often talks about the distress and embarrassment that the subject of nakedness causes the characters in the novel. This nakedness is not referring to a physical presence of nudity, but is rather understood to be a form of mental vulnerability that each character fears, especially John and Gabriel. In one scene John is dusting off the mantle in the Grimes' living room when he comes across the picture of him as a small child. John is "naked" in the picture. There were pictures of the other children alongside John's, but the narrator points out that, "When people looked at these photographs and laughed, their laughter differed from the laughter with which they greeted the naked John."<sup>159</sup> John felt unfairly exposed and vulnerable to other people's interpretation of his exposure that was often uneducated and incorrect. This testifies to John's psychological unsuredness of who he was.

He was not comfortable with his sense, or lack thereof, of identity. Baldwin says this of identity:

An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to

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<sup>159</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 28.

fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives the power to change one's robes.<sup>160</sup>

John questions his identity because he is menaced by the broad outer misconception of it. John's discomfort with his "nakedness of self" is a result of not having a self-constructed garment of identity from the beginning. In order to trust his "nakedness" John must sew the fabric of this garment, his identity, himself. John understands that nobody else can rightfully do this for him, if they do it is not his garment. It is not his identity.

John is a thinker. However, the narrator reveals on this, his fourteenth birthday, he is very scared of his thoughts. John is very uncomfortable and frightened of his thoughts because he does not understand them. He is uncomfortable with the exposure of his thoughts to himself and to people around him. By John not understanding his thoughts or comprehending what they mean, he recognizes he does not know himself. John has a very confused sense of self. All he really knows about himself has been told to him by other people. John's confusion about himself stems from other's misunderstanding of him. John's society and his family's miseducated and misunderstood definition of him severely limits his capacity for comprehending himself as unique individual. The stranger within had been created by his external influences and had germinated within him. Thus, John struggles with his thoughts because he has never had to understand them, for other people think for him, and this has caused John some disturbing, yet treatable, psychological damage.

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<sup>160</sup>James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 77.

The dysfunctional atmosphere John lives in has also restricted his sense of psychological independence. While John is a thinker, he is not a free thinker. John looks to others for approval rather than within himself. He most notably looks to his father for approval. However, his father only has disapproval and scorn to offer John. The issue for John is authority and control of his cognition. John's authority and dominance over his thoughts has been damaged by his mental dependence on others. John's dilemma that turns to torment is how his external forces dictate and mold his internal mode of thinking. In order for John to understand his thoughts and his community and for his father to understand him there must be a system of examination constructed.

This method centers on knowledge and education about the individual and how people perceive their experience. Only in the success of constructing such a device is one provided the authority that may tame and govern the psychological forces that threaten to delude definitions of self. John must deconstruct the myths that have been perpetuated about him. This deconstruction will offer John a way that he may understand his thoughts and what they mean. John wants to be educated about the things that make him who he is. In order to understand his thoughts, he must dispel the myths that have been perpetuated about him that he has come to question and doubt.

John perceives that his community's delusional vision of who he is and what he will become is a conspiracy. It is a design he feels that is unoriginal and one he is becoming trapped in and is a cage that his father has been confined to. The plot against John is to make him believe and accept a false identity of who and what he is not. However, John has trouble accepting something he knows little about. Therefore, he must know who he is before he accepts who he is and must know more about his external forces in order to accept and understand who

they think he is and what he will become. John is stronger than the conspiracy that threatens his identity and will never make peace with it.

John's mental resistance is founded by his want to know and understand himself and the oppressive forces that endanger his definition of himself. This process is trying for John because he does not have enough experience to evaluate his experience and interpret it. He cannot assess anyone else's life because he does not know that much about other's lives. John's education about himself and the world around him has come from his father and mother and from his community. John is not being educated by the external forces that attempt to define him, but is rather being made to surrender to a myth. The interpretations he has of himself are not his own. He is surrounded by corrupt and ill models. He has no healthy examples in his life. Baldwin states, "The power of the social definition is that it becomes, fatally, one's own."<sup>161</sup> This is only half true with John because he realizes that he and his identity are in danger of being buried by the external forces that strive to define him. Gabriel has already been defeated by these forces. John has become conscious of his being and questions other's interpretations because he realizes their interpretations are not his. They are wrong. His resistance is a refusal to accept other's limitations and definitions and focus his efforts on understanding his own.

