

Psychosexual racism in going to meet the man



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James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" depicts the psychosexual methodologies used by a white racist sheriff who both fears and fetishizes African Americans. Through the character of Jesse, Baldwin is stating that the sexual myth of black male virility and racism inspire and bolster each other. Jesse's obsession with black sexuality is ultimately merged in the ending when his nostalgia for a lynching that he saw as a child makes him hard and ready for intercourse. "He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him...he thought of the morning and grabbed her, laughing, and crying, crying and laughing, and he whispered, as he stroked her, as he took her, 'Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger.'" (1761)

James Baldwin inherited contradictory traditions in African American literature. African American literature often wrestled with a debate between the overtly political writings of Richard Wright and the folklore of Zora Neale Hurston. Overtly political narratives like Richard Wright's *Native Son* could be very limiting (something that Baldwin explores in *Notes of a Native Son*). On the other hand, ignoring the racial politics as Hurston seems to do could be just as untenable. Richard Wright was greatly offended by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and its complete absence of racial politics: "In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy" (23).

James Baldwin managed to draw from both traditions. James Baldwin was a writer who could write highly compelling stories that may involve racial politics. He was not satisfied with political tracts. In fact, he publicly

disdained his leftist politics. Even *The Fire Next Time*, a book that is primarily about racial politics in the United States, eschews sermons in favor of personal anecdotes discussing his encounters with the Nation of Islam and street preachers. In *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Mario Vargas Llosa encapsulates his view of the writing life by stating that the literary vocation is created and continually inspired by a sense of rebellion. “ Why would anyone who is deeply satisfied with reality, with real life as it is lived, dedicate himself to something as insubstantial and fanciful as the creation of fictional realities?” (7)

James Baldwin's style was often warm and humane. Most of his characters attempt to do the right thing and they deeply care about each other. In “ *Sonny's Blues*”, the narrator envies and worries about his brother, the heroin addicted saxophone player. In *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Baldwin's autobiographical protagonist goes through a journey of religious and sexual confusion that culminates in his acceptance of Christ in a moment of triumph that could very well be short-lived, but is still powerful in the context of the novel. It is the one moment where Baldwin's protagonist is empty of doubt and tension; however, times of doubts and tension tend to return no matter how often they are supposedly stamped out. Of course, the reading of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is informed by Baldwin's own short-lived time as a street preacher and the autobiographical nature of the book.

In contrast to Baldwin's standard sympathetic characterizations, Jesse is as close to a polemical villain as Baldwin could write. “ *Going to Meet the Man*” begins with Baldwin's sympathetic narration that depicts his hero as struggling with impotence. “ He just lay there, silent, angry, and helpless.

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Excitement filled him like a toothache, but it refused to enter his flesh” (1750). Yet, Jesse’s struggles are underscored by the racial dynamics. The narrative states that “ he could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it” (1750). This oblique reference to unnatural sexual practices upholds a racial belief in the perverse nature of African Americans held by white people, particularly racist white people. The narrative does not say what the “ little thing” but it is most likely oral sex.

Jesse’s sexuality and racism are intertwined. Even as he complains about his impotence, he is obsessed with the racial make-up of the town. The African American population bothers him and he’s afraid of cars just driving through. Even though he fantasizes about the wild sex that he might be able to have with a willing African American woman, he’s deathly afraid. “ There was no telling what might happen once your ass was in the air. And they were low enough to kill a man then, too, everyone of them, or the girl herself might do it, right while she was making believe you made her feel so good” (1750).

The narrative moves away from Jesse’s personal dilemma to reveal that the story places the action during the Civil Rights movement as Jesse is a sheriff in a town where he attempts to deal with the civil rights demonstrators. He alternates between infantilizing and denigrating the African Americans in the cells after he arrests them. When he brutalizes an African American in the jail cell to the point where the prisoner is knocked unconscious, he takes great joy in the action. When another prisoner called him ‘ white man’ that narrative states that “ He stopped. For some reason, he grabbed his privates” (1752). This is a protagonist perspective that hides the nature of

the grab from the narrator but not the reader. The phallic nature of the obsession is obvious to the nature of racial politics.

Baldwin's decision to depict Jesse's thoughts seems to contradict decades of literary tradition in which the personal viewpoint is eschewed in favor of a "universal" perspective. When Mario Vargas Llosa discusses Flaubert, he notes that in the works of Flaubert: "commentary, interpretation, and judgment represent intrusions of the narrator into the story and are signs of a presence (in space and reality) different from the presences that make up the reality of the novel; the intrusion of the narrator destroys the illusion of self-sufficiency, betrays the accidental, derivative nature of the story, and shows it to be dependent on something or someone else." (51). James Baldwin repeatedly inserts himself into the narrative by describing every thought of Jesse and depicting these thoughts as ugly terrors. Although the Flaubert standard states that the author should get out of the way of the characters, the ability and temptation to comment either overtly or covertly is very strong. Furthermore, the way that author depicts a scene betrays authorial perspective and intent. The most repeated piece of advice for writers is "show, don't tell" and it comes from this universal perspective that condemns blatant exposition as clumsy. James Baldwin uses much exposition to tell us what Jesse is thinking in order to depict that sexualized nature of racism.

Even Jesse's hatred of music becomes a supporting point in his racist view. In the stories of Baldwin, music plays an important role. One of the major methods involves the way that "characters listen to music to provide inspiration, clarity for their experiences, or space for contemplation" (Miller, <https://assignbuster.com/psychosexual-racism-in-going-to-meet-the-man/>

84). In this story, the narrator can only feel guilt and suspicion in regard to the singing. Music is a soul destroying institution. At one point, Jesse thinks: "They had not been singing black folks into heaven; they had been singing white folks into hell." (1754) Whatever strength the blues provides for Baldwin characters, it does not extend to white racists.

Everything in the civil rights movement becomes a challenge to Jesse's virility and Jesse's ultimate victory means that the story ends on a bleak note for the reader and a positive note for the protagonist. Jesse's racism is not only powerful and institutional, but it's also a source of sexual potency. He remembers a lynching that he attended and it arouses him. The final scene sees Jesse reminiscing about the man that he beat up in jail and the lynching victim and his impotency is conquered. In his final statement he says "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger." (1761) James Baldwin is telling us that the racism in the south is not simply an institution based on fear or ignorance. It is a source of carnal pleasure for the upholders of racial inequality.

Unintentionally, Jesse talks like a blues song with the repetition and invocation of terms. Even more important, Jesse engages in racial identification as he imagines both himself and his wife as the hypersexualized stereotypes that he has of African Americans. Jesse as a white man feels his power fading and this is physicalized in his impotency. The only solution out of his dilemma is a combination of violence against African Americans and tying personal sexuality in with the fantasy of the African American male being a virile specimen. Even as he reminiscences

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about a lynching in which an African American male is castrated, his invocation of that incident allows him to take on the fantasy version of African American virility. By depicting this scene, Baldwin makes a direct correlation between perceived virility and sexual violence.

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