

THE QUEST FOR SELF IN JAMES BALDWIN'S NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

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DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY OF THE
NORTH EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY, SHILLONG

1983

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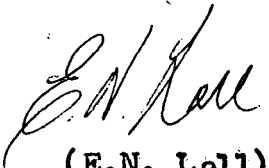
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I certify that the dissertation entitled "The Quest for Self in James Baldwin's Novels and Short Stories" submitted by Esther Syiem, in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of the Master of Philosophy of the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, is the record of original investigation carried out by her under my supervision.

She has been duly registered and the dissertation presented is worthy of being considered for the award of the M.Phil degree. This work has not been submitted for any degree of any other university.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. E.N. Lall, Reader, Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, who has worked with me and encouraged me throughout, always giving up his time whenever I needed his help.

I would like to thank Professor D.P. Singh, Dean, School of Languages and Head of the Department of English, NEHU, who introduced me to Black-American writing.

I am deeply indebted to the working staff of the National Library, Calcutta and the American Center Library, Calcutta, who helped me obtain all the necessary material from their respective libraries, *also to* the American Studies Research Centre, Hyderabad, who have always been prompt in mailing me books which I needed. I am especially grateful to Miss I. Majaw, Assistant Librarian, NEHU, Shillong, and to all its staff-members.

Thanks are extended to Bah Godfrey. He typed out the entire dissertation on time and to Kong I. Rynjah who assisted Bah Godfrey.

To my mother and father who encouraged me and who have been with me from the very beginning; also to my family *who were* always concerned with the progress of my work.

Shillong,

May, 5th, 1983.

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INTRODUCTION

In Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin clearly enunciates for himself what his concerns as a writer should be. He begins by defining his own position in America, "I suppose the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and was forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality." In reviewing his peculiar status as American Negro, he justifies his literary claims: "I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else." In actual fact, Baldwin's concerns as a writer are deeply connected with America. For, as he states this of himself; "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually... . I want to be an honest man and a good writer." It is upon these principles that Baldwin will seek to restore life to America. He will not be a prejudiced writer. He will lead his fellow Americans onto a vision of the American redemption by his attempt to portray the complex problems of human life, and to show that the way out of it rests upon the individual's struggle for moral perfection, or as he puts it: "... one must find, therefore, one's own moral center, and move through the world hoping that this center

will guide one aright." Although Baldwin's characters are black yet all of them are involved in the eternal struggle for self-renewal which is the fight waged against the forces of destruction.

Baldwin begins his quest by endeavouring to break free of the ambiguity which surrounds the American Negro, to strike out through his writings, on the path towards redefining the Black-American personality. In so doing, Baldwin, however, desires to preserve his imaginative integrity whereby the restrictive concerns of the social and the racial, give place to the loftier concerns of art. In other words, Baldwin intends for himself the path of aesthetic truth. Although most of his characters are black, yet they struggle to uplift the basic values of human existence which have remained deeply obscured in America, so that, although in his novels and short stories, Baldwin manipulates the American experience yet he does so only to have a better insight into America so as to remodel American life upon the more fulfilling principles of human existence. The artist, therefore, is specifically concerned with America, only as a vital means to that end which is the quest for self-identity, or to put it in Baldwin's own words:

One writes out of one thing only - one's own experience. Everything depends on how

relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.¹

Most critics agree that after Baldwin's first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain with its prophetic undertones of the Black resurgence, Baldwin has not been able to develop himself adequately enough. In many ways it is true that Baldwin has not succeeded in personalising the American Negro experience, so that there is a superfluity of emotion and sentiment within the novels. However, in every novel, there is noticeable this pattern of the search for self-identity, upon which converges the true significance of life for every character. The aim of this study is not to seek for anything technically new in Baldwin's fiction nor to relate him to other Black American writers, but to assess what his novels have to offer in terms of what the adolescent protagonist John Grimes, of the first novel, sets out to achieve for himself and ultimately for the American Negro. The essays also help to understand much of the emotional and intellectual turmoil depicted in the novels, and they explain the issues that concern Baldwin's characters.

Baldwin's novels capture the trauma of the present generation. For a proper understanding of his

fictional aims, his characters could be said to fall into two categories. On the one hand, we have them as human composites of the American disillusionment represented by such figures as Rufus Scott in Another Country or David and Giovanni in Giovanni's Room. On the other, there are the representative figures of the Black creative consciousness who can be singled out for their ability to search deep within themselves, the inner essence of life. They are able, successfully and artistically, to communicate their discovery to their fellow-men. These are the potential embodiments of hope in an otherwise unredeemed existence. They lay claims to a better future by an acute sense of their Negro heritage which activates them into a closer understanding of American history. They are represented by figures such as Sonny in the short story "Sonny's Blues" or by the young couple, Fonny and Tish in If Beale Street Could Talk. In so dividing Baldwin's characters, it is perhaps easier to discern Baldwin's attempt to differentiate between the authentic road towards personal salvation and the road leading to complete disaster. This lies in the reader's ability to recognise and to respond to those symbols of human endurance. They are the repositories of love in the brittle American society, and can be distinguished from the others by the inner presence within them of the black motivating genius which always gives them a renewed objective in life.

As one follows the thread of Baldwin's fictional quest for identity in the first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, one observes the unfolding of the John Grimes consciousness. He is an example of the Black American potential for change. He stands on the threshold of human experience, looking forward into the unknown. What he sees and what he feels are token reminders of the Black invincibility, of its refusal to accept life's injustices. In the following novels, however, one loses sight of John Grimes' tenacity and the ruling tone is one of despair. Although in these novels, there are several characters who attempt to understand their own situation which can be seen in the relationships that they try out with one another, and which show that the struggle towards life is being attempted, yet, on the whole, the three novels, Giovanni's Room, Another Country, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, fail to successfully characterize any one figure of hope. They focus more upon the evils that are prevalent within the contemporary American society and which thwart the spiritual growth of both black and white personality. The sense of personal responsibility which is deeply ingrained within all the characters, and which seems to be the driving impetus behind the Negro spirituals and blues quoted at intervals in the novels, is, however, weakened by the conflicting impulses at work within America. The three novels only point to the

black propensity for self-renewal but which remains unrealized until the later novel, If Beale Street Could Talk. There are no consistent embodiments of love and hope in these novels, and although there are characters like Ida, Vivaldo and Leo Proudhammer, who fight against the current of American hopelessness, yet they fail to actualise those life-impelling instincts, which, as figured in their own lives remain mere catchphrases of a dead civilization. However, these novels provide the necessary links to Baldwin's later novel; for it is in these novels that Baldwin focuses upon the dissipation that has set in within the American character, to which the Black-American is also victim and against which he struggles to fight and to flee from. This, however, is not the entire story of the Black American. After Baldwin has taken us into the heart of the American discontent and vividly characterized it, he projects the hope of the Black American in the later novel If Beale Street Could Talk, through the young couple's ability to resurrect the simple values of life. These were the values especially discarded with the disintegration of the family during the urbanization of the American Negro, and which have remained dead under the burden of the American pursuit of economic success. It is not that these life-impelling values are dealt with only in this novel. They have been playing on the edge of each character's consciousness. This may be seen

in the fact that, at certain moments of their lives, all the characters in Baldwin's novels, articulate their innermost feelings and their innermost needs, thereby making it known both to themselves and to the reader of the seeming impossibility of their ever being able to reach out towards the simple but sustaining virtues of human love. What has been focussed upon in the three novels preceeding If Beale Street Could Talk, is the broken nature of American life which confuse and divide all the characters. However, they make almost heroic attempts to understand themselves. The third novel, Another Country, bears evidence of the American need to define itself in the relationships both black and white that it portrays, which also reflects the need to be sufficient in love. It is in this novel, which has been said to be the most ambitious of Baldwin's novels², that Baldwin makes it clear that the quest for selfhood virtually involves the entire American country. For the black character to understand himself properly, he must be able to relate to America, and to his fellow Americans who may be white, to whom he owes nothing, but to whom he must communicate his personal sense of life and growth. This self commissioned task will be the Negro's triumph over himself, for according to Baldwin, love is the only force that is strong enough to battle against the oddities of life. In If Beale Street Could Talk, all the black characters are

sustained by the strength of such a love which therefore, gives dignity and meaning to their lives and upon which Fonny's and Tish's child will, in the future thrive upon.

The collection of short stories, Going to Meet the Man, echoes on a smaller scale, Baldwin's sensitivity to the Black American capacity for spiritual growth and for his ability to fight for redemption not merely for himself but also for his American counterpart. The black character in the short stories contains seeds of the Negro's future discovery of himself. ✓ The short stories help to deepen the reader's understanding of the American Negro's need to push forward in life to find his true identity. They have been written as if the characters themselves were telling their own stories. The reader is taken into the inner realms of each narrating character for a proper insight into the problems that each faces. All the characters feel themselves at one with the American destiny. ✓ They defy the restrictive laws of American society and their avowal of personal freedom is an assertion of their own faith in life. The last novel Just Above My Head, contributes little towards understanding Baldwin better. ✓ It resembles the three novels of his middle period in that it represents bewilderment and confusion. Its characters are adrift in the unyielding American universe, uselessly putting up the show of a fight and finally losing themselves in the mire of American life. However, Hal Montana,

as narrator, is representative of all that which is fulfilling and life-sustaining in Baldwin's fiction. This has been discussed in the chapter dealing with this novel.

Everything considered, the novels fall into the larger pattern of the Black American search for selfhood. Each book is linked to the other in that each represents aspects of the American reality. All the characters are a part of the divided American consciousness, everyone is caught within the crippling disabilities of America. Finally, although the majority of Baldwin's characters are black, yet their concerns are primarily that of individuals who are desperately searching for meaning in their lives. The nature of their quest is rooted as much in the black need for acceptance as in their recognition of the dissolution of values in the contemporary world. This makes them keen upon fighting for the change within the American heart. Baldwin's characters who are Black Americans and who have their roots in America are subjected to the travails of American life. However, they strongly feel that they are different from the White American. They bear this responsibility that although Black, they are a segment of the American community and therefore, have the task of rediscovering themselves as American citizens.

The chapters that follow deal with individual novels, they trace the spiritual growth of the characters and attempt to assess what each book contributes by way of explaining the nature of the quest for selfhood.

ENDNOTES

¹ James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1975), ref. Chaps: "Autobiographical Notes" and "Everybody's Protest Novel".

² Charles Newman, "The Lesson of the Master: Henry James and James Baldwin", The Yale Review, Vol. LVI (Oct. 1968), p. 47.

Chapter I

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN - THE SEARCH FOR RENEWAL

The title of the first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, has about it a suggestion of hope, but of hope unfulfilled until the task has been completed so that the "telling" can be done. It, therefore, hints at the imperative for action and thus speaks of human dynamism. This will be the recurring theme of Baldwin's fiction. His characters will project the search for renewal which inevitably points to a universal aliveness to all possibilities of fulfillment. Central to the life of every character in Baldwin's novels, is this persistent urge to create oneself anew.

In Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin uses the adolescent protagonist, John Grimes to initiate the search for the self. As the youth develops into early maturity, he challenges the preconceptions of the Black world and attempts to find that which should be central to life, but which is missing in the lives of those around him. He attempts to structure his life according to the basic needs of his inner self. In effect, this puts him opposite to all that society endorses. From the beginning he rules out the possibilities of compromise and his life, as depicted in the novel, is one lonely struggle against the soul-killing doctrines of America. Incidentally, three of Baldwin's essays, Notes of a Native Son, Nobody

Knows My Name and The Fire Next Time, give an account of Baldwin's adolescent experiences. They describe the bewilderment that assails him in his early years. This matches the confusions of John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain. The autobiographical aspect of the first novel, has been commented upon by several critics¹. However, George Kent observes that, "what is more interesting" is the artistic "transmutation" that has been effected, and the representation, therefore, of personal experiences, as "organised energies that carry mythic force in their reflection of man attempting to deal with destiny".² John Grimes is a representative figure of the American Negro who seeks to re-define himself. On a vaster level the novel deals with the individual's fight for survival.

In this novel, Baldwin dwells upon the sociological and spiritual influences that have shaped the Black character, so that the quest for selfhood in the first novel and in the later novels, may be properly understood in relation to the Black American milieu. The theme of the quest in Go Tell It on the Mountain has also been remarked upon by several critics³. ✓ In this novel, Baldwin shows us that the need for renewal is endlessly thwarted by the peculiar and almost distorted circumstances that surround the Negro in America. ✓ In actual fact, Baldwin characterises the

circumstances into which John Grimes was born and against which he will have to fight to maintain his inborn sense of personal freedom. The novel enacts the disillusionment of each saint who, in setting out to face life creatively, is instead defeated by his own misguided efforts. Against their histories will be portrayed the struggling figure of John Grimes. Through him Baldwin will attempt to look back into past history so as to re-evaluate the present to define the concept of the black-self. For, according to him, "The country will not change until it examines itself and discovers what it really means by freedom".⁴ This will be the starting point for John Grimes' venture into the unknown, which is his own special ability to utilise his freedom to enhance himself spiritually. He alone will display the courage needed to move out of the constricting framework of the Black community. Within the novel, this may be seen in John's inarticulate expressions of dissatisfaction and despair, in his endless probings about himself and about his own destiny. On the surface, the novel enacts John's re-birth into the religion. Surrounding him and inwoven into the narrative, are the futile life-histories of every other black character. Although each one celebrates the attainment of religious salvation, yet deeply embedded within all of them, is the uncleansed burden of guilt and frustration. The novel evokes a picture of John Grimes "trapped" in the "pathology"

of the country into which he was born. Yet John will enact if not the whole, at least the beginnings of his attempt to "liberate" himself,⁵ and to ask of himself as Baldwin did:

And if one despairs - as who has not? - of human love, God's love alone is left. But God - and I felt this even then, so long ago, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly - is white. And if his love was so great, and if he loved all his children, why were we, the blacks cast down so far? Why? In spite of all I said thereafter, I found no answer on the floor - not that answer, anyway...⁶

This remains an unanswered question for every character in the novel; for, although their lives are thickly layered with religion, yet religion merely impedes their growth. The end-product of each conversion is of a diminished dimension. Each seeks his refuge from his inner complexities, and finds it in the repressive faith of the Black Church. Underlying all, is the fact that every character who is seeking to renew himself, is inevitably overtaken by the strain of American existence. The purpose of mentioning, and later in the chapter, illustrating the broken nature of each character's life, is to point out that the quest for selfhood, whether successful or not, is central to all. In small measures, all of them display the determination to seek for the hidden sources of life. This becomes a convincing aspect of the John Grimes consciousness for, in every step that he takes John Grimes pledges himself further on to the task of finding the better self which would replace the subservient self of the old.



For a better understanding of John Grimes and of the Black American's quest for renewal, Baldwin presents us with an entire generation of Black questors who, having fought for a more meaningful life, have had to lose all in their hopeless struggle. It should also be understood that John Grimes' attempt to re-structure his own life must be upon a knowledge of the failure of his black predecessors.

Thus, to root itself in the present moment, the novel must go back to the past, to reassemble the history of those saints who were nourished by the ethics of a white civilization, and to trace John's geneology; as also to focus upon his movement away from Harlem, away from "all those sisters and all those churches, and all those tambourines to encounter the "white world" that "had been controlling him" from the time he opened his "eyes on the world".⁷ This has an autobiographical parallel in Baldwin's actual flight to Paris to ask himself the question: who he was.⁸ Go Tell It on the Mountain deals with the period prior to the flight. The novel evokes the past to evaluate its failure, whilst bringing into consciousness the figure of John Grimes. John belongs to the present, that moment in time, which, according to Baldwin, is forever dynamic. There is hope then within John's span of life, to reorient his people's vision towards "a new sense of life's possibilities";⁹ to free them from the misconceptions

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of history, and to restore to them a "sensuality", that Baldwin defines as, the ability to "respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the baking of bread."¹⁰ In other words, to wean them away from the narrowness of a Jealous Jehovah to a more personal and a freer conception of God:

I suggest that the role of the Negro in American life has something to do with our concept of what God is, ... to be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey towards something I do not understand, which in the going towards, makes me better. I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not as means to control others ...¹¹

Although John lacks the intellectual maturity to consciously put forward his arguments the way Baldwin does in his essays, yet his posture of mute defiance represents the subversive instinct of the artist, which according to Baldwin, disturbs the peace.¹² John is not committed to the falsifications of the past and, therefore, cannot be controlled by it. Rather, he is a witness to the possibility of Negro survival in the American wasteland. But, as yet, it still remains to be seen whether John reaches fictional maturity in the later novels, and whether Go Tell It on the Mountain, whilst aspiring to the rejuvenated landscape, does achieve proper fictional development.