John is despised by his father. Gabriel often refers to John and recognizes him, internally, as the "Bond Woman's Son." Gabriel also conveys to John in the first part of the novel that John has the mark of the devil on his forehead. All of John's recollections of Gabriel are derogatory and painful. Gabriel's treatment of John is physically and psychologically abusive. This creates feelings of disconnection and rejection within John. John does not understand his father's rigidity and harsh demeanor and why he treats John so unfairly. John

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<sup>161</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*, (New York: St. Martins/Marek, 1985), 643.

hates his father just as much as his father hates him. The resentment Gabriel holds for John makes him unfit to teach him as a father should. Baldwin states: “A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance.”<sup>162</sup> Though John’s community, the Black community, does not despise him, his dad surely does. John will eventually figure out that the White community he knows so little about also despises him.

However, the White community derides John for different reasons from that of his father. His father rebukes him out of envy. Gabriel envies John’s innocence, purity, youth, and the fact that he has a father figure. The White community John knows very little about other than his father saying that all White people are wicked has great disdain for John because of his color. His existence is loathed by the White community because he represents something that can never truly be denied, the past, and by his father because of something that can never recaptured, innocence and youth. Nonetheless, all John is conscious of at the present is the oppressive force of contempt and scorn his father has for him. His father’s conduct toward him, and the incorrect, damaging pronouncements he makes about him, germinates a deep hate in John. He realizes the source of his hate and oppression is his father.

John deals with this by disassembling his hate. The dissection of his hate is John’s examination of himself. He realizes that his father is attempting to invest him with a curse, a curse he has had no involvement in producing. Though John does not know what this curse is, he knows it does not belong to him. John does not want to pay for his father’s history or for his people’s history. The narrator states, “The stripes they had endured would scar his back, their punishment would be his, their portion his, his their humiliation, anguish, chains, their dungeon

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<sup>162</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 652.

his, their death his.”<sup>163</sup> John resists this trap of transmitted history. He did not want others scars, dungeon, or chains. He wanted his own construct of the world, his own experience, not others. Baldwin is clear in saying that one must always try to understand the experience of others, but in the case of John, and Baldwin’s own family enigmas, how can one embrace other’s experience if one does not know what that experience is? Thus, John rejects others experiences because he knows it will never be revealed to him and because it is not his. He must educate himself as to who he is, and this starts with examining his hate.

The exorcism and the realization of his hatred are played out on the threshing floor. Gabriel had almost convinced John that he was unfit for redemption. Gabriel treated John as though he was a hideous creation, and subhuman, much like White society treated Gabriel. In an epileptic persistence John faces the darkness within himself that he did not understand and was terrified of. His hate takes the form of Gabriel and transforms into deep pain and anguish. An “ironic voice” within John continually insists he rise up and leave the temple. However, the presence of his father creates interior contention that chokes and stifles his quest for redemption and ability to rise up. The narrator witnesses, “His father’s eyes looked down on him, and John began to scream. His father’s eyes stripped him naked, and hated what they saw. And as he turned, screaming, in the dust again, trying to escape his father’s eyes, those eyes, that face, and all their faces and the far-off yellow light, all departed from his vision as though he had gone blind. He was going down again. There is, his soul cried out again, no bottom to the darkness.”<sup>164</sup> The bottom of his darkness is what John is trying to find. He is trying to discover his limit. Only by discovering the limits of his darkness can he understand and embrace his journey and know who he is. With this examination of hate, came buried sensations of pain.

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<sup>163</sup>James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 201.

<sup>164</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

John wanted power. He perceived that his father was so powerful because of his love and faith in God. John's quest for spiritual redemption is a kind of fantasy revenge against his father. The pain of John's experience on the threshing floor comes from him attempting to "find" or "discover" who he is. However, the religious seizure and flood of emotion he experiences is an act of creation.

The day and time in the novel is symbolic of creation. It is John's fourteenth birthday. However, this day is more than a day wherein his physical age has changed. This day also marks the creation of John's sense of identity. The foundation of his self-acceptance has been forged. The fact that this happened on the seventh day of the week, the day that God created man, has a deep religious significance. The novel takes place on Saturday. John does not discover himself or who he is but rather recreates himself. He imposes himself on the world. The redemptive force of his resistance is not forging who and what he is but rather, an assertion of who and what he is not. John's spiritual redemption is a psychological transformation; it is his "door to maturity."

