

Disparaging masculinities: fred's doom and jesse's reaffirmation



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James Baldwin and Richard Wright focus most of their works on the suffering of blacks in opposition to the overwhelming and repressive nature of racism that contorts the very existence of black bodies, specifically men. Wright and Baldwin assert that there are various approaches to addressing racism and the structure of black narratives, as is made evident by Baldwin's use of a white male protagonist and Wright's use of a protagonist who lives underground. Both these writers suggest that identity is an entity that men, in particular, desire in order to both proclaim their roles as masculine and to proclaim their roles as human or they cease to maintain their power and become subhuman bodies. Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* and James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* represent two opposing forms of masculinity as they exist in black and white culture, however, Jesse and Fred both enter an oppressive darkness that consumes their identities and forces them to address their own roles in society or face imminent death.

Baldwin and Wright emphasize the importance of naming in their works as it generates a tangible form of existence and significance for both men in the short stories. Fred Daniels is presumably a reference to Frederick Douglass who, in contrast to other black leaders, encouraged living within the conditions that whites controlled and seeking to prove the worth of black people through adherence to racialized roles and physical labor. Fred did not have to face the conditions of fear and oppression head on until he is accused of murder and that single act forces him to retreat underground to a place where reality only exists above him. While underground Fred encounters death, most notably when he sees the discarded body of a baby.

This baby is unnamed, and like Fred, and the rat that he killed when he entered the sewer; all are lost in the vast darkness where humanity and morality lose their meaning. There is a sense of freedom while Fred is underground, he can choose to face reality or continue on his odyssey and avoid confronting oppression, contempt, and his false role as the fugitive. Fred's decision to go underground allows him to escape his identity, as black and as human, but it gives him the new identity as a voyeur of the human condition who has the option and will to enlighten others on the surface. One of the most poignant moments in the narrative is when Fred finds a typewriter and tries to practice writing. Wright explains, " He would now write his name on the typewriter...But what was his name" (Wright, 1453). Fred finds that he is unable to write his name down or, in a sense, write his name into history. Faced with the plight of non-existence, Fred decides that the knowledge that he learned as a voyeur can be used to enlighten those on the surface. Fred chooses to return to reality in order to have his chance at changing the world that has criminalized and dehumanized him. However, Fred is fatally shot and discarded like the innocent baby and he is unable to wield his power and agency that he's gained underground in the context of the real world.

Jesse's identity is composed of his own suppression of guilt that causes him to oppress blacks in order to maintain his sense of self. His job is to maintain order, but he does this by raping black women, attacking black men, and caging them at the police station like animals. Jesse's wife continuously inquires about why he chooses to work in such a dangerous field but Jesse appears to enjoy the subjugation of blacks which he rationalizes as

jurisdictional control. Jesse's desire for control regulates how his character is portrayed to the reader. Baldwin structures the text so that Jesse's name is not mentioned until his wife, Grace, is introduced; even when Jesse's name first appears it is as a reflection and he is given the title Mr. as a sign of respect. Naming proves to be a vital point within the text as Jesse tries to denote others, specifically blacks, to names that are not their own. In response Jesse gets the same treatment. Baldwin writes, "White man," said the boy, from the floor, behind him" (Baldwin, 1752). In this moment the young black man takes the power away from Jesse by being the one to name him. Furthermore, the young man, "grabbed his privates", as he says this emphasized the overt expression of masculinity and power that Jesse shapes his life around. Jesse's identity becomes a battlefield of power, specifically in regards to how he is perceived and named by others. In contrast to Fred, Jesse's identity is shaped by blacks, but he maintains agency and power through his role as a cop and his identity as a white man; which is something that Fred could never have.

Jesse not only dehumanizes the blacks in his city through naming and objectifying their bodies, but he also does this by subjecting them to the same disassociation that his father did when he was a young child. When his father and other whites captured a black man and burned him alive, they did so as retaliation but also to ensure that the black citizens in their city could not gain power and would be afraid to do so overall. Jesse explains, "The head was hanging. He saw the forehead, flat and high...like he had, like his father had" (Baldwin, 1759). The way in which Jesse commodifies the black body into parts is a similar way in which one might sell the parts of an

animal. Jesse also describes the man's hair as "another jungle" and the man's complexion as similar to an African jungle Cat. These descriptions emphasize two things within Jesse's narrative. It exemplifies the notion that Jesse desperately needs to other blacks in order to remain safe despite the fact that Jesse notices small similarities between the black victim and his own family. Further, Jesse subjects blacks to a geographical othering, which allows him to segregate blacks and remain comfortable when he is with his father, at work, or even with his wife. The idea that the black man is like an animal and that Jesse associates him with the jungle lets Jesse eradicate any guilt he has over the violence that his father and he perpetuate against blacks from their consciousness because, in his mind, blacks are equated with animals who do not factor into moral obligations of fair treatment and safety.