Meanwhile, the novel enacts the historical impasse between a Jealous Jehovah and the American Negro which has repercussions in the contemporary world, within the life of the black adolescent John Grimes. The whole story of Negro enslavement to suffering and to the white world is told through the polyphonic structuring of the character's experiences in the novel. It also reveals the American Negro's indoctrination to Western theology. As Baldwin manipulates the historical perspective, he also brings into focus the awakening Negro consciousness symbolised in the figure of John Grimes. Very early in the novel, John shows the beginnings of his own rejection of the fallacies of a white God, which alienates his relation to the institution of the Black Church and by implication, to Black-American attitudes. He will seek to re-define reality for himself in relation to an immediate present, as he sees it, and to the irrevocable past, to liberate an autonomy of the self. Not only does Baldwin autobiographically exploit his own past, but he imagines a tableau of the imprisoned Negro life evolving within the American context since the Great Migration.¹³ This is the life that threatens the very existence of a John Grimes. The struggle within the black adolescent foretells of a quickening of the Black American's spirit as it seeks to find itself. It will have to demolish its unlikely alliance with a white dominated past, and a

threateningly impoverished present to reconstruct paradoxically, through the power of love and by strategy, a better image of itself, and ultimately of America. The following excerpt from Baldwin's Nobody Knows My Name illustrates this point with clarity:

Which of us has overcome his past? And the past of the Negro is blood dripping down through the leaves ... But the past is not special to the Negro. This horror is also the past, and the everlasting potential temptation of the human race. If we do not know this, it seems to me, we know nothing about ourselves, nothing about each other; to have accepted this is also to have found a source of strength - source of all our power. But we must first accept the paradox with joy.¹⁴

The social reality of Go Tell It on the Mountain is shown to be under the fatal misrule of the Hebrew law. This reality consists of a community of socially-underprivileged saints who need to compensate their sense of dispossession by a pharisaical rightness. Surrounding them is the realness of the one birthright they have claim to, that of the colour black. This complicates their responses to the larger universe because of the associations that history had made with this colour. In the novel, John's father "had always said that his face was the face of Satan."¹⁵ Since the normal equivalent to the colour black is evil, it would be fatal for the Black American to cherish any illusions about his innocence. Part II evokes in flashback, the obsessive nature of the Black American guilt, as each

character makes his or her anguished journey to the altar of the Temple - for refuge and sustenance. Gabriel and Florence, as also Elizabeth and Richard, have been ravaged by a common destiny and are helplessly crucified to their lot. Their kinship with one another, rests on a common transgression: that of the failure to achieve spiritual integration and therefore, of the failure to achieve renewal, through personal relationship; so that they must return to the only institution that guarantees hope to their sin-protracted existence. Although like the others, John Grimes, undergoes the spiritual crisis that would qualify him to full membership of the Temple of the Fire Baptized as one of its restored saints, he yet remains unrestored to himself. The narrator recapitulates the irresolvable crisis within John's soul:

Yet, as he moved among them ... something began to knock in that listening, astonished, new born, and fragile heart of his; something recalling the terrors of the night, ... And while his heart was speaking, he found himself before his mother ... And once again, he tried to read the mystery of that face ... He wanted to comfort her ... He knew only - and now, looking at his mother, he knew that he could never tell it - that the heart was a fearful place.¹⁶

After John has felt the mysterious power of the Black faith the residual feeling makes him no wiser, only more vulnerable to the afflictions of an indifferent universe, personalised in the figure of the unpardoning

patriach:

And he felt his father behind him. And he felt the March wind rise, ... He turned to face his father, he found himself smiling but his father did not smile.¹⁷

It is significant that John's father has been the influential figure in his life. But at the crucial moment of John's conversion when Gabriel ought to have approved of his son's return, the narrator ironically emphasizes his veiled rejection. He focusses upon John's excitement and with it, a certain obdurate naivety of character that is reflected in John's bewildered inability to simplify the spiritual ecstasy that overtakes him. John's psychological posture, pitches the archetypal struggle between the tyranny of dogma and the lone antagonist. These conflicting impulses have been localized within the Black American context,¹⁸ and have been orchestrated within the novel, in the reenactment of each character's past history. As the characters go in search of a fruitless renewal, there is the crucial awareness that the terms of such a life might surely be John's legal inheritance if only he could escape it:

Suddenly, sitting at the window, and with a violence unprecedented, there arose in John a flood of fury and tears, and he bowed his head, fists clenched against the window-pane, crying, with teeth on edge: "What shall I do? What shall I do?"¹⁹

But escape for John, would only be into the clutches of a white world, which has yielded nothing to his mother, father

and aunt, who sojourned there in the mistaken hope of brighter prospects. John encounters in his mother, his unsolicited future:

And he knew again that she was not saying everything she meant; in a kind of secret language she was telling him today something that he must remember and understand tomorrow. He watched her face, his heart swollen with love for her and with an anguish, not yet his own, that he did not understand and that frightened him.²⁰

Between John and his mother, lie the "abyss" of the "American experience",²¹ from which she has salvaged nothing; only kept in safe custody the ability to love. Elizabeth, of all the others, heroically approaches her own kind of fulfillment. But John's quest for renewal away from that institution which his mother now endures and now represents, precipitates traumatic conflicts within him:

It was the roar of the damned that filled Broadway ... Broadway; the way that led to death was broad ... but narrow was the way that led to life eternal ... But he did not long for the narrow way, where all his people walked; ... In the narrow way, ... there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house ... where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil.²²

and which unwittingly aligns him with the contemporary American in search of a personal coherence in life.

Keeping in mind the words of Ralph Ellison, commenting upon how the contemporary American Negro ought to be drawn, John can be seen as "that sensitively focussed process

of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality"²³ - the whole complexity of black skepticism. John has to countenance a tortured conscience at odds with itself and with its zealous compatriots. And like Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man²⁴ he struggles to authenticate the meaningful existence. Although the novel does not ring out a positive conclusion, yet in the nature of John's spiritual ordeal flickers the impulse to confront reality not in the way of his predecessors, but apart from them and alone: "For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father or his father's fathers. He would have another life."²⁵

Significantly enough, the iconoclastic habit has been entrusted to John early in life. Any psychological formula for the novel could be traced back to The Fire Next Time and to Notes of a Native Son. But what is symbolic in the portrayal of John Grimes is that, whilst John's elders had their roots in an ossified tradition, John is moving away from the confinements of that milieu. He suffers not only the spiritual betrayal of his black superiors but also the collapse of the larger American environment that should have infused him with a sense of living relationships. The nascent rebellion launched within John Grimes, is symptomatic not only of precipitating sociological factors, but of the rootless

contemporary seeking to liberate the potential within. In Baldwin's terms, this would mean a renewing of the self with Dionysian fervour; that which he defines in The Fire Next Time as "sensuality" which is the ability to "respect and rejoice in the force of life ..."25

John Grimes, together with the other questors in Baldwin's later novels, seem to share a common ancestry in the figure of the epic questor of The Wasteland. They will attempt a blind pilgrimage that will take them everywhere, to cultural metropolises, and nowhere at all, back to themselves. "I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home."27

In the first novel, Baldwin restricts himself to the primary phase of a growing consciousness, that has not as yet outgrown the orthodoxy of its parent religion - of the colour Black and of the Black Church - because it is still uninitiated in the rites of worldly religions. In John, the inescapable heritage of cosmopolitan disbelief moulds his entire response to the Universe. So also is the fact of his Negro heritage that has bestowed upon him the curse of the ages: "All niggers had been cursed, ... all

niggers had come from this most undutiful of Noah's sons".²⁸
 And the spiritual ferment that lays claim upon his heart
 cannot find any simple solution. "Time was indifferent, ...
 but the heart, crazed wanderer in the driving waste, carried
 the curse forever."²⁹

Metaphorically, Part III, the Threshing Floor,
 encapsulates the soul's seizure by the Divine Protagonist; a
 nightmare pilgrimage into the recesses of elemental confusion
 that bears ironic witness to the genuineness of the soul's
 thirst for salvation and to the manifold contradictions that
 waylay it. The enactment has been symbolically verbalised,
 and heightened by the emphasis upon John's complete isolation
 and his individual response to it. Even here, John's
 untried sense of mission pressurizes him into the acutest
 participation that might yield him with a sharper sense of
 truth.

Ah, down! - what was he searching here, all alone
 in the darkness? But now he knew ... that he was
 searching something, hidden in the darkness, that
 must be found. He would die if it was not found.³⁰

In John's upheaval lies the testimony of a personal and a
 universal endeavour for the sight of the Father, and of
 ultimate renewal. The experience partakes of the mystical.
 John's experience of it, in the present, is a mythic
 representation of the visitation of a Retributive Father, to

a member of the community of saints. The novel embraces the impenetrable dimensions of the soul in blind relation to a capricious future, as it seeks out for itself the illusion of freedom; and of "change not on the surface but in the depths ... change in the sense of renewal."³¹

Each prayer for mercy agonises over the sins of the past, and as the momentum for John's conversion gradually works itself upto a crescendo, in a minor key, the contributive histories of each character is manipulated into the narrative. Characteristic to all (except perhaps Gabriel) is the flight from the stable to the unstable, taking the uncharted road to the unknown, and sociologically paralleled in the urbanization of the American Negro.³² The departer enlists nothing to assist him, only an undiminished capacity to live, and therefore, to love. Born into the forms of a sterile religion which communicates itself through a repressive idiom, these victims of a misguided milieu attempt to forge for themselves, a viable cure, apart from theology and away from the storefront church. In Baldwin's later novels, the flight away into the vacuity of cosmopolitan disbelief, sees no returning. But in Go Tell It on the Mountain, in the lives of those, who are a generation older to John, there is the deliberate, unquestioning return to the Sanctified Fold:

"Let Him bring you low so He can raise you up."
 And was this the way she should have gone? Had
 she been wrong to fight so hard? Now she was
 an old woman, and all alone, and she was going
 to die. And she had nothing for all her battles,
 ... she was on her face before the altar, crying
 to God for mercy.³³

Juxtaposed to the spiritual return of the other characters is the spiritual rebirth of John Grimes, which comes upon him at the start of his career and unlike the others not at the end of his life. History for John does not seem to forbode a stereotyped repetition even in the fact of his conversion, for his is a youthful conversion which, therefore becomes questionable in the light of a future still to be traversed. The conversion is unable to negate, as it has for the other characters John's quest for the better life. In their inability to reconcile confusion and complexity, the other characters subsume their sense of futility in a religion of retribution, within the fraternal clan of fire baptized saints. Their conversion, however, is not reductive of the moral significance of the quest. The emphasis falls upon a dramatisation of the blighted nature of each character's search through the city of New York. Although their secular pilgrimage through a sin-infested universe aborts Divine Grace, yet Baldwin draws out of their personal histories, the dynamic nature of each character's struggle with himself and with his environment to seek within their span of existence the benediction of a freer and of a nobler life. Florence,

Elizabeth and Gabriel are shown to be the impressionable scions of the occult traditions of the Black Church, and by implication, victims of the amoral dictates of a white society. Their inevitable return to it, nullifies their pioneering potential. The validity of their conversion reinstates the efficacy of the Black Church as an infinite source of control which does not in anyway indicate Baldwin's condemnation of the Black American, only an expression of his personal anathema to the Black Church; and a graphic replay of the damaged Negro consciousness wrecked by "pride, hatred, bitterness, lust ... folly ... corruption" of which also, John is "heir" to,³⁴ and by the subterfuge adopted by the dominant white culture.

In the novel, the urge towards some kind of renewal lies deeply embedded within the Black American. Even Gabriel allows himself to be perpetually brought low in the hope of reconditioning a stupendously adverse soul. "But no child had ever wept such tears ... They came from the deeps no child discovers, and shook him with an ague no child endures".³⁵ Go Tell It on the Mountain follows the linear movement of each character's quest towards an unspecified destiny. But instead of the arrival at a destination, that crux of what should normally be fulfilment, there is only the self-defeating end. The linear takes a turn back into

the cyclically self-enclosed. "As hers had been, and Richard's - there was no escape for anyone. God was everywhere, terrible, the living God...."³⁶ The narrator evokes the Negro's vivid sense of doom from which there can be no escape and against which John's soul rebels. John has not entirely moved out of the one-dimensioned religiosity of his elders, besides which and against which he will have to validate the self. Whether the altar of Grace will continue to ramify his spiritual documentations in the future, remains fictionally unstated. But the fact of the conversion of literally having "gone through" could be read as^a probable metaphor for the soul's passionate attempt to rejuvenate itself. Broadly speaking, in the novels that come after Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin abandons the religious arena for the liberalism of the New World, struggling to stabilise its chaotic impulses, and against which, the focus is upon the frenetic search for renewal through the sexual experience. The confinements of the religious have been jettisoned overboard and the sexual takes its place. But these milestone endeavours in the other novels, remain ineffectual. The majority of unconnected lives are unconnected still; unless one excludes If Beale Street Could Talk which could be viewed as the one, sustained life-fulfilling statement, that realistically liberates a latent capacity for procreative love - through the symbol of the child.

The theme of the quest for renewal through religion in Go Tell It on the Mountain (and through sexual encounter in the other novels) carries each character through, to the edge of a spiritual exile:

She knew through what fires the soul must crawl, and with what weeping one passed over. Men spoke of how the heart broke up, but never spoke of how the soul hung speechless in the pause, the void, the terror between the living and the dead.³⁷

and alone, confronting fathomless depths, they must either exploit to the point of blasphemy, in the sense of smashing taboos, life's possibilities, or make the journey back to a binding orthodoxy.

The pattern, of the quest for renewal, emerges only as each independent entity congregates before the altar of the Temple to attempt to consolidate a heavily littered past. The accumulated embitterment of each character has been telescoped into an instant in time, when the soul under the impetus of a revivalist fervour, surrenders its complexity for the humility of the faithful. Divine Justice is invoked through a prophetic litany sounded at regular intervals in the novel and more profoundly stressed in the last section, the Threshing Floor, as each character fulfills the pre-requisites of Divine Grace; those of humility and repentance. The irony, however, lies in the fact that although each character goes through the rituals of a spiritual baptism,

their inner inadequacies have not been cleansed. The wayward soul of John, grappling in time with the timeless conditions of human mortality, more particularly grappling with the essential roots of black identity, projects the desperate hope of regaining a vital sense of itself, now muted in the lives of those converted. The sense of ultimate renewal is emphatically and perhaps histrionically dramatised by the characters themselves. John, however, after the spiritual deluge, in contrast to the others, elicits the choric password into heaven rather half-heartedly. What the narrator also equally emphasizes is the ineffaceable quality of John's aloneness; his complete alienation, the sense of being outside the normal flux of human affairs; reminiscent of Johnnie in Baldwin's short story, "The Outing". Quotable from it with particular reference to John Grimes are the concluding sentences: "But now where there had been peace there was only panic and where there had been safety, danger, like a flower opened."³⁸ For John, the Journey towards renewal has only begun. He is unable unlike the others, to end his search in the encounter with the Divine, for the experience has only momentarily immobilized him³⁹ not liberated him; so that after his lightning conversion, his earlier uncertainties surface once again, and struggle to articulate themselves.

They were approaching his house - his father's house. In a moment he must leave Elisha, ... and walk alone ... with his mother and his father. And he was afraid. He wanted to stop and turn to Elisha, and tell him ... something for which he found no words.

...
"Elisha", said John, "Elisha",

...
John, staring at Elisha, struggled to tell him something more - struggled to say - all that could never be said.

Yet: "I was down in the valley", he dared, "I was by myself down there. I won't never forget. May God forget me if I forget."⁴⁰

That the friendship with Elisha stands as a secular symbol of hope for release is never made explicit. But, surrounding Elisha, is a certain vibrancy, that of life, and evoked in the early part of the novel, when John and Elisha grapple physically with each other. Fern Marja Eckman in The Furious Passage of James Baldwin, quotes Baldwin thus:

Go Tell It on the Mountain, a story of Harlem adolescence in which, according to its author, homosexuality is "implicit" in the boy's situation" and "made almost explicit" in his tentative gropings towards a seventeen year old Sunday School teacher".⁴¹

Although this might be the implied truth, yet John has always displayed a natural aptitude for seeking the love that has always been denied to him. Of all the characters that John Grimes comes into contact with, Elisha is the only one able to inspire him with confidence and hope; and, it would be natural for John Grimes to seek him for guidance and friendship. In the later novels, such relationships

become sexual alliances. For the present, it could be said that John's quest for renewal foreshadows a future, which will plunge him into diverse experiences which may or may not yield him with a better understanding of himself. Meanwhile the novel re-examines the classic structure of ^{the} Black American experience which will have to be modified by the present black generation. The novel seeks an uncertain future, but it looks ahead all the same, through its adolescent offspring, who has imbibed, despite himself, all the tragic and irredeemable shortcomings of the conscious Black American. The juxtaposition of personal experience between him and the other characters, especially bring forward the fact, of the near impossibility of Negro fulfillment in America. Unknown to John, but historically evident in the other characters, is the complex nature of the Black American existence. However, the thrust of the novel is forwards, always towards life and as a symbol of hope for the American Negro's release, John ventilates the fixed attitudes of his Black kinsmen, so that the weight of the entire novel, falls upon John's developing potential for freedom. This inspires him with the capacity to see, outwards and forwards into the unknown future that has yet to be tapped. It promises more than the past and present disillusionments that have disqualified the American Negro from participating in the creation of history and ultimately

that of human life. This naturally implies, that the end note is one of qualified optimism,

It cannot be said that John's quest for selfhood ends with the concluding lines of the novel. He has only succeeded in initiating himself out of the orthodox pattern of Black-American life. Where the other characters have already traversed the full course of a disillusioned life and have made their way back to the Black community having found no other alternative, John is only just preparing himself for life. His salvation lies in the future. As the novel awaits John Grimes' renewal, it significantly brings the reader up-to-date with the suffering that John will have to go through, the hopelessness that he will have to fight against and the knowledge that he will have to bear if he is to constantly seek to renew and rehabilitate his own identity. It is through John Grimes that the novel channelises the Black American hope for fulfillment and creativity. In the end, one understands that the quest for renewal is an undertaking that challenges the individual and forces him to re-orient his vision towards the more idealistic goals of life.

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul West, The Modern Novel, (London: Hutchinson Univ. Lib., 1963), II, 297.

² George Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), p. 144.

³ Louis H. Pratt, James Baldwin (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 109. "One is scarcely able to avoid the fact that the search for identity is one of primary forces behind all of Baldwin's writing". Ref. also to: Keneth Kinnamon ed., James Baldwin - A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs: New Jersey, 1974), p. 28 - "First five books ... emotion of shame. Flight from self, quest for identity and the sophisticated acceptance of one's "blackness" ...

⁴ James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (London: Transworld Pubs. Ltd., 1965), p. 64. All references are to this edition.

⁵ Margeret Mead and James Baldwin, A Rap on Race (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1971), p. 26. All references are to this edition.

⁶ James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (London: Michael Joseph, Ltd., 1963) p. 11. All references are to this edition.

⁷ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 121.

⁸ Fern Marja Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1966), p. 129.

⁹ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 23.

¹⁰ The Fire Next Time, p. 53.

¹¹ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 112.

¹² A Rap on Race, p. 201.

¹³ Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), p. 53. and Ref. to Keneth Kinnamon, p. 33.

- 13 Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), p. 53. and Ref. to Kenneth Kinnemon, p. 33.
- 14 Nobody Knows My Name, p. 168.
- 15 James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1954), p. 30. All references are to this edition.
- 16 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 236 & 237.
- 17 Ibid., p. 254.
- 18 Therman B. O'Daniel ed., James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation, (Washington: Howard Univ. Press, 1975), p. 31: "... the universality of their inner conflicts and the particular circumstances of their lives as Negroes in America."
- 19 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 34.
- 20 Ibid., p. 35 & 36.
- 21 The Fire Next Time, p. 168.
- 22 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 38.
- 23 Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 26.
- 24 Howard M. Harper Jr., Desperate Faith (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 146. "... the most successful parts of the book are those dealing with John himself, where the prose, like Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a subtle reflection of the protagonists awareness."
- 25 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 20.
- 26 The Fire Next Time, p. 53.
- 27 James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1957), p. 31.

