

James baldwin essay



James A. Baldwin, a homosexual African-American novelist, was once quoted saying that the most dangerous creation of any society is the man who has nothing to lose. What it means is that society's chief concern should be a person who has absolutely nothing to lose by always sticking to their beliefs, yet everything to gain. James Baldwin embodies that quote to the absolute fullest. Not only did he push the boundaries with his works in novels and articles on racial and sexual matters, but he also was a key component in the civil rights movement and that's why James Baldwin was important in shaping American history.

James A. Baldwin, born James Arthur Jones, was born on August 2, 1924 in New York City. James was one of several children that his mother had. His mother would go on to divorce his biological father because of drug-related issues and move to Harlem, New York. In Harlem his mother would meet and marry a preacher by the name of David Baldwin, hence where James got his last name. " David Baldwin became a center of conflict and understanding, hate and respect in Baldwin's early life and in some of his best writing.

Regardless of Baldwin's strained relationship with David, out of respect for him he would always refer to him as his " father" and not his " step-father. Growing up in the treacherous streets of Harlem was not an easy battle for Baldwin. " The oppression he faced the oppression he overcame, and the strength he gained from the battle was enough to break a man" Every single day in Harlem was a struggle for his life. Another example of how much respect Baldwin had for the man who adopted him, was at the age of fourteen he took it upon himself to follow in his footsteps and become a preacher as a member of the Pentecostal Church.

Baldwin developed a passion for reading during his early school years and exhibited a unique ability for writing. While attending high school at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, he worked on the schools magazine with famous photographer Richard Avedon. His explanation for being a writer for the school literary magazine, *The Magpie* was “ I wasn’t a dancer, I wasn’t a boxer, I can’t sing. And as it turned out I wasn’t very good at carrying a mop. So I wrote. He published various poems, short stories, and plays in the magazine and this work alone showed refined literacy skills. At the age of seventeen, Baldwin would also have already begun rough drafts for his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. After high school Baldwin had every intention of going to further his education at a college but he had to put those ambitions and dreams on hold for a while to support his family, which at the time was very poor. He would do any job that was offered to him, from laying railroad tracks down to working at various bars.

Yet, while looking for jobs he encountered a great amount of discrimination, such as getting turned away from bars, just because of the fact he was an African-American. This would lead to Baldwin struggling even more financially. Three years after graduating high school Baldwin took it upon himself and decided to make a dramatic change in his life. He would leave America and go live in Paris, France. Leaving America made Baldwin feel free, something he had never fully felt in his life because of discrimination.

Since the age of ten when he got jumped by white police officers, to not being able to find a job just because of his skin color had always made him feel trapped like a prisoner. “ The immensity of this freedom, filtered through the blues of Bessie Smith, enabled Baldwin to reestablish contact with his

past, his deeply buried experiences. It was this reconciliation which provided the challenge for the exploration of those experiences for the emergence of James Baldwin the writer. " In 1953, Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published.

An autobiographical novel, it describes the life of a young boy, John Grimes, from his early years to his adolescence, its focus being on his status within the family and his relation to his father. The novel resembles Baldwin's childhood a lot based on the fact that the novel's central theme is about a young man named John Grimes who is the innocent victim of his father, a religious man steeped in disgust and narrowness. It relates to Baldwin's childhood because he was the innocent victim of a father whom he hated and had a lot of hatred as well.

It's a milestone in the development of American literature because it is the first novel and/or short story about Negroes to be written from a non-racial point of view. Shortly after publishing his first novel, Baldwin would go on to receive a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1956 he would publish his second novel *Giovanni's Room*. *Giovanni's Room* fired up a lot of controversy because of the explicit amount of homoerotic content. It also was controversial because he explored interracial relationships, a very touchy topic at the time.

The plot of the novel itself stems from Baldwin's analysis of the nature and character of homosexuality. " Also, Baldwin was able to connect with a wider audience because to the surprise of many, *Giovanni's Room* was primarily about white people, not African-Americans. He was also making references to himself in this novel because the main character was living in

Paris. Baldwin's next two novels, *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, both dealt with white and black peoples as well as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual characters.

In 1957 Baldwin returned to the United States primarily because he had been touched by the image of a young female surviving a mob in an attempt to desegregate schools in North Carolina. Upon his return he took it upon himself to start writing about the movement and aligned himself with the likes of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1963 Baldwin did a tour of the South for CORE, where he would lecture to practically anyone who would give him the time of day.

He never would sugar coat any of his speeches and his approach for getting his message out there was different then the likes of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Baldwin's next work, a collection of short essays put into a novel, was called *The Fire Next Time*. One of the essays that were a part of the novel was called *Down at the Cross*. The essay revolved around the relationship between Christianity and the Black Muslim movement.

This essay was so captivating and touching that it not only got published in two issues of *The New Yorker* newspaper, but it also grabbed Baldwin the cover of *Time* magazine in 1963. In the United States today there is not another writer, black or white, who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South. " stated *Times* magazine. That same year on August 28th, 1963 Baldwin attended the famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Although,

initially he was supposed to give a speech they took him off the list of speakers and he took it personally and thought it was due to his open homosexuality. Although very time consumed with the movement, Baldwin still found success with his ability as a writer.

His first Broadway production Blues for Mister Charlie was very successful even though it was badly political. In addition to his first Broadway production, his first and only short stories were also published called Going to Meet the Man. Even though the reviews were not up to par with his typical reviews, few of the short stories went on to become anthology standards that people use today. The same year that his short stories were published, 1965, an event occurred that would affect Baldwin deeply.

Malcolm X, who had showed up to one of his lectures and had been friends ever since, was assassinated. Malcolm X was one of the greatest people he had ever met. Baldwin would write about him in his memoir No Name in the Street. With the assassination of one of the people he had looked up to, Baldwin took the next couple years particularly hard. His mind and heart both just weren't in the right place. His second Broadway production The Amen Corner closed after a brief run and it received possibly the most negative reviews of his career.

In April 1968 while working on a screenplay for Malcolm X's life Baldwin heard of the tragic news of the assassination of Martin Luther King JR. and he felt as if he would never write again. Throughout the next couple years Baldwin would write a few novels, yet none were nearly as good in comparison with the ones that he wrote before the deaths of Malcolm X and

Martin Luther King JR. In 1979, he published his last novel *Just above My Head* and it was a novel that loosely revolved around the experiences that he went through during his life.

It was also the longest novel of his career. “ Although Baldwin had written novels before about same-sex love, *Just above My Head* contains perhaps his most explicit rendering, but not just about the glands, but also about the emotion. ” The novel would spend thirty-seven weeks on the *Washington Post* best-seller list and the rights for the book were sold for over 300, 000 dollars. In the 1980’s Baldwin’s health was in the decline. From mild heart attacks to spending nights in the hospital because of drinking and smoking his health was gradually wearing thin.

In 1987 he was diagnosed with cancer and later that summer he would go on to pass away in the presence of his brother and an old friend. James A. Baldwin’s legacy at the time of his death was not known by him. He did not know that he would be on a first-class post stamp, or that a scholar would name him one of the hundred greatest African-Americans. His impact on American history is tremendous. Regardless of where America is fifty years from now Baldwin’s output, his skill, and his ability to put his passion into a form of communication will always have deserved and continued attention.