Fred becomes an animal underground, he slithers and climbs through the sewer but by the end of the text he becomes godlike making the choice to retreat from voyeurism and become the voice that others desperately need despite the fact that he is doomed from the beginning because of his race. Fred's gains an ominous perspective while he is underground. He views a spiritual chorus practice, sees an embalming, and most importantly witnesses individuals watching a film. Fred observes, "These people are laughing at their lives, he thought with amazement. They were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves" (Wright, 1441). This observation forces Fred to empathize with the helplessness of others as they are trapped within their own miserable existence. By the end of the text Fred resists his own identity as an animal and makes the choice to regain his

humanity and become a martyr for society as a whole. Fred is an unstable soldier in the battle against jurisdictional and criminal institutions that repress him throughout the text. Lawson, a police officer, expresses, ““ you’ve got to shoot his kind. They’d wreck things,”” (Wright, 1470). Fred’s kind have the ability to shatter and destroy the positions of power that the police officers maintain, and destroy the racist, materialistic, and capitalistic systems of their reality.

Sexually Jesse is inadequate, his role as a man is defined by procreation and control over his sexual experiences, but his sexual arousal is stimulated by the perceived connection between racism and violence and this is the path in which Jesse imposes white supremacy and invalidates the existence of others. Jesse fears, “ He was a big, healthy man and he had never had any trouble sleeping. And he wasn’t old enough yet to have any trouble getting it up” (Baldwin, 1750). The focus of male genitalia in this text emphasizes the male perception of masculinity as it is perceived through sexual ability. The entire story takes place in a bedroom with the core of the story focused on Jesse’s impotence. At one point a black man grabs his penis in order to assert his power, the lynch mob castrates a black man, and Jesse’s constantly uses other instruments, besides his penis, to assert his power. These instruments include his gun and his baton which can be perceived as extensions of Jesse’s own genitalia. The castration of the black man generates the notion that a man is defined by his use of and ownership of his genitalia and the lack of ability equates death because the man is no longer able to create life. Jesse’s memory of the lynching of a black man gives him the sexual arousal that is necessary for him to have sex with his wife. Jesse

describes, “ He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test , had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever” (Baldwin, 1761) The key to white masculinity is the perversion of desire. By distorting something that is wonderful, creation and life, with something that is destructive, violence and death; the moralistic ideology of good and evil is blurred to the point of non-existence. Jesse's father taught him that power comes from degrading other human beings which allows white men to proclaim their sexual delinquency as pure and masculine. This lesson that Jesse's father teaches him is that whiteness is power, as the lynch mob castrates the black man, and this memory leads Jesse to perform sexually. Jesse's ability to perform, allows him to supposedly continue on a lineage of whiteness but it also allows him to metaphorically enter a “ sanctuary” by literally entering his wife, Grace.

Fred's narrative is defined by the fact that the white police men reduce him to the role as a criminal but he needs white affirmation and salvation in order to survive, placing his role as a man under the control of other white men. Fred's reduced to an invisible man underground, nothing he does matters unless he takes a leap of faith and reenters the real world. Fred, unknowingly, gives into systems of oppression the moment he steps back into the world; as he relinquishes his power to that of white men. In order to obtain freedom he must believe in a just world and have faith in a group of men who have already condemned him to captivity or death. Wright's pessimism and disbelief in a just world seeps through in Fred's narrative. As Fred attempts to persuade the policemen of his innocence he speaks, “ in a childlike tone, as though repeating a lesson learned by heart” (Wright,

1465). In Fred's case there is no anticipation of hope, and there is no viable way in which he can gain ownership of his identity and masculinity simply because he is a black man.

Fred and Jesse represent two contrasting, and in some cases opposing, presentations of the intersections of race, sexuality, and masculinity. The two men struggle throughout their narratives to understand what masculinity means to them and how it can be expressed in their respective situations. Fred has expectations placed upon him by society and he seeks to surpass the notions of inferiority that he is subjected to and enlighten the masses of his new found knowledge. Jesse learns from his father that white masculinity equates power and it's through those notions that Jesse violates and suppresses black bodies within his community. Both men are constrained to the performance of masculinity but Jesse is the only one who has the agency to survive in the end.