- 28 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 226.
- 29 Ibid., p. 226.
- 30 Ibid., p. 228.
- 31 The Fire Next Time, p. 100.
- 32 Kenneth Kinnamon ed., p. 33" ... Florence, Elizabeth and Gabriel ... belong to a transitional generation, born roughly between 1875 and 1900 ... traces the process of secularization that occurred when the Negro left the land for the Northern Ghetto ...".
- 33 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 99.
- 34 Ibid., p. 181.
- 35 Ibid., p. 109 & 110.
- 36 Ibid., p. 201.
- 37 Ibid., p. 201.
- 38 James Baldwin, Going to Meet the Man (London: Michael Joseph, 1948), p. 54.
- 39 The Fire Next Time, p. 43.
- 40 Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 252 & 253.
- 41 Fern Marja Eckman, p. 30 & 31.

Chapter II

GIOVANNI'S ROOM, ANOTHER COUNTRY, TELL ME HOW LONG THE
TRAIN'S BEEN GONE - THE PASSAGE THROUGH THE AMERICAN
CONFUSION

After Baldwin's portrayal in Go Tell It on the Mountain of the adolescent hero's valiant effort to "wrestle with himself"¹ and to understand his situation better, the three novels that follow it carry the theme of Baldwin's quest for authenticity, to the more complex realms of the artists' fictive imagination. They depict his ripening concern with the Black American attempt to validify an unfettered identity, away from the warped conceptions of the black ghetto and apart from the black stereotypes of history. Consequently, Giovanni's Room, Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, reflect in their inner construction, the extremities of behaviour which the individual in flight from his environment has been driven to. This is specifically illustrated in the entangled human relationships that fill the three novels. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the nature of these relationships so as to have a better insight into the problems that the American character has to face before he can hope to attain knowledge of the self. The focus will be upon the nature of experience in America, outside the boundaries of the Black Church. If in the first novel, Baldwin is dealing strictly with the pattern of Black American life,ⁱⁿ the later novels, the arena has enlarged to include the whole of America. For the Black American, the quest for selfhood would be insufficiently pursued if he is to exclude his white counterpart from his

area of experience. The second novel, Giovanni's Room, which has only white characters in it shows us that the White American is as divided within himself as the Black American. Although the problems are individual to each, yet Baldwin feels that they are a part of one another. Their individual struggle for self-knowledge points to a basic unity between them and to the fact that they must forge a new relationship with one another, so as to help each other in the quest for the American identity. On a deeper level, the quest for selfhood in Baldwin's novels, concerns every individual, irrespective of colour. The three novels have been studied together, for they enact the pain-filled experiences that have to be undergone if the individual is to set out in search of himself. The novel exemplify the contradictory experiences of adulthood and suggest that the course of salvation lies only in the ability to endure pain. Baldwin's characters are not heroic embodiments of suffering. Instead they bear the distinctive curse of self-consciousness. This makes them even more aware of their spiritual disabilities, of the gap that there is between themselves as they are and what they should be. The three novels focus upon this genuine inability of the American character to rise above himself. They acquaint the reader with the American desolation. After one has encountered in the three novels, the hopelessness of life in America, one is better able to appreciate the worth

of resurrective love in If Beale Street Could Talk. Before coming to it, however, one must first come to grips with the loneliness and despair of a people divided from itself.

Although these novels do not equal the artistic control that has been displayed in Go Tell It on the Mountain, yet they do portray, through certain characters and through particular relationships, the chaotic nature of reality outside Harlem: a reality which is a conglomerate of racial and individual frustration. Perception of this reality is Baldwin's major concern in the three novels. But as his essays also illustrate, Baldwin's concern with the imperative to meet it, irreconcilably splits his attitude towards it.

As a public spokesman he urges rebellion, while as an artist his inner need is for acceptance. The one role demands social action while the other denies the relevance of that action . . . While the idea of rebellion against the injustice is dominant in the essays on the racial crisis, the idea of acceptance of the ultimate existential fact is there too. For the illustration rather than the exposition, of these apparently conflicting views of the human condition, Baldwin's fiction is the most illuminating source.²

Howard Harper points to the fact that the three novels do not provide solutions to the questions posed in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Rather, they illustrate the paradoxical realization that, compromise with the American reality is

an apparent necessity for the American Negro, through his nobler attempt to love his fellow country-men and through his acceptance of the historical circumstances that had traded him into such an existence. But his life however, will attempt to conceive of itself anew. Advocating rebellion in plain statement in the essays, is comparatively simpler than demonstrating the complex actuality of it in the novels; and critics like Edward Margolies are of the opinion that "Baldwin's characters generally end up more outraged and submerged than they began",³ whilst Louis Pratt states that, only a few of Baldwin's characters "seem to have arrived at the goal of complete self-realization".⁴ To a large extent one would agree with these critics since most of Baldwin's characters are overwhelmed with the issues that are either warring for acceptance or for repudiation. At the most fundamental level, however, the characters are confused and suffer from an unjustified rejection on the basis of colour discrimination.

Rather than offer solutions, what the three novels stress upon, is the fact, that, reality outside the confinements of Harlem, is neither black nor white, but completely American; that self definition becomes possible only within the American context. This would involve, as Baldwin sees it, an examining of attitudes, of going beneath the surface,

"to tap the source" and to explore "one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of life that order which is art".⁵

A somewhat lofty claim for the artist's compulsive search for the aesthetic ideal which, when examined in the lives of all the characters in the three novels, can be seen as the personal struggle for that, which Baldwin in Notes of a Native Son defines as the "moral center". Every character, even more than being politically involved in expatiating upon his social injuries, is more concerned with the passionate and somewhat mystical search for personal equipoise. Logically then, all action in the three novels, stems from the inner and the psychological, rather than the outer and the social imperative for freedom. This places the Black American in direct confrontation with the essential forces of life against which he will have to measure and discipline his own potential for freedom. Life has, therefore, to be faced only in terms of what the Black American can discover for himself; and as Baldwin himself puts it:

I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find therefore, one's own moral center and

move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright. I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this ...⁶

The nobling plea for responsibility, is thwarted in the novels, by the pervasive nightmare of American history which has mutually opposed the white conqueror to the black slave. The one prefers to deny the other his equally complex humanity, and the other, nourishes within himself, the "rage of the disesteemed", from which "internal warfare",⁷ Rufus Scott in Another Country was unable to extricate himself; and to which his sister Ida, was victim. But for Ida Scott, Rufus' despair, does not achieve what she desires: which is a transmutation of personal affliction. Hers is the driving determination to succeed, at whatever cost. Journeying through the American confusion then, the questing pilgrim, bound in honesty to himself, will have to encounter as never before, "that void, within which, like the earth before the word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden. From this void - ourselves - it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void; our unknown selves, demanding forever, a new act of creation, which can save us".⁸ The possibility of redemption for Baldwin's characters, lies in their ability to recreate life out of chaos. Although in varying degrees, the instinct for life does mark each character in the novels, in that they aspire towards overcoming their situation, and

although there is the attempted struggle against death, which shows itself to be the "emasculating effects of white society",⁹ yet the characters are rarely able to successfully realize their potential for life. The more convincing evidence, is the "stalking" note of "buried despair",¹⁰ from which, David in Giovanni's Room, cannot escape even after fleeing from America, and which has been interiorised within him as a condition of the American dilemma. The only possible solution lies in the courageous cohabitation of individuals graced by love and self-discipline.¹¹ But this is not the message of the novels; rather this is what Baldwin explicitly states in his essays. The novels do not arrive at the integrated vision of his essays. They merely illustrate the contemporary American existence fraught with pain. The only hope lies in the characters ability to endure suffering. But these are qualities, that elude the American character in Baldwin's novels.

Incidental to the fulfilling experience in Baldwin's novels, is the discovery of suffering. This is a significant dimension of Baldwin's writing, to which Louis Pratt remarks: "One is scarcely able to avoid the fact that the search for identity is one of the primary forces behind all of Baldwin's writings. For this reason, it has become the theme upon which a majority of the discovery is

suffering".¹² Louis Pratt indicates that the way of human affliction through which all of Baldwin's characters must pass, is the effectual catalyst for the change within them. However, none achieves the classic pinnacle of tragic suffering. But this would not be the appropriate yardstick for measuring human potential in Baldwin's novels. The nature of suffering as explained in Notes of a Native Son, is tied up with the historical circumstances that have created and thrown the white man and the black man, the master and the slave together. The master has not the innocence of his white counterpart in Europe, who is oblivious to the existence of "black men",¹³ and for whom, guilt is not a literal feature of his every day existence. Incidentally, also, Charles Newman observes that the conclusion of Another Country is "magnificently unresolved". This irresolution points to the casual nature of modern tragedy¹⁴ which exists in life, especially in American existence, as a condition of human purblindness that results in an unrelieved frustration which nullifies all effort. The American Negro who faces this reality, realizes, that he has "arrived at this place in God's name".

This then is the best that God (the white God) can do. If that is so, then it is time to replace Him - replace Him with what? and this void, this despair, this torment is felt everywhere in the West, from the streets of Stockholm to the churches of New Orleans and the sidewalks of Harlem.

The "devastating question" of the "true meaning of man's history",¹⁵ becomes the sole concern of the West, including the American Negro, who has now become an indivisible part of it, since his unwilling acculturation into the forms of western life.

The general critical opinion held about the three novels, ranges from an appreciation of Baldwin's sensitivity to "the artistic conscience in its struggle with its Black inheritance, in its aspiration to a human estate",¹⁶ to a denigration of Baldwin's apparent ineptitude with the genre of novel writing.¹⁷ But as Louis Pratt fittingly concludes: "As contemporaries of Baldwin we are unable to assess the impact that his writings will have on posterity".¹⁸ Although lacking the objective distance of time, the unprejudiced response to the situations and characters that Baldwin explores is possible, for this depends on the ability to reorient one's expectations not in the way of technical skill, but in one's sensitivity to Baldwin's attempt to illustrate the dilemma of his black compatriots. His novels, might on the surface be marred by repetition and distracting details, but the cumulative impact of the Negro experience in America as portrayed in the novels, reveals the essential truth of the baffled American, black or white, whose entry into his country's drama, can find no logical conclusion, except in death.

The majority of faceless White Americans in Baldwin's novels, have a dissipated sense of life. They do not "earn" their death by "confronting with passion the conundrum of life"¹⁹. In direct contrast to them stands the black wayfarer who is in perpetual contact with life and death, love and hatred, right and wrong,²⁰ symbolizing Baldwin's inexorable sense of human duality. Most of Baldwin's black protagonists are gifted artists; gifted with the insight into life, so that they are able to reflect as Leo Proudhammer does, in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, a sense of black dynamism. These characters, tell of the possibility of hope in America and ultimately of hope in the human universe.²¹ They underline the attempt to revive the sustaining virtues of faith in one another, hope in a future still to be traversed, and ultimately, of the transcending power of love. Baldwin's novels cannot merely be dismissed as artistic blunders. The significance of their meaning, especially arises, when they are considered together as, revealing truths about the Black American travail.

Baldwin's second novel, Giovanni's Room is smaller in scope, in "not being cosmic ... But like the first novel, the second is focussed on the subjective inner experience of a single individual."²² According to Irving Howe, the novel

is a flat failure.²³ It is a failure if one reads it only as a novel about homosexuality because the central experience in it, fails to evoke any lasting impression about the genuineness of such a relationship. Moreover, it does not transcend its own subjectivity. And as John Aldrige states in After the Lost Generation: "Homosexual and racial conflict seem to be the only discoveries which the new writers have been able to make so far in the area of unexploited subject matter". He says further, that such subjects are promising, only to the extent that they have served to replace the "old subjects", but unfortunately, most of these novels replace "literary values" with "sensational values". The characters too "quickly recede into types rather than expand into symbols".²⁴ With particular reference to Giovanni's Room only as a novel about homosexuality, this statement would be applicable to it. But when one begins to seek for the hidden sources of life denied to David, one finds something more than the central problem of homosexuality. One encounters the flesh and blood embodiments of a bankrupt era. David's acute sense of human waste at the end of the episode, cannot entirely be overruled. So also is Jacques' pathetic sense of doom, and Giovanni's frenzied attempts at life. What binds the novel together, and links it up with the theme of human futility in the other two novels, is David's

evident humility in the face of his own aberration:

And yet - when one begins to search for the crucial, the definitive moment, the moment which changed all others, one finds oneself pressing in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors. My flight may, indeed, have begun that summer - which does not tell me where to find the germ of the dilemma which resolved itself, that summer, into flight. Of course, it is somewhere before me ... and it is yet more foreign to me than those foreign hills outside.²⁵

Although these are white characters that Baldwin deals with, yet the nature of David's dilemma goes beyond the social barrier of colour. The homosexual experience in the novel could be seen as a literal indication of the fractured American personality, what happened to it, when, having been deprived of its filial attachments by circumstances beyond its control, it seeks to resolve the crisis by itself, in the only other way that appears possible to it. And as David unhappily quotes to the reader "perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself".²⁶ It seeks for itself a new identity and enters life with the incorrigible belief that, all the unexploited possibilities of life lie open to it. However, the "road of excess" traversed in Baldwin's three novels, does not conclude in the "palace of wisdom". David, at the end of the novel, observes in futility:

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

I long to make this prophecy come true. I long ... to be free.²⁷

thereby voicing to himself the absoluteness of the void which has imprisoned him and which his girlfriend Hella, has also consciously realized for herself:

Ah, I don't know anything about happiness anymore. I don't know anything about forgiveness. But if women are supposed to be led by men and there aren't any men to lead them, what happens then? What happens then?²⁸

Baldwin's explanation of David's aberrant behaviour, is that "David's dilemma is the dilemma ... of many men of his generation; by which I do not mean sexual ambivalence as a crucial lack of sexual authority."²⁹ Whatever may be the explanation offered, John Lash, in A Critical Evaluation conclusively puts it thus: "Ironically however, the phallic gods have no absolute answers for Baldwin's men ... they may ... find each other and so find a legitimate identity. But they do not find a reconciliation with life itself ..."³⁰ Ironically so, the physical state of disorder in Giovanni's room, seems to be pointing to the internal chaos ruling the life of each character. As Giovanni vigorously, but ineffectively attempts to order his room, the characters inhabiting the Parisian underworld, are also clamouring for the vital connection that would reinstate their lives. But their undisciplined search for the ideal human contact has

only carried them underground, to be claimed by their subterranean instincts; furthest from the profundities of any definable identity, which must take root in the simplicity of a love denied to David:

I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed. It had been so once, it had almost been so once. I could make it so again, I could make it real. It only demanded a short, hard struggle for me to become myself again.³¹

The absolute denial is made more insistent by the futility of David's envisioning power; that he is able to see into the human paradox but is unable to help himself, which is the peculiar predicament of contemporary man.³² Despite its limitation of subject matter, the significance of Giovanni's Room arises when it is considered along with the other novels. Together with Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, they speak of the American frustration.

"I am the man, I suffered, I was there". The epigraph to Giovanni's Room testifies to the "weight" of experience that the "fallen" have to bear; the theme of which, according to several critics, has been handled in a more complex way in Another Country. In coming to this novel we find that heterosexual and homosexual relationships abound in it. But in the context of what the characters are

looking for, these relationships that are of predominant concern in Another Country are merely partial and illusory solutions, that do not provide the answers to the question figuratively put forward at the very beginning of the novel.

He stood there ... shivering in the rags of twenty odd years, and screaming through the horns: Do you love me? Do you love? ... the question was terrible and real.³³

George Kent, is of the opinion that, the relationships have a serious purpose, being "the instruments for the explication of being the metaphors for self-definition". And, as he continues, Baldwin is "too concerned about whether the sexual experience provides a transcending love to make distinctions between the heterosexual and homosexual experience."³⁴ This would be too uncritical an acceptance of the viability of the relationships and would completely tend to trace the evolution of being through these relationships. Howard Harper's discriminating stand provides a more definite attitude: "the homosexual relationships in Baldwin's fiction" are usually "transitory; they lead only to moments of illusion whilst the heterosexual relationships, are "more painful, but deeper".³⁵ One would be more in favour of the latter opinion especially after Baldwin's fiction has seen the comparative fulfilment of the heterosexual relationship in If Beale Street Could Talk.

Meanwhile, however, the relationships in Another Country, mark the distracted efforts of the American citizen to understand himself and to come to terms with reality. The setting for the novel, is in America, in New York, where the forces of disintegration also at work in Giovanni's Room, prove to be the internal forces that have to be confronted, wherever the place. In Giovanni's Room, Paris, even more than resolving conflicts heightens the sense of victimization to human irrationality. And self-discovery as Baldwin also finds out, is not a flight away from, but a grappling with, the death-impelling norms of American society.

The search for a meaningful identity is not merely confined to the Black race in America, but also to the white race living in close proximity with its Negro brother. Baldwin's passion for justice which links itself with his artistic sensibility, leads him to proclaim repeatedly, that the country's need is for the "relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks"³⁶ to accept each other. This mutual endorsement of one another's existence would be the only means of universal rejuvenation. But, however clear-sighted Baldwin may be in his essays, his fiction does not sustain their liberating idealism. As most critics have observed, and, to quote from one of them: "His intricate and sinuous style, graceful or apocalyptic as the occasion

requires, is unmistakable; but his materials seem to defy dramatic control. The Black race and the white, straight and inverted sex, worldly and transcendent concerns, often break asunder in rhetoric, fury or sentiment."³⁷ The characters do, sometimes get lost in the involutions of the story and they do portray the stereotype of the alienated youth in search of an identity. But the fact that they are either aspiring or professional artists, figurative embodiments of the conscious citizen in Baldwin's fiction, attempting, despite the odds, to create life for themselves, underscores Baldwin's hope for the birth of the new.