John must see himself as the "center and the key" of his reality. By examining this truth, his circumstance, and his feelings, John will be able to control and redefine himself. He wants to make his own judgments. Baldwin states that, "Judgment begins in the eyes of one's own parents (the crucial, the definitive, the all but everlasting judgment), and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others."<sup>165</sup> John's spiritual transformation gives him the power that supercedes his parent's judgment and escape the "claustrophobic gallery of Others." After John's experience on the threshing floor, he has a new Father and creates a new sense of identity. He does not want to make peace with mediocrity; he aspires to face the darkness within himself that terrorizes the definition of himself.

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<sup>165</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 680.

John's character means a great deal to Baldwin. John is the antithesis of Gabriel. He is all that Gabriel is not. He is young, pure, physically innocent, smart, and mentally strong. Unlike Gabriel, John wants to understand the darkness in his heart, the stranger within him. John does not run from or try to escape his thoughts and experience like Gabriel. Gabriel retreats from the responsibility he has to comprehend his thoughts and how his thoughts affect his psychological construction of his experience and how his experience affects his thoughts. Gabriel avoids examining the source of his hate; he avoids examining the experience that has shaped his thoughts and made his present condition plausible.

John strives to understand his experience to achieve a sense of connection with all that has come before him. John wants to demolish the delusion and myth that his father and his community have perpetuated about him and how to use experience. David Leeming says, "Of John Grimes stepfather, Baldwin would say he was, 'John's first apprehension of history, and ... history is brutal.'"<sup>166</sup> Gabriel's sense of identity has been buried beneath the myths that he has perpetuated about himself and the world around him. John's resistance has been fueled by seeking to fracture the fallacy perpetuated about him by his father and community. John rejects the role, the lie that is being forced upon him while Gabriel facilitates a falsehood within himself. While Gabriel clings to a self-perpetuated distortion of himself that he has created, John wants to exterminate all the myths produced about him by his environment. John realizes that his external forces have shaped and generated his internal confusion and conundrum of self.

John's character is a redemptive force for Baldwin. The key for Baldwin lay not in John's experience but rather in his method of cognitive excavation about what his experience means to him as a historical creation. John represents a self-disciplined way of thinking that adds integration and awareness of oneself to one's periphery. Baldwin feels this is imperative to

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<sup>166</sup>David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, (1994), 86

understanding and maintaining a sense of identity. John's resistance sustains Baldwin's requisite.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* was an arduous, ten year production for Baldwin. Baldwin felt it was the hardest novel he had ever written. Baldwin affirmed that it was the novel he had to write if he was going to ever write anything else. It was also his most important work. The piece was so hard for Baldwin because he was dealing with forces he knew little about – history, his father, and identity. The novel abstractly examined all of these subjects. Such a taxing undertaking allowed Baldwin to recreate his past thereby extricating his understanding of it. This piece was so important because it afforded Baldwin a sense of control that he had never before possessed.

Prior to the novel Baldwin wrote very little about how he felt about history. Most of the literature used in the second chapter was written after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. There was one article Baldwin wrote titled, “History as Nightmare,” in which he revealed some of his historical understanding. Another essay that intimately reveals how he felt about history he wrote while on the last section of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and was called “Stranger in the Village.” Thus, after the completion of his first work Baldwin was more confident to write about and discuss how he felt about history because his view of it had been disentangled through the laboratory of fiction in his first novel.

Brian Fay stated that, “historians often try to get ‘inside the minds’ of their subjects to understand their motivations and their experiences – in much the same way as do fiction writers.”<sup>167</sup> In dealing with James Baldwin and his first novel such an attempt has been made. The writer has taken on a role as an emotional archeologist and historian in trying to understand

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<sup>167</sup>Brian Fay, “Unconventional History,” *History and Theory, Theme Issue 41* (December 2002), 2.

how James Baldwin's view of history came to be. Baldwin's first novel was an important document in this excavation.

An unconventional method has been employed in this study but, "there are many ways to skin a cat, and it impoverishes our ability to access and make sense of the past if we insist that there is only one way to do so."<sup>168</sup> There has also been an unconventional method of understanding the past that has been scrutinized. Historians would do well to constantly evaluate their cognitive approach to historical understanding for they are, as Barbara Tuchman claims, dealing with human beings, "not arithmetic."<sup>169</sup>

With the completion of the work, Baldwin realized his ability to construct his interpretation of history both personal and collective. However, Baldwin also understood how dangerous and fragile such a privilege was. As Carl Becker espoused, people are the author and historian of their own life. Thus, Baldwin felt individuals bore a great responsibility to themselves and the world around them to be true to their experience.