In the essay, A Rap on Race, Baldwin dwells to a large extent upon the defunctive reality of American life. This is the reality, which influences and which entraps the lives of all the characters in Baldwin's novels, and against which Rufus Scott in Another Country pitches himself. Rufus' bitter warfare with the white world results only in the self-defeating end. His rage, is the insensible reaction, which is foolishly but tragically unable to rise above itself, against the implications of his victimization. "To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need"; explains Baldwin in Notes of a Native Son, but "most of the time it is the members of the ghetto who smash each other and themselves".³⁸ Rufus succeeds in smashing not only himself, but also his girl

friend Leona, till finally alone, denuded of rage, he faces the ultimate immediacy of a "white God",³⁹ to find nothing within himself, only the anguish that this recognition has brought to the surface. "I imagine that one of the reasons that people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain".⁴⁰ In Baldwin's terms, the violence of Rufus' anger, has consumed that natural propensity for love, which is the supreme criterion for the positive reconstruction. For every character, knowledge of Rufus' abandonment to complete despair at the beginning of the novel, brings them into a personal confrontation with the perniciousness of the American reality; and which has been lucidly explained in Notes of a Native Son:

In order really to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind - and the heart - that this hatred becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that love comes easily ... It is really this, which has driven so many people mad, both black and white ... And the trouble finally, is that the risks are real even if the choices do not exist.⁴¹

For Rufus' sister, one amongst the striving many, to continue to live alone, undaunted and hopeful yet, without heeding the threat of destruction, already enacted through her brother's suicide, would require an almost impossible

heroism. Yet Ida Scott does struggle for an existence. But the life promised her is devoid of human trust. Like Rufus, but better equipped for survival,⁴² Ida moves away from the narrow enclosures of Harlem existence, to seek that which Rufus sought for in the outside world. The proven treachery of this world, imposes its standards upon Ida. In order to survive, she must defend herself from being assaulted and annihilated by it. And in the scene when Vivaldo watches Ida unobserved, there is revealed in her bearing, the unyielding bitterness of the black race. She nurses within herself, the impersonal hatred which was also borne by her black predecessors, that^{which} is always ready, poised for destruction:

... her face a dark mask behind which belligerence battled with humility. This was in her eyes which never for an instant lost their wariness and which were always ready within a split second, to turn black and lightless with contempt. Even when she was being friendly there was something in her manner, her voice, which carried a warning...⁴³

Although her life has been riddled by hatred and disillusion, her resistance to it is strong enough to enable her to approach, however skeptically, the emotional fulfillment of love. At first, her alliance with Rufus' friend Vivaldo, seems to be merely a matter of emotional expedience, when, in the knowledge of her brother's suicide, she had urgently needed human support. Baldwin does not strictly follow the

relationship to the end. Nor does he allow too revealing and insight into Ida's psychology - so that the picture gathered of her, seems inconclusive. Yet her relationship with Vivaldo, relatively succeeds where all the others fail. But like the other relationships that abound in the novel, the Richard-Cass relationship, the Eric-Yves relationship, the Rufus-Leona relationship and the Eric-Cass relationship, the Ida-Vivaldo relationship also reflect the "misery, confusion and despair"⁴⁴ reigning over the American character and which divorces people one from the other. Through the workings of these relationships in Another Country, Baldwin has been able to suggest the frenzied search for wholeness. But he has not exercised the tenacity that was displayed in following the workings of the psychic mechanism of John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Although each relationship strikes a significant chord in the human character, they have not been deeply and fully developed enough so as to be the energising means of self-discovery and of ultimate reconciliation with the universe. The forward looking hero of Go Tell It on the Mountain cannot claim to have tapped the sources of life in this novel. The discovery instead is of the perishable nature of human values in the American reality; more specifically, in the city of New York, which is a city

"without oases, run entirely ... for money", where its citizens seem to "have lost entirely any sense of their right to renew themselves"; so that whoever in "New York attempted to cling to this right, lived in New York in exile - in exile from the life around him, and this, paradoxically had the effect of placing him in perpetual danger of being forever banished from any real sense of himself".⁴⁵ In short, it speaks for almost every character in the novel who has been endowed, fortunately or unfortunately, with the artistic sensibility, that cannot content itself with the malaise of bourgeoisie complacency. This perhaps, is the reason for Rufus' suicide. He had ceased to believe in the creative response to his music; for "no one heard" and since "bloodless people cannot be made to bleed",⁴⁶ self-violence seemed the only adequate way to vindicate himself.

The intermixing of black and white characters in Baldwin's novels, seems to confirm his belief in the composite nature of the American reality. Besides, the obvious fictional intent, is not to document the struggle of the Black-American, but to imaginatively create and to manipulate characters, both black and white, who have enough visionary foresight to make the courageous bid for

freedom. If the struggle towards a personal acceptance of one another was one-sidedly embarked upon only by the American Negro, nothing would be accomplished. The American reality, therefore, shows the struggle of each character to assimilate the constant reality of his black or white counterpart and to which he must accordingly adapt his own standards. Fraught with these perplexing conditions, most of the time the contemporary American finds himself entrapped within them. For Vivaldo, a white aspiring novelist, although the one important "question" of his life was, how to "discover his possibilities and become reconciled to them,"⁴⁷ this only serves to remind him ironically, of his own disintegrating potential. His relationship with Ida is an uneven quest for fulfillment and it is not until the very end that both are finally bound together in knowledge, however, incomplete, of one another. Meanwhile, Vivaldo has to live out the entire length of his own despair and his uncertain quest for Ida; and Ida, her calculated resolve to defeat the white man at his game and to strike up a mercenary relationship with the universe. Both are, however, deeply humbled at the end:

There was nothing erotic in it; they were like two weary children. And it was she who was comforting him. Her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible,

strangling sound, to weep; for she was stroking his innocence out of him.⁴⁸

Baldwin's sensitivity to human hope lies in that which he envisions to be, the white man's voluntary option out of a radical innocence that has imprisoned him and that has chosen to deny to the black man his American identity. To a certain extent, and at the end of the novel, Ida, effects Vivaldo's awakening into knowledge. She draws him out of his enslavement from the American ignorance to educate him for the nobler responsibility of love. Vivaldo too, has not been entirely indifferent to the influences of life around him, and as he gravitates towards Ida, he indicates the way of salvation. This is, as Baldwin also sees and expresses it in one of his essays: "For one of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men and vice-versa ... It is precisely this black and white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today."⁴⁹

Whereas the Ida-Vivaldo relationship concludes in a muted optimism, Richard and Cass, suffer from a lack of connection with each other and with the natural rhythms of human growth. Richard's relative success as a novelist,

only disproves him as a man. In the eyes of Cass, Richard who stands accused of parasitism, has been unable to bridge the void in their marriage, which obviously deepened at the moment of Richard's arrival at material gain. It was Cass who had not only manfully held the relationship together, but who had made the unceasing attempt to heal Richard through love. But as in the other heterosexual relationships one's burdens cannot be foisted onto another; it can only be lightened. When Cass voices her own misgivings to Eric, she gives expression to her personal dilemma:

I watched Richard this morning and I thought to myself as I've thought before, how much responsibility I must take for who he is ... I score him, after all, for being second rate, for not having any real passion, any real daring, any real thoughts of his own ... I had the daring and the passion. And he took them all,⁵⁰ of course, how could he tell they weren't his?

This brings the situation back to Hella in Giovanni's Room:

"But if women are supposed to be led by men and there aren't any men to lead them what happens then?"⁵¹ In a somewhat similar situation, Cass runs off from Richard to a relationship with Eric. Yet, Eric can only wish that

He could rescue her, that it was within his power to rescue her and make her life less hard. But it was only love which could accomplish the miracle of making life bearable - only love and love itself mostly failed; and he had never loved her. He had used her to find out something about

himself. And even this was not true.⁵²

The truth is that Eric is only biding his time before his homosexual partner arrives in New York to join him there. The permanence of this relationship also becomes questionable, because Yves, who is much younger will also "dream of escape" one day. Individual destinies become inextricable and yet are deeply isolated from one another, in that all are aware of their personal responsibilities to life, but are unable to help each other. Ideally, the characters must forge for themselves the Dionysian sense of the constant recreation out of life; but most of Baldwin's characters lack the clarity of will to determine the course of salvation for themselves and are invariably trapped in human conflicts.

The constant yearning for the transcendent moments of human experience, has been italicised in the novel, by the use of Biblical strains and snatches of song; which experience, however, has proved almost impossible to sustain. The only insistent "note" is the note of "buried despair". Permanent succour in Another Country, as in Giovanni's Room is ultimately denied.

Baldwin's fourth novel, Tell me How Long the Train's Been Gone has been regarded "as the most directly political

novel in that the issues regarding the questions of the relation of men to society and to each other are more dramatically and explicitly posed than in any of the preceding fiction".⁵³ The reason for this, could be seen as one, by which Leo Proudhammer, through whom the story is told, who is an actor of maturity, and therefore, an artist with a sizeable amount of experience behind him, whose intellectual faculties have also been sharpened, brings to the forefront aspects of the American life which desire to be discussed and understood. He begins with the most pressing factor that of his own blackness as it relates to the whiteness of others. In the words of Baldwin: "I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else."⁵⁴ The unlocking of Leo Proudhammer's history could be said to begin from the conscious look into the ethics of Negro survival in America. Besides being an actor, Leo Proudhammer, metaphorically embodies the spirit of the artist⁵⁵ who, in Baldwin's fiction, personifies the alienated soul seeking to justify itself. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, offers no better solutions, nor are the problems it encounters different from the ones already faced. If it is to be seen as displaying any signs of artistic maturity, then perhaps the single person narrator, through whose

perspective the total picture is offered, is at least a more organized method of telling the story than a novel like Another Country which has been too "ambitiously"⁵⁶ packed. The hero's illness, is the appropriate fictional device; a reflective moment in time, to enable a look into the past and future so as to be better equipped for the present. This implies, a more concerted effort to deal with the problems besetting the American Negro, who still has courage enough to pursue his own quest for fulfillment. There is less of the frenzied search of Another Country and more of the realization that "the history which produced one cannot be given away".⁵⁷ In Baldwin's terms, this is the necessary

acceptance, totally, without rancour, of life as it is, and men as they are; in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a common place. But ... we must never ... accept these injustices as common place but must fight them with all one's strength. The fight begins, however, in the heart.⁵⁸

The focal centre of the novel lies within the deepening consciousness of Leo Proudhammer who has traditionally made his way to the top. The relived events of his life mark the syndrome of American futility. But futility in this novel is not as tragic as the overruling despair which paralyses human relationship and human

endeavour in Another Country. The undercurrents of personal doubt in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone speaks not only for the Negro's perpetual sense of danger even after professional success has been achieved, but also for the individual in search of meaning and connection; so that, Leo Proudhammer is once again reminiscent of all the other characters struggling towards "Bethlehem" or towards the "New Jerusalem". In this novel, there is more of a distanced analysis of the fragments that have been recalled from the past, and less of the frenetic search for renewal of Another Country; as if the character is utilising his illness to consolidate the meaning of his life. But as the last sentence proves about the inevitability of human circumstance: "Then, I came back. I first did the movie, Big Deal, not a very good movie, really, and then I did a new play, and so found myself, presently, standing in the wings again, waiting for my cue."⁵⁹ Withdrawal from the human lot is never the solution for Baldwin's characters. All of them are drawn to the epicentre of human life which pre-supposes suffering and promises renewal through human love. But the ultimate realization of that meaning, in the three novels dealt with in this chapter, proves elusive to each one of them. The thematic confrontation is of the fully conscious character, facing the phenomenal invincibility of creation and destruction, and successfully or unsuccessfully reflected in

his life, in the social arena of day to day communication.

In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, it is as if Leo Proudhammer discovers the ultimate "aloneness" of every individual. This is made clear in the concluding sentences when the narrative places emphasis upon the personal pronoun: "Then, I went away to Europe, alone. Then, I came back. I first did the movie ... and then I did a new play, and so found myself, presently, standing in the wings again, waiting for my cue".⁶⁰ Just as the initiation into self awareness, is in most cases external so its realization is an internal process to be perfected alone. The ultimate confrontation partly understood and partly realized by Leo Proudhammer, is with the dark and unknown side of the self, where the rejuvenative birth which will transmute human travail, will issue from it. However in the three novels discussed in the chapter, Baldwin has not been able to manipulate that moment of complete renewal.

Neither Leo Proudhammer's relationship with Barbara King nor with Christopher, seems to assert any very lasting claims upon him. That is the prerogative of his profession. This, ironically speaks of the possibility of the American Negro's success, but it also implies that there is something more to be desired other than professional gain. This is something experience teaches Leo Proudhammer. "If it

is true, as I expect, that people turn to each other in the hope of being created by each other then it is absolutely true that the uncreated young turn, to be created, toward their elders".⁶¹ Perception of the need for human interrelatedness seems to be the special contribution of Christopher to Leo Proudhammer. Their relationship is more in the nature of father and son, elder brother and younger brother, a continuation of the relationship shared with his own brother Caleb. But this again has not the finer possibilities of heterosexual love where a polarised reciprocity opens up the possibility for a deeper understanding of human continuity. With the fourth novel, Baldwin assesses the possibility of life in America, which reflected in Leo Proudhammer, is found wanting.

I loved Barbara. I knew it then, and I really know it now; but what, I asked myself, was I to do with her? Love, honour and protect. But these were not among my possibilities. And, since they were not, I felt myself, bitterly, and most unwillingly, holding myself outside her sorrow; holding myself, in fact, outside her love; holding myself beyond the reach of my blasted possibilities.⁶²

Throughout the telling of his own story, Leo Proudhammer is weighed down by a sense of exile from human involvement; as a result of which, he has not been able to justify his own meagre role in it. "There was a sense in which it certainly could be said that my endeavour had been for nothing. Indeed,

I had conquered the city; but the city was stricken with plague".⁶³ Once again, as in the other two, the novel concludes with a sense of life, unfulfilled. That the erotic potential remains unrealised, is not so much a failure on the part of the characters, as in Baldwin's apparent inability to realise that potential in the personal level, and to translate it into fictive terms. The failure, however, is also indicative of the corruptibility of the American attempt to define itself.

The renewal sought for by every character, demands a total surrender of the self; a giving up of the old, for principles as yet undiscovered, but never improbable. However, the telling comment that, "any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality"⁶⁴ is applicable to almost every character in Baldwin's three novels under consideration in this chapter. None of them ever succeeds in realising his or her own potential for the power to life. It is not that renewal is impossible, but, they seem unable to sustain those moments of achieved connection with each other and with the universe; so that they fall back into blindness and despair impels them to blunder through every relationship. The failure of Baldwin's characters in these three novels, also tells something of the American abyss through which all of them must pass. In the

end, each one of them, lives with the knowledge of his own fallibility; unable to help himself, unable to rise above his own situation. Baldwin does succeed, however, in conveying the essence of the Negro exile in America, which in the words of Julian Mayfield writing about the Negro writer, reinforces Baldwin's sensitivity to the Black American's unjustified expulsion from the country of his birth:

He walks the streets of his nation an alien, and yet he feels no bond to the continent of his ancestors. He is indeed the man without a country. And yet this very detachment may give him the insight of the stranger in the house, placing him in a better position to illuminate contemporary American life.⁶⁵

Giovanni's Room, Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, are related to one another in the problems that they confront; which are not only those of the questing Negro's but that of the American's search for unity and his encounter with the bewildering complexities that impede him from complete achievement. The novels do a cross-section of the malady of contemporary American confusion, and throw up as a consequence, a characteristic range of experience and of human personalities, indicating thereby, that the way to self-reconciliation is only through confusion and anarchy; which, however, never means that the American character ought to be overtaken by them. Those

moments of lucid introspection in these novels, however inconsistent, are positive arrowmarks towards human stability. They are the result of the characters' enduring allegiance to life. The energy dispelled in human warfare with the forces of life and death, seeks to rectify itself once again in the privacy of such moments; so that, experience as portrayed in the three novels, is justified in relation to the ultimate discovery of the value of the moulding influences of human existence. As the characters strike out towards a self-defined freedom, they mark the human progress towards solutions. More sustaining, in the three novels, however, is the threat of extinction in the face of overriding perplexities. The characters have run the gamut of American disillusionment, and the novels look forward to the liberating experience of If Beale Street Could Talk, which is not founded upon any baseless idealism, but upon a realistic and stoical looking forward into life.

ENDNOTES

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Chapter III

"GOING TO MEET THE MAN" - THE IMPERATIVE FOR
RENEWAL

The short stories restate in a concise way, the conditions of Negro life in America. At the same time, they sound Baldwin's firmly held belief in the possibilities of remaking the American future. They are thematically related to the novels for they also examine those aspects of the American character that desire change. The story-telling techniques of the short stories are those followed in Baldwin's novels. In fact, one of the earlier short story, "The Rockpile" was the original draft for the first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain. These stories clarify the issues that are of vital concern with all of Baldwin's characters, for, they question the integrity of life in America and they look for the hidden depths that will bring about renewal for the American character, both in the personal and political sense. They are important to this study of Baldwin's quest for selfhood, for they enact simply and briefly all aspects of the American reality. The reader is brought closer to the problems that all of Baldwin's characters have to confront, for in the short stories, the focus upon the individual problems of every character has been done so directly and clearly. At the same time, one is taken into the heart of the Negro consciousness and one is made aware of its unrealized power, waiting to manifest itself for America.

✓ Baldwin centres each story around the human image of bewilderment and pain, and concentrates upon the nature of the American suffering, through characters who are sensitive enough to articulate, either consciously or unconsciously, their own predicament and who will seek within themselves and within one another the way out of the bonded life in America. The dissolution of the American reality, finds perfect embodiment through figures such as the white community in "Going to Meet the Man", who partake of the barbarous lynching of a black man. This is an appraisal of the moral regression that occurred within the white American, since his country's dependence upon the institution of slavery. But as the stories localize the nature of the American dispossession, they also re-locate the curative centre, which lies both in the social and in the spiritual plane, partly pragmatic and partly visionary in character. This has been rationally explained in the essays. In Nobody Knows My Name, Baldwin speaks of "cracking" the American image to "find out and deal with what it hides". Earlier in the book he likens life to a furnace, and freedom to the fire which burns away illusion. If this were applied to his fiction, one would see the artist's genuine attempt to burn away the illusion of the American success, to make the voluntary effort of taking a "hard look" at the reality of the American "incoherence", so as to reassess American.

standards.¹ Incidentally, the artist is the prime example of that disciplined effort to effect a purposeful discovery within the American heart. Ultimately, solutions depend as much upon the individual effort to cope with one another at the social level, as this in turn depends for its success upon a deeply exacting introspection that would unbind the spiritual capacities of every individual in America. Thus, in Nobody Knows My Name, Baldwin can vehemently state that, the country "will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me ..."² only after he has realized in Notes of a Native Son, the extent to which his own father was destroyed by the hatred which incapacitated him as an individual and which shut him off from the possibility of being morally resuscitated by human relationship. Baldwin chooses to fight for his own identity, not to be swamped in "hatred and despair",³ as his father was. Most of the characters in the short stories, reflect his own attempt to keep the heart free of hatred and despair so as to be strong enough to battle with the hazards of daily life in America, and to work at reactivating once again, America's lost potential. The short stories emphasize Baldwin's faith in the rejuvenative possibilities of the American character. They make the aesthetic overture to the practicability of the fulfilling life in America by imaginatively grappling with the sources of the American

confusion, already rationalized in the earlier essays, but awaiting qualification through his fiction.

Although the thematic content is the same, in the collection of short stories, Going to Meet the Man, yet there is none of the unnecessary repetition that is to be found in Baldwin's more ambitious novels like Another Country and Just Above My Head. Each story is clearly structured to focus only upon a dimension of the greater American universe, which is the subject of Baldwin's writings. They touch only upon those aspects of the American life that they direct themselves upon. The repetitive actions and dialogues which normally saturate his novels have been minimised to the extent that the stories function more by implication than by explication. The characters exist as suggestive embodiments of creativity or destructivity. The black musician in "Sonny's Blues", is understood to be a symbol of hope, the white sheriff in "Going to Meet the Man", is a travesty of the much upheld American ideal of justice, and youth in "The Rockpile" and in "The Outing", represents the callowness of inexperience, but which hopes to be ultimately liberated from its environment. The short stories indicate Baldwin's potential for creatively reckoning with the varied challenge of American life.]

This is reflected in each story, in his deep emphasis upon a recognition of the confusion "both public and private"⁴ ruling the lives of his struggling characters who are fortunately, always consciously and constantly attempting to find themselves. When sometimes, some of the stories show some characters succumbing to the wayward influences of their surroundings, as in the case of the white-lover Paul in "Come Out the Wilderness", there are the other prototypical figures of maturity and hope in the other stories, who equalize this sense of hopelessness. They prove to be the regenerative figures; figures who on the other hand imply, that the lost might once again find life for themselves and that the capacity for self-renewal need never be surrendered. On the whole, the images of hope predominate in the short stories. Ultimately while the short stories expose the fallacies upon which America has built itself, they redirect the reader's vision, through the suffering writ large upon the lives of every character to a clearer understanding of the spiritual requirements needed to remake America.

The short stories are intensely lyrical. They tap the essence of the Black experience in America, riven by innumerable conflicts with the white world as in "Previous Condition"; or with the Black Church (as in the "Outing" and

"The Rockpile"), which is essentially an institution that merely appropriates the white man's values; or even with the alienation from the self as in the early part of Sonny's life in "Sonny's Blues". More profoundly the lyricism arises out of the black man's deep recognition and acceptance of his alienated life in America, of his indubitable status as American citizen⁵ and of his chosen responsibility to work for moral perfection within himself and within others too. This lyricism is also dependent upon the idiom that is deeply embedded within the Black American conscience which seeks outlet in its folk expression. In the short stories, it speaks through the array of hard-suffering personages. This relates them to the kind of folk wisdom found in "Some gospel songs" and in "jazz". According to Baldwin in The Fire Next Time, "in all jazz, and especially in the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged"⁶. It is as if in the collection of short stories Going to Meet the Man, Baldwin follows the techniques of jazz music, and of the blues, which verbalize their sentiments from the depths of human experience. "Only people" who have been "down the line", says Baldwin, "know what this music is about"⁷. In Nobody Knows My Name, he expresses the same but in different words: "In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there ...".⁸ Despite his knowledge of the

despairing depths, the black man is able to articulate an enduring optimism through his songs and through his personal life. This courage to deal with suffering has been recaptured in every story, of which the underlying insistence is upon the option for life, the imperative to seek renewal.

In the short stories, Going to Meet the Man, Baldwin directs his abilities more towards exploiting on a figurative level, the illogicality of life, as is especially experienced by the American Negro; to express both hope and despair, as well as to show through various characters the complex range of his awareness of the unevenness of Negro experience in America. In less vocal terms, but more poetic in expression, and depending much upon understatement, it could be seen that the collection of short stories form the reservoir of Baldwin's creative ability. They hold in stock, latent embodiments of characters like Jesse in "Going to Meet the Man" or the urbane Mr. Davies in "Come Out the Wilderness", who hints at the potential for tragic recognition. These will later be taken up or have already been exploited for use in the novels, so that Sonny's narrator-brother in "Sonny's Blues" looks forward to the elder-brother-narrator in Just Above My Head or even to Leo Proudhammer's brother Caleb in

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone; whilst the Ruth-Davies relationship is charged with the possibilities of achieving what Fanny and Tish will achieve in If Beale Street Could Talk. Needless to say, John in "The Rockpile", has already found full justification as the adolescent hero of Go Tell It on the Mountain. These characters in the short stories, imply that they contain overtones of the multiplicity of American existence as depicted in the novels. They also play out, but on a lesser key, the quest for renewal and provide a concise and illuminating catalogue to the types of characters to be found in the novels. They indicate that persistent concern for reorienting oneself out of the historical confusion. As in the novels, the central dilemma of the short stories, is as Peter, one of the characters in the short story "Previous Condition", enunciates it: "I didn't seem to have a place".⁹ The only alternative left for every character, is to attempt the fight for self-justification, to seek for a proper place and to find his role in the American universe.

From "The Rockpile" to "Going to Meet the Man", the stories span the phases of a maturing consciousness. There seems to be no evidence however, of Baldwin intentionally systemizing the stories. All the same, the first two, "The Rockpile" and "The Outing", deal with the

transitory stage between boyhood and early manhood; in short, the period of awakening into knowledge. One encounters as in Go Tell It on the Mountain, not only the obstacles of religion and of race that are the prominent features of the black ghetto, but also forebodings of sexual entanglements. The uneasy presagings of the future is manifested in "The Rockpile" in John's extreme isolation, and in "The Outing" in Johnie's inability to sublimate his thoughts in religious humility. The father-figure in both stories stands for the overweening destructivity of the orthodox and the fanatical; qualities ascribed to the novelist's own father in Notes of a Native Son, and which has fictional culmination in Go Tell It on the Mountain. In the first novel, the irony has been finely sharpened to bring home the unbridged gap between the depressing actuality and the illusion of fulfillment. Although there is not this ironic perfection in the earlier two stories, yet they do conclude open-endedly, in the sense that they are inconclusive about the rift between father and son. On a broader level, the personal conflict becomes the conflict between authoritarian religion and boyhood innocence seeking a more palpable love. This is the focal point of interest in both stories. They are a step back to a particular time in the past where Baldwin examines the causalities that have led to the spiritual torment of a black "John" or a black

"Johnnie" and which divides them internally; the result being either a hazardous withdrawal from the religious communality of the saints into absolute freedom, or to a pledging together with them of suffering and of worship in obedience to their misguided elders. But this inevitability is not within the limited scope of the two stories. What has been more poignantly enacted, is the black youth's inability to accept, unquestioningly, the authoritarian dictates of an already obsolete universe, figured through the guilt-ridden, fanatical elders of the black community. Consequently, he takes recourse to the self, the only institution that will legalise his unformed and yet to be understood yearning, for encouragement and fulfilment of some kind. Even at this infant stage, the younger protagonists of the two stories, like John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain, only simulate obedience. They are unconsciously marking time until they are old enough to break away from the restrictive conventions of the black life so as to seek the personal convictions that would help them stand on their own. They mark the way in which the black man, if he is to survive with his soul untrammelled, must choose for himself. The young participants are acutely alive to the possibilities of the unencountered world. They are ignorant of experience, but they anticipate a future

based upon a complete break from the past.

With the third story, "The Man Child", Baldwin moves within the realms of a child's consciousness. Whatever happens, whatever is perceived, is impressionistically recorded according to the child-victim's artless perception of the adult world surrounding him. Eric's simplicity juxtaposes itself to the adult complexity of his mother, his father and his father's friend Jamie who is inseparable from his brown and yellow dog. The story hinges upon Baldwin's uncanny insight into the frozen capacities of the white world ironically played through Eric's dim grasp and his naive unawareness of the failure of the human entity around him. The more adult consciousness of the artist exposes the nullifying unreality of the child's environment, through Eric himself, who becomes the unwitting victim of a society barely able to adjust itself to the besetting problems of adulthood. The opening paragraph, exposes the spiritual disintegration that has already crystallized the human faculties of Eric's parents, and of Jamie. One reads that:

... Eric lived with his father, who was a farmer and the son of a farmer, and his mother, who had been captured by his father on some far-off, ublessed, unbelievable night, who had never since burst her chains. She did not know that she was chained any more than she knew that she lived in

terror of the night - One child was in the churchyard, it would have been Eric's little sister and her name would have been Sophie ... then, not long ago, there had begun to be a pounding in his mother's belly ... But then again his mother had been sick ... and when she came back the pounding was not there any more, nothing was there any more. His father laughed less, something in his mother's face seemed to have gone to sleep for ever.¹⁰

The blighted energy of love, is symbolically illustrated in the failure of human birth in the story. Eric is the sole agent of hope left; but reality, however, proves different when it bears violently down upon the murdered figure of the boy.

'I have to go', he repeated, and, as Jamie moved towards him the tight ball of terror in his bowels, in his throat, swelled and rose, exploded, he opened his mouth to scream but Jamie's fingers closed around his throat. He stared, stared into Jamie's eyes.¹¹

Whatever the motives, Jamie's murder is a form of violence, of a type with Richard's suicide in Go Tell It on the Mountain or with Giovanni's death impulse in Giovanni's Room or even with Rufus Scott's suicide in Another Country; personalized aspects of the American despair that blindly seeks to vindicate itself even in the most unprincipled of ways. In the short story, the violence has already been apprehended in Baldwin's account of Eric's instinctive recoil from Jamie, when, "Jamie raised his eyes and looked at Eric and ... Eric had looked into Jamie's eyes." Jamie

smiled that strange smile of an old man and Eric moved closer to his mother".¹² In her weary recognition of Jamie's debilitated manhood Eric's mother also reacts against Jamie. Her negative response signifies the moral collapse of Eric's world:

"Eric caught her regard bent on Jamie, ... He could not read her look, but it reminded him of that moment at the birthday party when he had looked into Jamie's eyes. She seemed to be looking at Jamie as though ... she were discovering, with some surprise, that she had never really liked him but also felt, in her weariness and weakness, that it did not really matter now".¹³

Baldwin replays all over again, the terrifying nullity which the human image in his fiction is stamped with and surrounded by. His focus in "The Man Child" as in the last story, "Going to Meet the Man" is upon the white reality that is devoid of emotional security. The deceptive social normalcy is only surface deep. Behind it lies the savageness of the American spirit. This manifests itself in Jamie's actual murder of Eric; that point when the underground instincts assert their power. Nothing about the murder has been explicitly defined. The narrative merely follows the train of events, as if Eric's consciousness were still recording what was actually happening to him. Eric's future, his hope of inheriting his father's farming land one day, is displaced by his sudden death and Jamie, the murderer

disappears into the night. It is as if Baldwin ends the story thus, to emphasise upon the American indifference towards one another. The story plumbs the depths of the American negativity to stress more deeply upon America's need to renew itself and to rediscover the moral significance of love.

As was discussed in the second chapter, Baldwin's novels do not state the explicit answers, they merely hint at solutions. While revealing the fallible American reality, Baldwin obliquely suggests the urgent necessity for opting out of it. The responsibility for this, is carried out by the figure of the artist in "Previous Condition", "Sonny's Blues" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon". In "Previous Condition", in Peter's exilement from the American life, lies the unresolved dilemma of the Negro who discovers for himself what the American life has shaped him for:

I'm worried about what's happening to me, to me, inside. I don't walk the streets, I crawl. I've never been like this before. Now ~~when~~ I go to a strange place I wonder what will happen, will I be accepted, if I'm accepted, can I accept?¹⁴

These are questions that assail Peter when he is told to leave the room of a hotel rented out only to whites, but which was obtained for him by his Jewish friend. There is irony in the fact that, his friend is a Jew, who is at best

a social outcaste but who remains unrecognised and, therefore, acceptable because he is white. The entire story centres around Peter's vehement despair. His life repeats the failure of many of Baldwin's protagonists; and when he begins to see into his own persecuted existence, he feels "betrayed ... beaten as a person", because he has "no honest place to stand."¹⁵ Peter's story is a fictional excerpt from the lives of anyone of Baldwin's black protagonists, who are always consciously articulating their doubts and fears, and in the course of which, they penetrate through the ugliness of the American experience to realize finally, that, they are the unwanted race. An example of this, is Peter's expulsion from the hotel: "'I can't have no coloured people here ... I don't have nothing' against you, but you gotta get out."¹⁶ This outright denial of the black man's proper status in America sparks off a violent reaction. Peter represents the ruined figure of the Black artist whose liberation critically depends upon his country's awareness of its failure to negotiate harmony between its people, as much as this also depends upon its concerted effort to actualize unity. In all his essays, Baldwin restates his countrymen's needs. But, as he explains himself in Nobody Knows My Name, his white countrymen are too obviously bent upon preserving their innocence¹⁷ to be able to see into the living

conditions of the fallen multitude of blacks around them, who like Peter, find abode only on the peripheries of the American social justice. Where Peter despairs about the possibility of ever being able to communicate with the "easy going, hard drinking, flotsam and jetsam" people of New York and wonders "if I was able any longer to trust anybody. Not on top, where all the world could see, but underneath where everybody lives",¹⁸ Sonny, in the next story, takes this up as a challenge upon himself; to create the living consciousness within himself and to be the living exemplar of that inner unity through his music, which is the communicating agent. Sonny goes under only to come up again, not in triumph but better fitted to live his life all over again.

"Sonny's Blues" has been narrated by Sonny's elder brother. He endows it with the perspective of the sensitive brother well past the zenith of his own youth, which allows him a clear sighted look into the life that his younger brother is now making for himself. The young aspirants of the early short stories, "The Outing" and "The Rockpile" meet in the struggling figure of Sonny. The remarkable fact about Baldwin's characters, is their singular ability to attempt to understand life and also to make the effort to live creatively, despite the odds against

them. A statement equally applicable to Peter in "Previous Condition" because, though Peter is emotionally crippled yet, he is not dead, and the story which touches only upon a particular phase of Peter's life does not conclude with any dramatic collapse in the life of Peter itself. Although Peter realizes that he does not seem to have a "place"¹⁹ in the White American system, yet his despair indicates the depths out of which the Black American must emerge to forge better and newer standards for himself. This partly explains why most of Baldwin's characters are artists. They belong to that category of men who are unable to live out the drab and the prosaic life, but must make the repeated endeavour to reach their own creative centres. Although most times they fail, yet their failure marks the anointment of a deeper discovery of themselves. They chalk out the way to self knowledge and personal rejuvenation. Baldwin's short stories, demonstrate the manifold quickening of the Black-American spirit. Each story bears the mark of a sensitive consciousness bent upon its search for truth within the American labyrinth; so that figures like Sonny, who have been scarred by experience, and, therefore, proved to be of human make, stand emblematically juxtaposed to the bewildering life, as figures approaching the essence of that knowledge which Sonny himself confesses to be existing in "all that hatred and misery and love",²⁰ His music is the outcome of knowledge heavily paid for in terms of human

suffering. It fulfills its potential at the end when it communicates its meaning through the responsive and appreciative audience of Sonny's brother:

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again, one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others ... Then he began to make it his ... I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did ...²¹

At such a point, the music becomes an autonomy of the living and communicating power of perception. It is the critical point of awareness for both artist and audience alike, for it communicates the artists' discovery to the audience, and transmits the response of the audience, in greater dimension back to the artist. In course of the exchange, it touches upon the universal in human life. It establishes a musical rapport, however, momentary, that quells confusion and genuinely hopes for perpetual renewal, through a responsible and personal connection with one another. Contrasted to Sonny's transcending capacities, is the collapse of Rufus Scott in Another Country which becomes the failure of his music, through the imperfect sublimation of his suffering. In other words, the efficacy of Sonny's music, lies in its transmuting power. The artist, who is

not only the maker of music and poetry, but the responsive individual, stands at the creative centre; he will accomplish the change. Baldwin's use of the blues, his graphic description through Sonny's life, of the depths that it touches and of the heights that it can reach, show up the double-edged wisdom attributed to the American-Negro's stoic ability to live even whilst accepting human adversity. This is the abiding force not only behind Sonny's music, but behind most of the short stories as well. It suggests both the depressing and the liberating, the real and the ideal, but leaves it to the recipient to understand the significance of both, so that he might also eventualize fulfilment of some sort, sometime. The short stories are both fictionally interesting and morally educative, each story a parable of the black endeavour to fight for the change of heart within himself and within other Americans as well.

The next story, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon", is poised upon the eve of the protagonists return to America. As he makes a final tour of Paris, he reckons with himself upon the realities that the return to America portends: "I think of all the things that I have seen destroyed in America, all the things that I have lost there, all the threats it holds for me and mine".²² He dwells upon the fact that he would never have married his Swedish wife

Harriet, if in America, because:

If Harriet had been born in America, it would have taken her a long time, perhaps for ever, to look on me as a man like other men; if I had met her in America, I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women. The habits of public rage and power would also have been our private compulsions, and would have blinded our eyes.²³

Looking into the conditions of life in America he has the objective advantage of the outsider, because of his voluntary exilement away, whilst still remaining its native son. Where the "Man Child" and "Going to Meet the Man" symbolically play out the American tragedy, in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon", the protagonist, who is also a singer and therefore, an artist, makes a straight-forward ~~analysis~~ of America's private deformities:

Once one had become 'Pete' or 'Jamie' or 'Bill' all that could decently be known was known and any suggestion that there might be further depths, a person, so to speak, behind the name, was taken as a violation of that privacy which did not, paradoxically, since they trusted it so little, seem to exist among the Americans. They apparently equated privacy with the unspeakable things they did in the bathroom or the bedroom, which they related only to the analyst, and then read about in the pages of best sellers ... Nothing was more familiar to them than the sight of a dark boy, singing, ... It was under cover of darkness, my own darkness, that I could sing for them the joys, passions and terrors they smuggled about with them like the steadily depreciating contraband. Under cover of the midnight fiction that I was unlike them because I was black, they could steadily gaze at those treasures which they had been mysteriously forbidden to possess and were never permitted to declare.²⁴

The frank and caustic tone resembles the way in which Baldwin writes his essays. Coming from the depths of one bitterly exploited but, now settled in life, in respect of emotional fulfilment, it has the trenchancy of the black spirit which approaches reality aware of its tragic shortcomings. The protagonist who has already distanced himself from America need never return to it. However, as the short story implies, and as is repeatedly stated by Baldwin,²⁵ flight of any kind, if it is to have a meaningful end, must terminate in the return to America; the coming to terms with one's blackness and re-discovering the American integrity. For, although the truth is that, "everyone's life is always shaped by races, churches and armies", yet "everyone's life begins on a level where races, armies, and churches stop".²⁶ This is what the protagonist has practically attempted and has ideally sought for, in his songs; but all his effort was expended away from the American homeland, in Parisian surroundings amidst an alien culture. The actual test, lies in his return to America; to the disillusioned and despairing country, where life must be found and re-created once again.