Gabriel Grimes abused this privilege. He irresponsibly handled the interpretation of his own experience. His irresponsibility resulted in his confusion of identity. This confusion led to what Baldwin would call a "breakdown of meaning." Gabriel could never understand who he "is" because he didn't want to understand who he "was." He didn't want to understand his present pain for fear of uncovering his dark past. His pain was a result of things he had done in his past and was perpetuated by his treatment of it. By striving to be alienated from his past, Gabriel became an "unhistorical" creature that possessed no conception of identity. He was a stranger unto himself.

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>169</sup>Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 44.

Baldwin, too, before and during the production of the novel had a damaged sense of history. Baldwin never knew his biological father. His mother never provided a picture or furnished any information about him. Therefore, it was difficult for Baldwin to come to terms with his history because he didn't know his history. He didn't know his origins. Gabriel Grimes also never knew his biological father in the novel. However, his feelings of bastardy instigated a different, more damaged, response to knowing his origins. Baldwin's feelings of illegitimacy seeped over into his perception of collective history. Baldwin felt he was historically illegitimate. Baldwin had a great sense of shame about his history before *Go Tell It on the Mountain* because of the way his society treated him and African-American history in general.

According to the society he was a part of, Baldwin had no history. He was a stranger, a bastard, in his own native land. These feelings of disconnection deeply affected Baldwin's interior construction of self and identity. Baldwin, like Gabriel, was becoming a stranger unto himself because he didn't want to examine his pain. However, unlike Gabriel, Baldwin's pain was caused not by things he had done in his past but rather things that had been done to him, by his society and step-father. Baldwin realized with the writing of this novel that this pain was being perpetuated within him and realized that he would be the cause of his demise if he didn't face and examine it. Thus, the novel is an examination of the forces that caused Baldwin the most pain, his father and his history. His history was painful because he never knew the truth about it.

If Gabriel represents the problem of identity, the character of John represents the solution. John is a redemptive force in the novel because of his response to Gabriel's example. He resists the way of thinking that has caged Gabriel's sense of reality and identity. While Gabriel's source of his pain is his history, John's is his father. John's response is a decree for

freedom. He wants to understand his experience, his heartache, and his thoughts and what they mean. He, like Baldwin, wants to excavate his experience and his origins so as to achieve an internal sense of coherence and identity. John had to impose his identity on the world around him. If he didn't his society would define his identity for him. He, like Baldwin, realized this and was liberated through his resistance to surrender to other's definitions of identity. He is not Baldwin's hero but, rather, an essential element to his extrication of history that is imperative in imposing his identity upon the world.

Thus, with the combination of Gabriel and John Grimes' characters James Baldwin's extrication is made complete. Both characters struggle with things that are the source of Baldwin's internal strife. Through the examination of both Gabriel and John's pain, Baldwin performs an act of extrication that affords him a sense of history and, as a result, identity.

Thus, the novel is more a personal achievement than a literary achievement. Many critics are sensitive to the aesthetic distance Baldwin maintains between his characters and himself throughout the novel. The novel was an act of creation for Baldwin. The writing of the novel was so important because it provided Baldwin a way to construct his sense of history and forge his identity. Through the novel, he came to know and understand the stranger within him that was created by his society and he had perpetuated.

The scholarly community involved in studying James Baldwin lacks an understanding of how important history was to Baldwin's self-definition. There has been an attempt here to take James Baldwin out of any tradition he is supposedly a part of and test him in his own right and on his own grounds. His first novel attests to how important the conception and treatment of personal history is in the construction of identity. It's not fiction as history but fiction as an important tool in constructing one's personal view of history. The novel provided Baldwin an

inner coherence that he would continue to tweak and perfect throughout his literary career and a historical imagination his society attempted to suppress and restrain. Its completion afforded Baldwin a new sense of freedom. With it, Baldwin was liberated from the prison of other's miseducated interpretations and misguided assumptions about him and history. Baldwin asserted that, "if one cannot use the past, one cannot function in the present, and so one can never be free."<sup>170</sup> Baldwin, in his first novel, came to terms with his historical illegitimacy and reconciled himself, as best he could, to his origins. Dilthey said, "Man, bound and determined by the reality of life, is set free not only through art – as has often been set forth – but also through the understanding of history."<sup>171</sup> James Baldwin was made free by the fusion of both in his first novel.

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<sup>170</sup>James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, 383.

<sup>171</sup>Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, ed. by B. Groethuysen (Leipzig und Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1927), 216; translated by H.A. Hodges, *The Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 277.

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