The significance of the story rests upon the protagonist's imminent return to America, his feelings of uncertainty towards his own country, his preparation for the

mature confrontation with it, and in the courage he displays in realising for himself that once in America he might have to remodel his life and adjust himself to the standards there. But as Baldwin says in Notes of a Native Son, "truce" is the "best one can hope for". This is not a way of surrendering oneself to circumstances but of properly identifying oneself with America as an American Negro and taking pride in just that. "I suppose, the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and was forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality".²⁷ The protagonist of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon", displays just such an attempt to understand himself, to be wholly in touch with the centre that will forge his identity anew. His return to America vitally rests upon his ability to understand his own predicament, and to gear himself towards something positive.

There are poignant over-tones of the indelibility of the white man's betrayal in "Come Out the Wilderness", underlying what seems to be a contemporary enactment of the American frustration. Ruth, the American Negro, and Paul, the son of the white "masters", are trapped in a relationship betokening the extra-personal conflict that has existed between Black and White Americans. It is perhaps significant

that Paul, remains unrelentingly irresponsible, deliberately innocent and naturally inclined towards the guiltless American pose, which has already had natural repercussions in the intermittent explosions of criminal violence and prolonged sexual deviations in the country. This is as illustrated in an earlier short story, in the manchild Jamie, who has regressed from his natural propensity for the fulfilling human action into the defensive savageness of the morally deranged, who finds fulfilment only through the negation of another.

The title of the story is derived from a gospel song: "Come out the Wilderness/Come out the Wilderness/How did you feel when you come out the wilderness/Leaning on the Lord?"²⁸ It speaks with the ardent simplicity of a religious faith that belies the tragic complexity, already encountered, of the American wilderness, in which both Ruth and Paul are trapped. Ruth's past bears a definite imprint of the American Negro's search for emotional harmony, with its subsequent disenchantment, in Ruth's advent upon America's predominantly white metropolis, New York. In New York, her personal troubles become less manageable, because the sense of unpo^otedness and her feelings of estrangement which were unresolved when she fled away, take better hold of her. The realm of personal relationships which would have created her

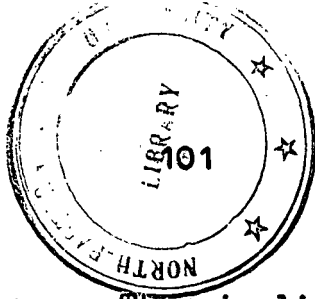
anew, is marked by unfulfilment from the start. She cannot draw hope from her environment; it reflects only the broken reality of America. Neither is she prepared, nor is she equipped to meet with the oncoming disaster in the shape of Paul's indifference. As it is, the burden of an uncleansed guilt, the burden of a "crime she could not remember"²⁹ because it was not hers, lies buried deep within her. And Paul, who should have released her through love, had "power over her not because she was free but because she was guilty. To enforce his power over her he had only to keep her guilt awake. This did not demand malice on his part, it scarcely demanded perception - it only demanded that he have, as, in fact, he overwhelmingly did have an instinct for his own convenience".³⁰ This is the entire legend of the white master's treachery, repeated and re-produced all over again. On the one hand, the relationship pertains to Baldwin's vision of the American renewal; that renewal for him, becomes possible only in the black and white coming together. On the other hand, the relationship is a travesty of the values that America professes to have nurtured and to uphold. There is however, the hope of release in the figure of the black executive Mr. Davies, who seems to be able to kindle Ruth's dormant capacity for love; because he has retained the essential integrity of his Negro heritage, which displays itself in what Ruth realizes to be, the deliberate affectation

"whenever possible", of the "illiterate speech of his youth" in order to keep in touch with himself,³¹ and which deliberately forces the uneasy response from Ruth: "she was responding to him with parts of herself that had been buried so long she had forgotten they existed".³² If the white character, in the collection of short stories, Going to Meet the Man, manifests the denuded potential, the Black American seems to be groping towards some kind of self affirmation. This concludes in "Come Out the Wilderness", on a note of qualified pessimism; that, although Ruth finally represents the abandoned woman, walking briskly "through the crowds to hide from them and from herself the fact that she did not know where she was going",³³ yet it is she herself who initiates her own self out of the domain of Paul's influence. Though she is ultimately alone with the unutterable American dead-end, in which "the sons of the masters were roaming the world, looking for arms to hold them. And the arms that might have held them - could not forgive",³⁴ yet her illimitable potential for life has already been fatefully tapped by her black counterpart; so that, although the end emphasises Ruth's complete aloneness, redemptive love has already figured itself in the form of Mr. Davies. What is implied, is that her liberation must take place, but, elsewhere, on a different plane. Of all the stories, "Come Out the Wilderness", acutely

enacts the limits which the Black American despair can be put to but, which, when confronted with the possibilities of love, cannot help but reach out towards the promise of renewal. Perhaps, this is reading too much into the Ruth-Davies relationship. However, it is an actuality, one that prepossesses Ruth's future. The tilt of the story, as in fact is most often the case with Baldwin's fiction, is, towards a possible regeneration.

The last story, "Going to Meet the Man", delves into the trauma of the American experience and projects the dominant emotions of fear and of mistrust, which underlie all America. This has been internalised within Jesse, in his traumatic initiation into adulthood through the ritualistic sadism of his spiritual educators. "These men were his models, they had been friends to his father, and they had taught him what it meant to be a man. He looked to them for courage now".³⁵ Jesse is caught in the racial crossfire and is unable to legitimize his country's and his own inconsistencies against the Black American, so that the rational energy of human behaviour within the story, becomes totally disrupted and aggravates even more, the tension between white impersonator and black victim. What the white man would clearly like to do, is illustrated in the final

pages of the story, in the confrontation between the tortured black and the sightless innocence of the white community, bent upon justifying itself through human oppression. More often, in the novels the savageness is shown to be more subtle and more refined, conveniently suppressed by the white character and kept just below the surface. But usually, its psychological effects outrun itself. In the beginning of the story, this shows itself through Jesse's sexual impotence, which is more a mental condition rather than biological defect, and more a reflection of the defeated energies of the White American. Although the end tells us of Jesse's achievement of some kind of union with his wife, yet the union is purely physical, non-regenerative, the violent outcome of Jesse's need for reassurance concerning his status in life. Once again, as in the earlier and later novels, the story is in the form of a flashback, upon Jesse's life, and we gain insight into the chaotic inner life of an individual. Human perversity as it exists in "Going to Meet the Man", is a sub-human aspect of the vicious cycle of the American failure. It is curable only by what is implied through Baldwin's images of the crippled potential, that we also direct our attention with the writer, through these characters, upon what he sees and portrays, so that we may also recognise the profound



necessity for change. Therein lies the importance of the writer, according to Baldwin. He is the one person equipped to see into the "interior life" of people, to focus upon their self-deceptions and spiritual necessities, and to communicate this knowledge to those lesser informed or less able to see; because, as Baldwin states in Nobody Knows My Name: "Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world".³⁶ It follows then, that salvation can only lie in the black and white awakening into the knowledge of each other, so that personal responsibility, so obviously missing in characters like Jamie and Jesse, will be shouldered by all alike. To quote from one of the essays:

Everything now, we must assume is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we - and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks, who must like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others - do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.³⁷

The last story indirectly asserts this statement, by its fictive measurement of the lost vitality of the American character through the figure of Jesse. As novelist, Baldwin follows the way of his artist - characters, who attempt to understand the implications of being American through their

diverse ways, and who reveal that, in the understanding is the way out of the confusion. Ultimately, each story, challenges the individual, irrespective of colour, to take the hard look at the frailties of humankind, to encounter them within himself, through subsequent self-examination, so as to forge the newer self.

The short stories map out the areas of Negro experience in America. In the course of their narration, they release the essence of Black creativity, located at the centre of Sonny's music, and at the heart of his struggle for moral justice. They justify the human necessity for the suffering that will forge the spirit of the new. Baldwin attempts nothing different in the short stories. If at all, he succeeds in re-emphasizing his own felt necessity for change; but, in order to change "a situation", or even to change oneself, "one has first to see it for what it is". This has been the attempt of all the short stories which has been to explore the depths of the Black consciousness. For the American Negro, this takes shape in his realization of the "fearful paradox", that, the "American Negro can have no future anywhere, or any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past", for, the "Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not

belong to any other - not to Africa and certainly not to Islam". However, the acceptance of one's past is "not the same thing as drowning in it, it is learning how to use it".³⁸ In short, Baldwin unearths the lost dynamism of the Blacks in America, by fictionally activating the Negro's lost awareness of his own moral independence. The final message is, the call to every individual to rechannelise the human potential, towards new beginnings.

ENDNOTES

¹ James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (London: Transworld Pubs. Ltd., 1965), pp. 95, 118, 123. All references are to this edition.

² Nobody Knows My Name, p. 126.

³ James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 113. All references are to this edition.

⁴ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 122.

⁵ Ibid., p. 122.

⁶ James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1963), p. 52. All references are to this edition.

⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 110.

- ⁹ James Baldwin, Going to Meet the Man (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1948), p. 99.
- ¹⁰ Going to Meet the Man, p. 57.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 75 & 76.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 71.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 73.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 92.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 88.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 89.
- ¹⁷ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 172. "... the things that most white people imagine that they can salvage from the storm of life is really, in sum, their innocence ...".
- ¹⁸ Going to Meet the Man, p. 88.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 99.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 137.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 141 & 142.
- ²² Ibid., p. 150 & 151.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 150.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 160 & 161.
- ²⁵ Nobody Knows My Name, p. 22 & 23.
- ²⁶ Going to Meet the Man, p. 150.

- 27 Notes of a Native Son, p. 5.
- 28 Going to Meet the Man, p. 210.
- 29 Ibid., p. 218.
- 30 Ibid., p. 218.
- 31 Ibid., p. 219.
- 32 Ibid., p. 222.
- 33 Ibid., p. 228.
- 34 Ibid., p. 228.
- 35 Ibid., p. 239.
- 36 Nobody Knows My Name, p. 23.
- 37 The Fire Next Time, p. 112.
- 38 Ibid., p. 89 & 90.

Chapter IV

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK AND JUST ABOVE MY HEAD -
THE FULFILLED AND UNFULFILLED REALITIES

If Beale Street Could Talk, successfully reworks the theme of the Black American hope for release, and states his arrival at selfhood most effectively. Its success is to be considered in relation to what Baldwin has to say in his earlier novels, that America's redemption lies in the inner process of self discovery. Beginning with John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain, the search for self-definition concludes with Fonny and Tish, the only characters who actually remain alive to the possibility of life, while struggling with the destructive agents of American existence. In the other novels, the characters have either been partially or even wholly defeated by the conflicting passions of Negro life in America. In If Beale Street Could Talk, Fonny and Tish effect their own self-discovery, by their deep recognition of the fact, that the Black American who is an "exile" in America, cannot, therefore, "live in America under terms on which Americans"¹ offer him his life; so that for the American Negro, for Fonny and Tish, who defy the assimilation into the American mainstream, the only alternative left, is to opt out of the way of their black forbears, to acknowledge to themselves, the autonomous spiritual "center" reigning freely "inside",² and to attempt to preserve it and to keep it wholly alive.

The novel, rests on the irony that, Fonny, who "wasn't anybody's nigger" and who had found his own "center" within himself, is however, condemned by the standards of White-America because of his inability to compromise himself. The greater American reality is intolerant of the convictions of the black minority, and Fonny, who differs from Rufus Scott, in Another Country, had found something that he could do, that he wanted to do", which thus saved him from the death that was waiting to overtake the children" of the age. Although the other "kids" had succumbed to the plague of self-hatred, having been told that "they were'nt worth a shit", falling like "flies" and congregating on the "garbage heap of their lives", Fonny has already saved himself from it, preserved by the fervour of an imagination that has not been dulled by slavishness. That he is able to function normally, is proof enough of the implacability of the life driving him from within, and which finds creative outlet in his wood carvings: "he started working as a short order cook in a barbecue joint, so he could eat, and he found a basement where he could work on his wood".³ We are reminded of the fact, that Baldwin greatly emphasizes the necessity for, the imaginative and "interior life"⁴ of a people to be alive to the outer and practical demands of life, to rightly mould them according to its highest decrees. This functions on the surface as the social adaptability of the individual. It

points to the fact that, Fonny's inner artistic temper stabilizes him as a man.

Fonny is the natural expatriate fighting for redemption on the personal and extra-personal level. As the novel on the one hand depicts Fonny's imprisonment, on the other, it makes us consciously aware, through the figure of the child, that the power for self-renewal functions independent of material considerations. Life has, therefore, to be constructed if it be positively realized, upon the highest realms of the imagination; the point beyond the restrictive norms of society where the individual is at creative perfection. Within the novel, this points to the conjugal harmony that Fonny and Tish have been able to realize for themselves. It has led them into the depths of their own selves and of each other, and as Louis Pratt states: "the act of copulation becomes a movement towards life; it becomes a creative act which ultimately celebrates the continuity of the human race".⁵ This is the only novel in which the human relationship achieves permanence because it transcends the physical to move within the nobler realms of personal and mutual responsibility. It is only in this novel, that the concept of love has been categorically stated as being a "decree", one by which both Fonny and Tish must abide. In

the other novels, Baldwin examines a complexity of love-frustrations. The ideal of love to which all his characters attempt to move towards does exist, but it remains unrealized. In this novel, Fonny and Tish accept one another, simply, without recourse to the intellectualisms of their times. In keeping themselves free of it, they are able to function on the instinctual and creative level and are therefore, able to realize their innate capacity for love.

Thus:

"there was a hardness in him I had barely sensed before. Within this hardness moved his love, moved as a torrent or as a fire moves, above reason, beyond argument, not to be modified in any degree by anything life might do. I was his, and he was mine - I ... would be a ... dead girl should I ever attempt to challenge this decree."⁶

Baldwin's characters must endure the peculiarities of their lot. But it is only by their absolute submission to suffering that they can hope to be renewed so as to redefine their potential source of strength in love and in the struggle to accept one another. The point of arrival is not a simplistic fulfilment of selfhood. It is achieved only after the characters have been metamorphosed by their courageous participation in the ordeal of human experience. Thus considered, If Beale Street Could Talk represents Baldwin's fullest attempt to fulfil the requirements of life put forward through John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain.

The novel is relatively short. It is simpler than any of the other novels. However, as depicted within the novel, the hardships that Fonny has to face, reflects the unredeemed American existence, which has always been enacted in Baldwin's fiction, and which figures in If Beale Street Could Talk at the social level, in the American failure to dispense with justice. Fonny and Tish must remain, either indubitably dependent upon the white man's caprice, or they must effect freedom for themselves wholly on their own terms. Their commitment to life, arises naturally and profoundly out of their instinct for love, which is the life impelling force behind the novel, but which has never in the other novels, taken on the immeasurable depths of If Beale Street Could Talk. Baldwin's earlier fiction only partially suggests it through half-filled figures like Elizabeth in Go Tell It on the Mountain, or through the Ida-Vivaldo relationship in Another Country. Unlike the other novels, If Beale Street Could Talk affirms the integrity of the love-achievement of two individuals. On the surface, Baldwin renders into fiction, the besetting enormity of the problem of the black man's rejection and his sense of exile in America. More deeply, it reflects the Negro's sharpened awareness of his unmitigated sense of his unique identity and of his right to live and to create life for himself in America.

This is the point of all trouble for Fonny and for Tish for, their love exclusively defies the unframed racism of the white world. But as the story develops, there is the unmistakable sense of something shared, of a togetherness in suffering, that their persecuted existence, also becomes that of the other blacks surrounding them. The young couple are the paradigms of black hope in a white dominated universe. Where the earlier novels abound in all types of ill-conceived relationships, If Beale Street Could Talk, lays claim to its future by vitally endorsing that, which usually lies unknown and unacknowledged at the root of human existence. This can be seen in the character's recognition of the virtue of human endurance. The couple's ability to endure suffering forges their potential for growth. Fonny and Tish, are borne along in quest of the indefinable permanence, in quest of each other, and of the vital mechanism of human love. The ruling problem within the novel is that which has already been encountered before, which lies in the obduracy of the white American. In the novel, it pertinently figures in the form of the hysterical Mrs. Rogers, who deliberately accuses Fonny of assaulting her. Fonny becomes the archetype of the oppressed, inopportunistically present at the unfavourable moment and convicted of something he has never ever attempted. The stereotype of the white oppressor pursuing his black victim is enacted before the

reader. However, the sense of personal and racial stability is omnipresent within the novel, even if it resides only at that future date when the child will be born, as this in reality depends upon the individual aliveness to the possibility of human birth. Fonny and Tish actuate this greater propensity for human stability through their growing awareness of, their preparation for, and their acceptance of, the living processes of the child that is forming within Tish. Fonny is always seen to be on the offensive, fighting to assert his own claims upon life, willing himself to keep the "appointment" with his child.⁷ Much has been sacrificed and hoped for, for the cause of the child. Every character, except Mrs. Hunt and her daughters eagerly anticipate the future through the unborn child. The child is a significant embodiment of life. It is the ideal figure of black redemption, for its birth challenges the racial doctrines of America. The values of freedom and of hope that it upholds are those already outlined in Baldwin's novels and essays. They are the sustaining principles of life in If Beale Street Could Talk, able to elicit human depths despite the thwart of circumstances. Thus, quoting Tish, we encounter that life which is founded upon the transcendent values of humankind:

I had found someone to love and I was loved and he was released and verified ... Our laughter in

that kitchen, then, was our helpless response to a miracle ... in spite of all that hung above our heads, the child was promised safety. Love had sent it, spinning out of us, to us. Where that might take us, no one knows; but now, my father, Joe, was ready.⁸

The impetus behind the novel, comes from each character's awareness of his personal responsibility. Nowhere in any of the other novels, is there this sense of filial unity and of sexual harmony, which harbours the only hope left for America. Whatever confusion might reign outside, inside, within the love-plenitude of Tish's family, lies the centre of personal stability, which shows itself on the surface in its more common aspect of human love, and of a sense of responsible inter-dependence. To quote Louis Pratt once again:

The story presented in If Beale Street Could Talk is indeed a love story, though not in the traditional sense. On one level we have Eros as a personal force. It is the physical and emotional response that leads to the individual self-realization of two people, Fonny and Tish. However, the love story, when viewed from this perspective is merely peripheral. Beyond these confines of individuality lies a communal love. The feelings of affection and mutual concern shared by the members of the family are directed not towards individual self-fulfilment, but towards a familial love which, by the nature of its collectivism, transcends the individual component of the emotion in order to reveal a vaster, more compelling aspect of love.⁹

Where the other novels and even a much later novel like Just Above My Head spells defeat in one way or another,

If Beale Street Could Talk, is the metaphoric enunciation of a reality which is empowered to resist defeat, to shake the foundations of the American life for it to be forged anew, by the inevitable and inexorable forces of creation like the birth of the black child. The presence of the child is a dynamic entity within the novel, one that subjugates death and despair because it becomes a deepening constancy, a promising reminder to all that can still be hoped for, even in the reigning profusion of misery. The novel concludes with the birth of the child, which reassesses future possibilities: "... the baby cries and cries and cries and cries, and cries and cries and cries and cries, like it means to wake the dead".¹⁰ This places the ultimate significance of the story in its truest perspective; that, although Fonny's father, Frank, is defeated and dead; found "way up in the river, in the woods, sitting in his car, with the doors locked, and the motor running";¹¹ although the outer chaos seems to be gaining in upon every character, yet there are the others, who endorse their hopes of finding full justification on the American continent by their determined anticipation of the birth of the black child.

The novel moves towards a specific point, the point of emotional release, which will be precipitated by the

actual birth of the child. From the very beginning, the birth pangs of the new arrival has made itself evident within everyone around. It is the cause of much of the upheaval that will uproot the realities of the white man and plant in their stead, its "slow" but "triumphant" formation;¹² a significant consequence of the graced union that is able to restore life to the oppressed. The story is evidently symbolic of the personal achievement which seems to have eluded all of Baldwin's protagonists in the other novels and which has only remained partially discovered. It speaks with simplicity, of Tish's deepening knowledge of her potential for the role of motherhood. She is a life-endowing figure, the most fulfilled embodiment of the role of the Black American woman in Baldwin's fiction. Especially in an age where, "the relationship between the sexes, which has apparently never really been as fixed as everyone always claimed, is now very definitely in a state of flux" and where "it is very difficult for a man to know exactly what the terms are; to know how he is to be related to a woman", and vice versa,¹³ Fonny is still in possession of the finer possibilities of womanhood. This would seem on the one hand, to be an overstatement of her character. But the narrative itself, is deliberately marked by Tish's emergent sense of responsibility. Her fidelity to the life-restoring powers, is carried out through her love for Fonny, her deep commitment to the child

and indirectly, through her sense of responsibility to the black community. In this sense, she is the consummate artist, neither willing nor able to fit herself into the abject pattern of Black American existence. She is herself aware of her own difference from the others who are merely "imitation" pieces, so "free that they believed in nothing; and didn't realise that this illusion was their only truth and that they were doing exactly as they had been told".¹⁴ She has already adapted herself uncompromisingly, to the incarnate mystery of life within her. On a deeper level, she represents that crucial awareness of the black identity that is alive within her and struggling to define itself. This infuses the novel with Tish's positive sense of purpose, her option to fight for her child and for her husband.

Underlying the hotbed of American racialism raging everywhere in the novel, is the evolution of a life determined to be set free. It has its spiritual centre in the love-union of Fonny and Tish and it acquires significance only through Tish's maturing response to it. It is that pristine embodiment of life in If Beale Street Could Talk, as yet uncorrupted by human adversity and, therefore, alive with the Black American potential for freedom. It is the most perfect result of the commitment to which Baldwin wishes

the Black American to make. It is, in the truest sense, the commitment to love. As he puts it in The Fire Next Time, "love" as he means it, is "not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth".¹⁵ In actual fact, at the end of the novel, Fonny and Tish, who have familiarised themselves with the pain of human separation and human division, and who have endured humiliation, have already traversed the road beyond any conceivable point of mental collapse. Rather than seek easy escape through religious platitudes, through cynicism or even through an overt sentimentality, Fonny and Tish chose to stake their lives for a better future on the American continent itself. They forfeit their freedom for their spiritual progeny. Their discovery is, simply, that of one another's unlimited resources, which is the cause of their involuntary response to the greater call to life. The life which, according to Baldwin in Notes of a Native Son, is the American Negro's sole "birthright which he is struggling to recognise and make articulate." This life contains the "echoes of a past which he has not yet been able to utilize, intimations of a responsibility which he has not yet been able to face". In short, although it is the life of complete alienation, reflected in jazz music and in songs usually worded thus:

"Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child",¹⁶ yet it is a life that is pregnant with change and growth. Individual responsibility in the novel, lies in reclaiming the inner vitality of that life which now seems to have been lost.

The whole idea of change centres around the unborn child. Baldwin gives importance to the child, who is a figure fighting for survival in the present, but who is also responsible for the future making of Black American history. The path of complete renewal rests entirely with it.¹⁷ Its entry into the human universe, but more specifically into the American universe, depends upon the adult ability to facilitate its coming, through a recompensing faith and love. Finally, it is the question that Baldwin asks of himself in Notes of a Native Son, "how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child - by what means? - a stronger antidote to this poison that one had found for oneself,"¹⁸ that unconditionally challenges Fony and Tish to struggle for the native rights of the child, so that it might enter the world in full assertion of itself. All forces have been channelised for this ultimate pronouncement. The pattern for the Black American release, given logical reasoning to in all the essays, must work itself out through a figurative parallel in fiction. Baldwin is genuinely

concerned with finding a practical solution not only for the Black American release, but also for the creative release of all men. For him, acceptance of the "black face" is seminal to the salvation of America and ultimately to that of the whole world¹⁹ "... And I have a feeling that the one problem, the problem of colour in this country, has always contained the key to all the other problems. It is not an isolated, particular, peculiar problem. It is a symptom of all the problems in this country. And, in a way this is indicated by the reaction in the country and finally in the world, to the civil rights movement ..."²⁰ If, as he continues to say, "the domination of the white world over the rest of the world is a short accident of history,"²¹ the black man, does have the veritable right to claim the power to life for himself. Quoting Baldwin once again, "at the risk of being ... sounding a little fanatical, one has to ... insist a little on the importance of the black problem as a kind of touchstone."²³ As he sees it, the Black American, who is preparing himself for the spiritual rebirth of his race, is already passing through the consuming fires of experience, and learning by this nobler necessity, to give himself up to the demands of a future based upon love. Conclusively, then, "we" (the blackman and whiteman) "are going to have to learn from each other or else we will both be destroyed".²⁵ America, in short will have to recognise the spiritual validity of the

black child before it can hope to liberate itself.

This instinct for perfecting life, is at its peak in the love-relationship of Fonny and Tish, and finds justifiable fulfilment with the child. Its survival would depend upon its precessors' ability to shake off their ill-famed prejudices and their criminally overtaxed values, for the values of life that this child would bring with it. It is the living emblem of continuity. It dramatically realises the unborn potential for love. The antagonists to it, are Fonny's mother and sisters, who have immobilized themselves within the verbalisms of an adopted religion. They represent the type of black fanaticism against which John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain was struggling. For them, spiritual sustenance, pre-eminently figures itself in their servility to the white gods. They are naturally ill-equipped to meet with the ravages of their time-bound existence. They suffer the collapse of their borrowed values. In effect they have perished within the confines of a deluded universe.

For the Fonny-Tish relationship to be appreciably understood, one has first to look into Baldwin's plea for the American Negro's right to live in freedom in America, and which has been expostulated upon by all his characters.

Although the novel is not in any way innovative of newer techniques or newer forms of experience, yet it urgently reflects Baldwin's ideal of freedom, in the sense of the hard-earned ability to look at "one's image of oneself and what one actually is", and to make the deliberate choice of becoming "what you really are". Baldwin points out that, "freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and people are as free as they want to be".²⁵ The lives of Fonny and Tish are juxtaposed to the lives of all the other characters in Baldwin's novels. For them, there is the sense of something found, of a love-motivated existence, that freely sacrifices itself for the well-being of another. Fonny and Tish have smelted down the impure and weakening properties of life and refined their innate capacities for personal fulfilment. What follows within the novel, is no longer the blind and impeded thrust towards self-definition, but the discovery of the self and its proper relation to others based upon a love that has already withstood the trials of human experience. There is that certainty within the novel, that, however much one suffers, however much one has to see, the continuity of life remains unbroken, so that the way of the child, is the way of all who believe in its resuscitative power. Sharon, Tish's mother, reminds Tish of the illimitable potential of love:

'... Try to remember that, And: the only way anything ever gets done is when you make up your mind to do it. I know a lot of our loved ones, a lot of our men, have died in prison: but not all of them. You remember that. And you ain't really alone in that bed, Tish. You got that child beneath your heart and were all counting on you, Fonny's counting on you, to bring that child here safe and well. You the only one who can do it but you're strong. Lean on your strength.'

...

'I don't want to sound foolish but, just, remember, love brought you here. If you trusted love this far, don't panic now.'²⁶

The novel concludes with the birth of the child, symbolic evidence of the irrespressible forces of life underlying all human existence.

The next novel, Just Above My Head, seems deliberately unaware of the love-possibilities endorsed in If Beale Street Could Talk. It exists as if it were merely taking over the theme of the quest for the self, from Leo Proudhammer in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the novel that directly precedes If Beale Street Could Talk. The story is focussed upon the lives of a few youthful characters, who seek to renew themselves through personal relationships, through music and ultimately through love. All the contradictory aspects of American life are present within the novel. It is the lengthiest of Baldwin's novels and contains within it the unresolved complexities of

American civilization. The resultant emotion is unintelligible. All the characters are apparently victims of one another, victims of the frustrating cycle of the American chaos, and victims of their own emotions. The pattern of life in Just Above My Head, is the same as in Another Country; youth is afflicted by the delusions of the self-seeking generation before it. The novel bears evidence of the inner collapse of every individual, representative of the death-in-life existence of modern civilization.

The story is a flashback upon the life of Arthur Montana and his friends. Hal Montana, his elder brother, is the narrator, the only character who seems genuinely alive to the greater possibility of love, in that he has preserved his own marriage, and has been able to give his children proper parental care and understanding, something which most of the father - figures in Baldwin's fiction have been unable to do. His presence, however, is as nebulous as the values that he represents. It is as if in this novel, Baldwin has not been able to reconcile his hopes for the Black American release, with the evident hopelessness of the American reality. What seems more real, is the conflict of values that is breaking up the totality of life in America. Hal Montana, is keenly aware of the fragmented life and as he deliberates upon the death of his own brother he is brought

face to face with his own life, with the question of the centrality of love and death to it:

... It was not meant to be my story, though it is far more my story than I would have thought, or might have wished. I have wondered more than once, why I started it, but - I know why. It is a love song to my brother. It is an attempt to face both love and death.

I have been very frightened for: I have had to strip myself naked: One does not like what one sees then, and one is afraid of what others will see: and do. To challenge one's deepest, most nameless fears, is also to challenge the heavens. It is to drag yourself, and everyone and everything and everyone you love, to the attention of the fiercest of the gods: who may not forgive your impertinence, who may not spare you ...²⁷

Hal Montana explores the abysmal depths of Arthur's existence and comes up with the only intelligible reality which is that of human suffering. This may be interpreted as the only consistent evidence of life in the novel. But the characters are over susceptible to it and instead of allowing themselves to be transmuted by it, they cut off all possibilities of growth by their inability to accept it wholly. Thus Arthur Montana dies a lonely death inside a bar in Paris, away from home, eventually succumbing to the disturbance within, which is the fateful malady of the American despair, to which Rufus Scott in Another Country was victim of. Arthur Montana had sought reprieve through music and through homosexual alliances, which,

however, remain as tenuous as all the other homosexual relationships in the other novels. It is unable to restore Arthur to himself; his private confusions remain undivorced from him. Julia seeks escape from her incestuous father in a different life altogether. She has somehow salvaged part of herself and is capable of sincere retrospection. Arthur's three young accompanists, Red Peanut and Crunch end their lives rejected and unfulfilled. The novel narrates the life histories of the Black American youth spawned in the ghetto and fed upon "anxiety, bitterness and guilt" which "continue to breed their indescribable complex of tensions". In Just Above My Head, Baldwin never shows us the practical way out of this confusion, but in the essay Notes of a Native Son, he qualifies himself thus: "what time will bring Americans is at least their own identity. It is on this dangerous voyage and in the same boat that the American Negro will make peace with himself and with the voiceless many thousands gone before him".²⁸ All the characters have, in one way or another, been defiled by experience; and although they are embarked on the "voyage" to self discovery, yet somewhere they have lost touch with the metamorphosing power of suffering. This is not to say that the characters are mere puppets, devoid of humanity, or of the ability to grow, it is only to point out that, most of them must of necessity perish within a self-

enclosed existence, unable to make the living contact with others because they have not been able to transcend their own sufferings. The novel is not an affirmation of the self or of personal stability in the way that If Beale Street Could Talk is. Instead, it reveals the emptiness that surrounds every character and which has been Baldwin's main concern in all the novels. It turns back upon what has already been courageously proved in If Beale Street Could Talk. Much of its philosophy was formulated only after the damaging experience had been undergone, and only after Hal Montana had already informed us about the death of Arthur Montana at the beginning of the novel. In If Beale Street Could Talk, each character takes up the call to life by a sincere commitment to personal and deeply moral objectives. They do not side-track into racial or political discussions as do the characters in the other novels, who consequently lose themselves in their attempt to find the right attitude towards life. In Just Above My Head, the characters mutely enact their failure to come to terms with America. They tell their stories differently from that of Fonny and Tish, and where Fonny and Tish are able to tap the sources of love, characters like Arthur and his young friends, Red, Peanut and Crunch are filled with the bewilderment which is the only recognisable reality left in America. Their fight is only a weary reaction to the harsh existence. Their

relationship with one another and with the universe is marked by a nullifying despair. However, contrary to all this, is Hal Montana's underlying sense of personal responsibility, which, even though passive, is at least able to guide the reader morally, so that, whatever has happened within the novel, the values of life are those that have been genuinely personalized in If Beale Street Could Talk and strictly upheld in all the novels. It would be fitting at this point to quote a few lines from Saadet Bozkurt's article on James Baldwin:

Nevertheless, the latest stage of Baldwin's career as a novelist does not rest on a note of desperation and pessimism. On the contrary, it is an exhortation to perseverance and endurance, and to perception and realization. Since most of what happens in Just Above My Head is recounted by Hall in retrospect, we see that memory is at once a burden and a joy. This perception leads to the realization of the self. The discovery of the self results from suffering, perseverance, and endurance, but it should be followed by an even greater strength of will to help man face the consequences.²⁹

As we follow the narrative we observe that the recollection of the past for Hal Montana is also a way of knowing himself better. Memory of the past will sharpen his consciousness of the present. It ^{will} equip him for a responsible future thus:

Now, watching my children grow, old enough to have some sense of where I've been, having suffered enough to be no longer terrified of

suffering, and knowing something of joy, too, I know that we must attempt to be responsible for what we know. Only this action moves us, without fear, into what we do not know, and what we do not know is limitless.³⁰

These lines reflect the idealism upon which the entire book has been founded. However in Just Above My Head Baldwin has placed too great an emphasis upon the frictioning experiences of America, details of which have merely overshadowed the hope for fulfilment. The last novel cannot be read as a development from If Beale Street Could Talk because it does not in any way deepen the meaning of the discovery of love. Baldwin has not portrayed the full significance of personal achievement in this novel. It is as if in this last novel, by focussing more upon the disillusioned American life, he is indirectly pointing the way towards which America will move or for that matter, has already moved, if it does not make the effort to remake itself. The novel only depicts the failure of the American reality and to quote George Kent once again: "... since his first novel he has not evolved the artistic form that will fully release and articulate his obviously complex awareness".³¹ Baldwin's complex awareness of the deeply human problem of the struggle for identity, has not been properly harnessed, even in this last novel. The complexity of the human situation in this novel, although clearly emphasised upon, does not however, rise above the

stereotype of the American suffering, because no character has been presented as being singular enough to be able to discover and to actualize the hidden depths of the self. The characters then, merge with the unidentified millions of suffering Americans who all have the same story to tell. Despite the sense of personal discovery in If Beale Street Could Talk; Just Above My Head reads only as an exposition of the falseness of American life. All that can be gathered from the novel, is the embitterment of the black youth who are being systematically destroyed by their own failure to cope with the hard realities of life in America. With the death of Arthur Montana the novel leaves us with a sense of the finality of the destructive powers at work in America. The novel has nothing definite to offer in the way that If Beale Street Could Talk does because the characters have not the inbuilt strength and visionary foresight of Fonny and of Tish to struggle for the acceptance of the blackman in America, and ultimately to hope for a deeply human cause.

The quest for self which has been the main concern of all the novels, reaches its culmination in If Beale Street Could Talk. In it, the characters have been endowed with the strength and tenacity of will to fulfill themselves creatively. The story represents the crux of personal achievement, where individual love functions as the

motivating source of freedom and of creativity for the entire Negro race. The simplicity of the novel contrasts with the complexity of the other novels. There is only one relationship which is the chief concern of the narrative, and which in contrast to the criss-crossing relationships to be found in the other novels shows itself to be undefeated by the onslaught of the American affliction because it is based upon a love, supple and strong enough to withstand corruption. The characters grapple not only with the destructive forces of America but they also grapple with one another, seeking to mutually revitalize their almost deadened sense of hope. This is especially brought out in the novel in Tish's loyalty to Fonny, who would have otherwise been destroyed by despair, and which takes her to the jail-house twice a day to visit him there:

... And Fonny knows that I will be there. It is very strange, and I now begin to learn a very strange thing.... Every day, when he sees my face, he knows, again, that I love him, and God knows I do, more and more, deeper and deeper, with every hour. But it is'nt only that. It means that others love him, too, love him so much that they have set me free to be there. He is not alone; we are not alone ...

And I understand that the growth of the baby is connected with his determination to be free. So. I don't care if I get to be as high as two houses. The baby wants out. Fonny wants out. And we are going to make it; in time.³²

The forces of life in the novel are active, never passive as in Just Above My Head. They are perpetually

fulfilling the basic human need for acceptance and for recognition. It is as if Baldwin shows us another side to the American life which can exist in the country and which in If Beale Street Could Talk, is pictured as the stronghold of human integrity. Whatever else Baldwin might choose to portray, If Beale Street Could Talk has succeeded in giving substance to those values which his essays are always seeking for in society and which his characters are always yearning towards in their struggle for life.

ENDNOTES

¹ Margeret Mead and James Baldwin, A Rap on Race (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 221. All references are to this edition.

² James Bladwin, If Beale Street Could Talk (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), p. 39. All references are to this edition.

³ If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 38.

⁴ James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (London: Transworld Pubs. Ltd., 1965), p. 23. All references are to this edition.

⁵ Louis H. Pratt, James Baldwin (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 80. All references are to this edition.

⁶ If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 72.

⁷ Ibid., p. 169.

⁸ Ibid., p. 49.

- 9 Louis Pratt, p. 99.
- 10 If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 173.
- 11 Ibid., p. 172 & 173.
- 12 If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 43.
- 13 A Rap on Race, p. 52.
- 14 If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 52 & 53.
- 15 James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), p. 103. All references are to this edition.
- 16 James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 122 & 113. All references are to this edition.
- 17 Reference could be made to the last lines of the novel already quoted earlier on in the chapter.
- 18 Notes of a Native Son, p. 106.
- 19 A Rap on Race, p. 70.
- 20 Ibid., p. 69.
- 21 Ibid., p. 79.
- 22 Ibid., p. 62.
- 23 Ibid., p. 70.
- 24 Ibid., p. 81.
- 25 Nobody Knows My Name, p. 124 & 125.
- 26 If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 102.

27 James Baldwin, Just Above My Head, New York: The Dial Press, 1978), p. 529. All references are to this edition.

28 Notes of a Native Son, p. 123.

29 Saadet Bozkurt, "Harmony Within and Without: James Baldwin's Quest for Humanity," American Studies International, Vol. XX (Autumn, 1981), p. 50.

30 Just Above My Head, p. 429.

31 George Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), p. 150.

32 If Beale Street Could Talk, p. 144.

CONCLUSION

The assessment of Baldwin's fiction rests upon the understanding that he is a Negro novelist writing from within the American milieu. He is, therefore, subject to the demands of American history. This is merely to point out that the literature of the American Negro, which has had to take a subordinate stand in the mainstream of American literature, and which has had to deal primarily with the social deprivation of the Negro, has reached a point when it must firmly ground itself upon aesthetic principles. It must transcend the limiting frontiers of social protest and move into the unmapped regions of Negro art. This would mean that it would justifiably present the complexities of human life and subordinate its non-literary concerns to the literary claims of an "art-centered Negro fiction".¹ It must root itself within the American experience because of the nature of its history, in which its people, who have been nurtured upon the American soil and who still have an important role to play in the future making of American history, would reflect the diversifying characteristics of America. Accordingly, Robert Bone in his outline of American Negro literature, anticipates the literary future of the Negro thus:

Freedom for the Negro novelist is not a simple concept to define. In negative terms, one can assert with some confidence that the problems of racial conflict and of white characterization

are the principal obstacles to freedom. Once these problems have been solved on a sound literary basis, the Negro novelist will be free to develop to the limits of his capacity. Without a doubt, notable progress has been made in this direction as more the younger writers have learned to respect the difference between social controversy and art. In the long run, an art-centered Negro fiction will evolve free from the crude nationalistic propaganda of the past and the subtler assimilationist propaganda of the present.²

This naturally concurs with Baldwin's programme for an "art-centered" fiction which would only depict the "beauty", "dread" and "power" of humanity.³ This speaks of Baldwin's inherent understanding of the necessity to depict in his fiction, only the complex human situation; so that although his characters are black, yet they live out the trauma of the life of any individual who has been deprived of meaning in life.

In its deepest sense, Baldwin's fiction deals with the alienated self. This has also been the main concerns of modern literature which also deals with the fragmented life. Although black literature pertinently relates itself to the actual fragmentation of the American-Negro life, which in a sense makes it affinitive to modern literature, it depicts the quest for selfhood primarily amongst the Black American. But, this could be said of it, that, the black character is akin to his counterpart questor in the modern world, who seeks to define the self, to mythicize the worth of a newly-discovered life by imbuing it with a sense of personal symbolism. Baldwin's black character begins the quest for selfhood by a personal confrontation with himself as he is, and consequently

by reassessing his own position in America so as to know himself better and to uncover the spiritual dimensions of his own race. The black questor like the modern questor is also in search of a personal meaning in life. Living within the confines of America and partially moulded by the west he seeks to reshape his life not according to the rules of history, but to articulate his existence out of his unique position in America, so as to "fashion out of his experience that which will give him sustenance, and a voice".⁴ This would be his proclamation of that life which found embodiment in Sonny's music in the short story, "Sonny's Blues" and through the symbol of the child in If Beale Street Could Talk. The black renewal rests upon a recognition of its own spiritual validity which for Baldwin signified the ability to live the unfettered life, according to the unwritten and yet to be recognised laws of the Black personality which was maimed by oppression and fear.

As was pointed out in the introduction, the second category of Baldwin's characters who are alive to themselves, represent the stalwarts of Negro faith. They actualize the principle of human love and they endow hope to the senselessness of life by being participants in the work of bettering the American environment. They are the agents of full consciousness in Baldwin's fiction. Their lives incorporate

the meaning of failure and success, of life and death, of hope and despair, which reached artistic culmination in the life of Sonny, who was able to fulfil his potential creativity. He possessed the tenacity of will and the integrity of motive to reanimate the meaning of his own life, to distil its essence into music. Baldwin depicts Sonny's hard-won struggle against his own inner sense of defeat and against the more material powers of destruction that are prevalent within America. Sonny's music speaks of this perennial fight against death. It is the only viable alternative for those in search of themselves; for it is in their fight against death that these characters are brought closer to the actual meaning of life. This meant their ability to acknowledge their own centres of creativity which was hidden deep within and which was a blend of deep suffering and deep joy. These factors comprised the totality of each character's quest for selfhood.

However simple this might seem, the suffering that the quest for identity engenders, reflects the human inability to reach the centre of personal stability directly, without undergoing the crisis which would involve a recognition and an acceptance of the vicissitudes of human destiny. For the Negro, this would mean the acceptance of his peculiar position in America, of the role he has to play in it, in

order to save his country's diminishing sense of life. This is the mission that Fonny and Tish set out to fulfil for themselves and for their fellow Americans. Baldwin's earlier novels which document the tedious struggle for existence, also reveal the incessant internal warfare that the American character both black and white, is caught within. These novels measure the depths of human degradation out of which characters like John Grimes or Ruth of the short story "Come Out The Wilderness", those symbolic embodiments of life, must struggle against and fight to rise out of.

Baldwin's plea for the artist's right to find his own "moral center", is sometimes superseded by his apparent concern with the humiliation of the Negro in America. Racialism plays an important part in all of Baldwin's novels. However, Baldwin realizes that the coming to grips with his Negro identity would be the first step towards securing a place in the larger American universe. Sometimes however, such characters as are to be found in Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, lose themselves in the politics of racialism, which mar the novels artistically, so that between the conception and the actual presentation lies the unbridged gap. There is much still to be desired in Baldwin's fiction. His fictional contribution lies more towards charting out the direction in which Negro literature

is to move; that is, Baldwin's fiction shows us that the sources of life and of self-discovery for the Negro in America, lies in the vital elements of jazz music and the blues, and in the kind of sensitivity that marks the black musician and the black artist in his novels and short stories. This trend towards a re-discovery of one's racial uniqueness has also been noted by Arthur P. Davies. He observes:

From the twenties on down to the present, the jazz musician, has been popular with black writers, but he has never before received the kind and the amount of attention now given him. In these days of black nationalism and "negritude", the jazz musician has acquired a new significance. He has become for many Negro writers a symbol of the spontaneous creative impulse of the race; he represents black "original genius", something that is not indebted in any way to middle class culture.⁵

Davies mentions that, Rufus Scott in Another Country is emblematic of the jazz musician. But, although Baldwin was definitely conscious of the Negro creative potential, yet with Rufus Scott he was not able to realize it fully. As artist, Baldwin was motivated by a personal need to explicate the meaning of his peculiar life.⁶ This is the quality that marks most of his characters. They attempt to find meaning and to articulate the difficult human situation. They belong to that category of the exiled individual who:

walks the streets of his nation an alien, and yet who feels no bond to the continent of his ancestors. He is indeed the man without a country. And yet this very detachment may give him the insight of the stranger in the house, placing him in a better position to illuminate contemporary American life as few writers of the mainstream can.⁷

Julian Mayfield speaks of the special privilege that the American Negro has, who by his peculiar relation to the American continent, gains special insight into it. From his vantage point, not only has he the objectivity to reveal America's hidden realities, but also to draw upon the strength of the Negro understanding of itself. This will enable him to act, positively and creatively to remake America's future. Ideally, this has been the special attribute of the conscious Negro artist in Baldwin's novels and short stories.

Baldwin's characters who are launched on the road to self-discovery, reveal aspects of the contemporary Negro character who has been set adrift in the Northern cities of America. They are the younger generation of Black Americans born after the war and into comparative freedom and leisure, but whose frame of reference will always be towards Harlem, that perennial centre of Negro survival in the history of the Black American. Harlem plays a pivotal role in the lives of Baldwin's characters. They seek to

define themselves by it and through it, and it is the older, more experienced Harlemite who will initiate the young blacks into the white world. Harlem, however, is no cherished centre of human growth. "All over Harlem, Negro boys and girls are growing into stunted maturity, trying desperately to find a place to stand; and the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive."⁸ Although most of Baldwin's characters escape from Harlem, yet even for the most successful of them, rehabilitating their Black American identity would mean bridging the psychological gap between Harlem and the white world. This pertains to the Negro discovery of himself, based upon an acceptance of himself as he is and of his understanding of his past and present position in America so as to re-model his life upon the living principles of self-discovery. Baldwin anticipates Negro fulfillment through the young protagonist John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain and dramatises it through Fonny and Tish in If Beale Street Could Talk. In the intervening novels are the half-fulfilled figures of creative reconstruction who await fictional justification in the later novel.

It could be stated that Baldwin's fiction reflects the cultural dilemma of the younger generation

Negroes. Harold Cruse in The Crisis of the Negro

Intellectual, explains the Black American situation thus:

As long as the Negro cultural identity is in question, or open to self-doubts, then there can be no positive identification with the real demands of his political and economic existence. Further than that, without a cultural identity that adequately defines himself, the Negro cannot even identify with the American nation as a whole. He is left in the limbo of social marginality, alienated and directionless on the landscape of America, in a variegated nation of whites who have not yet decided on their own identity ... Thus the problem of Negro cultural identity is an unsolved problem within the context of an American nation that is still in the process of formation.⁹

Baldwin's novels, especially the novels of his middle period, depict the conditions of having to live within the driftless American universe. All the characters are trapped in it. Some of them flounder towards some kind of self-reconciliation. A handful of them, like John Grimes, Fonny and Tish, challenge the American country to accept them on their own terms. The battle that they wage is a two-fold operation, fought against the American society, against its social prejudices, and against their own selves, to constantly put themselves to the challenge of re-creating values afresh. This depends upon their ability to objectify the past, to search it closely for a better understanding of the complex present. This would also reflect upon the strength of their creative ability, which would have to keep itself above the depressing actuality of

American society, so as to function with clarity and insight. The majority of Baldwin's characters have been unable to do this. They allow themselves to be denuded by the strain of American social life and are, therefore, unable to find that which Baldwin terms as the "moral center". However, this is an observation made only on some of Baldwin's characters. The rest of them are constantly seeking for the vital components of a love-filled existence. They have a common identity with their white counterparts in the modern world who are also in search of the values that would give meaning to life. The main part of their discovery comes through to us in suggestive symbols of hope as in the young adolescent protagonists of the early short stories, "The Outing" and "The Rocpile". The final message of Baldwin's novels, is something to be gained only after one has journeyed through the pain that afflicts America, only after one has seen the failure of some and the comparative success of other characters; so that Baldwin's novels must be considered as an entity depicting the difficult process of self-discovery.

Whether Baldwin's fiction will have a lasting impact upon Negro literature, remains undefined. But this much can be said of it, that, what it offers to its readers is nothing conventional, nothing stereotyped. It reflects,

through its sensitivity to the black artistic genius, a contemporary awareness of the power of its own "negritude" which has a substantial message to offer not only to America but to the entire human universe. Much of its success rests upon this perception of itself. Critics like Nathan Scott Jr. has this to say of the black writer: "And thus for the black writer to explore and exhibit the rich complexity of Negro life is for him not only to assist his own people toward a deeper understanding of themselves but is for him also to be an agent of self-discovery for the nation at large."¹⁰

Finally, it ought to be pointed out that, the quest for selfhood has been the main concern of black literature. This can be seen in the movement of its literary history, which has always depicted the different stages of the Negro cultural awakening, and which in the early part of the century culminated in the nationalism of the Negro Renaissance.¹¹ As the Black American, however, began to regard himself as a significant entity, the identity crisis became a complex struggle; one that was fought against an easy absorption into the American mainstream; for the white acceptance merely portended a black cultural submergence. This would mean America's complete denial of black origins. The contemporary Negro, as is reflected in Baldwin's characters fought for the primacy of the black self-consciousness, which became his sole criterion for

life in America.

The ultimate meaning of the quest for selfhood in Baldwin's fiction, rests upon both historical and personal factors. The fact of the Negro's alienation, which, according to Baldwin in A Rap on Race,¹² is a symptom of all the other problems in the country, because its effects are a universal reminder to the modern existential dilemma, points to the urgent necessity to seek for change. Baldwin's characters, who are more or less educated or sensitive artists, bear the cross of this unhappy displacement. At the centre of their lives lies this knowledge that, they have been rejected from American society. They begin life with a dim sensitivity to this, but its full impact is felt later in life, only when that knowledge has already crippled them, or even annihilated them as it has for Rufus Scott in Another Country. The only justifiable measure of personal success for the American Negro lies in his ability to accept alienation and to live despite it from the depths of his entire being. This facility for life is what Baldwin in The Fire Next Time terms "sensuality",¹³ which is the equivalent of the Dionysian intrepidity. If Beale Street Could Talk crystallizes these forces of creation which are deeply rooted within the black psyche.

Baldwin concerns himself not only with the black character but also with the white character. In depicting the white man as he is, Baldwin has perhaps been able to bring closer to the actual fact of America's need to renew itself, for the white man as he sees it, is as much in need of personal rejuvenation as his black counterpart. The fault lies as Baldwin reiterates throughout his novels and short stories, in the white man's inflexibility, in his inability to change. He is riven by the contemporary loss of faith and, therefore, unable to find complete integration for himself, let alone help his black counterpart. However, in Another Country, Baldwin suggests a hopeful coming together of the black and white personality in the Ida-Vivaldo relationship. His novels and short stories contain prefigurations of America's future discovery of itself, in which the characters mark the movement towards life by their ability to activate the dormant sense of black responsibility which works not only towards the black restoration but which is also aimed at changing the entire American continent. The black character who sets out to discover the possibilities of love finds, that his quest is inextricable from America's search for self-discovery; and in Baldwin's words:

I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. ¹⁴

This defines the role of the Black American as the spiritual legislator of his American homeland.

On a broad perspective, the quest for self in Baldwin's fiction would naturally involve the entire American country. It was to the American continent that the black slave had to forsake his identity and it will be in the American homeland that he will seek to establish himself once again. Baldwin's characters attempt to assert the resilience of the black spirit which will fight, not to destroy America, but which will fight to create for itself and for the American country a higher, more meaningful code of existence. However, there are times when characters like Rufus Scott who, weakened by their traffickings in the mercenary American life, succumb to it. They fail to personalize the exemplary values of love, which will give them inner stability. Their lives are typically that of the foiled American. They have not the ability to refashion their lives according to their inner convictions, and in the death of Rufus Scott in Another Country, one sees what usually happens when the black character is sapped of the fulfilling energies of life. But, this is not the final picture one has of Baldwin's characters. Although the quest for the self might lead some of them astray, there are the others beginning from John Grimes of the first novel, who live through the bitterness of being black

and rejected but who are able to withstand the corrupting influences of America so that they liberate for themselves, practically and creatively, the private values of a love-based existence. Ultimately the quest for self becomes synonymous with the quest for love. All of them know that this is the sole constituent of life which will dignify existence for them. However, to most of them it remains forever elusive and being unacquainted with it, they try out ways of reaching it but are led instead into its dark regions, as was the case with David in Giovanni's Room. On the other hand, there are characters like Fonny and Tish who are the unmistakable pioneers of human love in Baldwin's fiction. By it they define themselves, their relation to one another and to the rest of America. It is only in the freedom of love that the Black American can hope to release himself from his bondage to the white world to find the truest form of self-expression. Functioning from within it and through it, he will restore to himself all that was hidden and lost, all that was denied to him, so that his life will be a meaningful journey "towards something" he does not yet understand but "which in the going towards" makes him "better".¹⁵ For the reader, the one perfect example of this journey has already been enacted in the lives of Fonny and Tish who are bound together in a love which impels them forward into a greater

understanding of themselves as individuals capable of fulfilment. This indicates the movement, already charted out through John Grimes in the first novel, away from black fanaticism into an afflicted universe and finally to a sincere recognition of the personal validity of love. It is upon this basic premise of life that Baldwin's characters set out to find themselves.

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 225 & 226. All references are to this edition.

² Ibid.

³ James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 23. All references are to this edition.

⁴ Ibid., p. 172.

⁵ ed. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross, Dark Symphony Negro Literature in America (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 524 & 525. All references are to this edition.

⁶ Notes of a Native Son, p. 71.

⁷ ed. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross, p. 560 & 561.

⁸ Notes of a Native Son, p. 71.

⁹ Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (London: W.H. Allen & Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 12 & 13.

- 10 Daniel Hoffman ed., Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing, (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 340 & 341.
- 11 Ref. Robert Bone.
- 12 Margeret Mead⁽¹⁾ and James Baldwin, A Rap on Race (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 69.
- 13 James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), p. 53.
- 14 Notes of a Native Son, p. 9.
- 15 James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (London: Transworld Pubs. Ltd., 1965), p. 112.

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