

Searching for identity through the past essay sample



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In the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin develops his main character, John Grimes, on the basis of other characters' pasts. He reveals each character's past to the reader, and how these pasts affect the main character John in his quest for identity. Gabriel Grimes and Elizabeth Grimes, his father and mother, have the largest impact on John Grimes and his search for his own identity.

John Grimes, the son of Elizabeth, is celebrating his fourteenth birthday and beginning his search for his own identity. His mother has married Gabriel Grimes, who has promised to love John like his own son. John always seems to feel as though he is not good enough for Gabriel and never able to meet his approval. Roy, Gabriel's true son, is more of a trouble-maker, but Gabriel favors Roy to John; he does not want John under the power of the Lord before his own son. Gabriel believes that Roy is the start of his royal blood-line.

Gabriel, John's step-father, has a concealed past which is a major factor in Gabriel's resentment towards John. Being a preacher, Gabriel should be a good example of unconditional love, but as his past is revealed his attitude toward John becomes more understandable. Gabriel had turned to God and the church since his mother's death. Before being part of the church, Gabriel was a wild-child. He was twenty-two when he went through his rebirth.

Gabriel married a woman, Deborah, who had been defiled, after a powerful dream from the Lord. After cheating once on Deborah with a woman named Esther, he continued this affair for nine days. The result of this affair was a son whom Esther named Royal just to spite Gabriel and his dream of a royal blood-line. Considering Esther was sent by Satan, Gabriel fell into

temptation. Gabriel and Deborah stayed in contact with Royal, in Chicago, but it seemed that no one knew of Gabriel's blood-ties. For her entire life, Gabriel kept the secret of his son Royal from Deborah. However, on her death-bed, Deborah told Gabriel she knew Royal was his son and that he had died in a knife fight.

Having an illegitimate son should have given Gabriel the strength to accept John better than he did. Gabriel is clearly not as holy as he believes people perceive him to be. He looks down on Elizabeth because she has not repented for John's birth, but Gabriel himself has never faced up to his own transgressions. By caring for Elizabeth and her bastard son, Gabriel feels that he has made amends with God. Gabriel has made Elizabeth and her son his charity to make-up for his past mistake.

Gabriel's anger and frustrations for the royal blood-line are expressed harshly towards John. John gets confused by his father's actions and is pushed further into the church as he searches for himself and a life to please his father.

Constantly confused by his mother, Elizabeth, John never knows what to search for in her. Communication between him and his mother is a very weak characteristic of their relationship. Elizabeth is almost forced to take Gabriel's side many times, and this causes John more confusion about why he is not accepted.

Elizabeth met John's true father, Richard, in 1919, and together they moved to New York to start a life away from the ways of the south. Elizabeth had

kept herself innocent before moving to New York, but upon her move she fell into sin with Richard.

She was Richard's strength, and she could never leave him, no matter how bad things may have gotten. She became pregnant but never told Richard. She does not regret the pregnancy, but she always regrets not having told Richard about it.

Richard was beaten, arrested, and tried because of a mistaken identity of a robber. After getting out of jail, Richard knew that his name and reputation had been tarnished and committed suicide that night.

Elizabeth met Florence, Gabriel's sister, through work and soon was introduced to Gabriel. Gabriel brought Elizabeth back to the faith and provided strength and comfort to her. She was in need of someone for her to lean on for a change. He promised her that he would love John as his own son. Elizabeth used Gabriel to hide from her past. He was her mountain to hide behind. Both of them, however, had been searching for a sign of forgiveness and believed their meeting was the sign. Due to their pasts, Elizabeth and Gabriel feel powerlessness and hatred. Elizabeth and Gabriel have faced the injustices of the world, but John cannot face it until he comes to it. The biggest hurdle John faces is acceptance in his search for identity.

John lives in Harlem and his family is greatly involved in the church, considering his father, Gabriel, is a preacher. John notices all the sinners in his neighborhood and is disgusted by their actions. His brother Roy, on the other hand, takes joy in the sinners' actions. Gabriel's stronger love for Roy is not understandable to John because of the harsh life that Roy leads. John
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has committed a sin that weighs heavy on his heart; he masturbated in the boy's bathroom to the thoughts of the older boys. Not only faced with acceptance by his father, John wants acceptance of the Lord after this sin and his questions of his sexuality. He is a smart boy, excels in school, and is praised by the teachers, both black and white. Because of his intelligence, John stands tall and strong around his father's physical, emotional, and psychological abuse.

John sees his whole house as dirty one day. This is the point John realizes he needs to find himself and "clean" things up. John does not fit into his family too well because of his thoughts on life and salvation. He is constantly trying to be accepted, but in doing so he reveals his outlook on many aspects of life. His birthday is forgotten by his family, but John is not surprised. John begins his chore assignment in the living room and looks at the pictures on the mantle. He thinks about Gabriel's first wife, Deborah, and wonders if she would have been able to help him win his father's love. He is in the dark about his father's past, and that past is the key to his acceptance.

His mother calls him in after his chores and gives him a little birthday money. John goes out to Central Park and gazes out onto the city from his favorite hill. He notices all the white people, and unlike his father, believes that they will honor him when he is distinguished. John decides to see a movie, despite the fact that he might be seen. Compelled by the main character of the movie, John begins to think about Hell, redemption, and life. Upon his arrival home, John finds that his brother, Roy, has been stabbed and notices in his father that Gabriel wishes it were John dying and not Roy.

Confused by his father's thoughts, John wonders if it is his own fault that his <https://assignbuster.com/searching-for-identity-through-the-past-essay-sample/>

father does not accept him. The strong feeling of hatred towards his father and himself is a natural reaction John constantly feels.

John, later that night, goes to the church to do his chores. Elisha and John begin talking about John's soul and being saved. As he kneels and prays, John undergoes a hallucination of rebirth. Believing that he has seen the Lord, John is saved after this experience. His mother and aunt are proud of him for his salvation, but his father remains cold towards him. "It came from your mouth," Gabriel says to John, "I want to see you live it. It's more than a notion" (271). John walks with Elisha and tells him how different the world looks. Encouraging him, Elisha tells John that he will pray for him.

They all walk out of the church, John and his mother, Gabriel and his sister. "I know you thinking at the bottom of your heart," Florence tells Gabriel, referring to Elizabeth, "that if you just make her, her and her bastard son, pay enough for her sin, your son won't have to pay for yours" (281). Florence challenges Gabriel's pretensions to holiness. The salvation of John gives John the strength to face his father in a stronger manner. He may fall, and each day is a new battle he will fight. And he has not won his father's love, but the struggle has been altered. It is no longer man against boy; it is now man against man.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is a description of one boy's search for himself. Not only is John searching for his identity but also for love. He struggles with the decision of what path is best for him and best for his relationship with his father, Gabriel. With constant reminders of not being accepted, John doubts himself throughout the novel. He is greatly influenced in all his decisions by

his parents' thoughts and opinions. Each cruel remark that is made towards him by his father seems to push him closer to the path Gabriel has taken in life.

John is not only searching for approval from his father, but also social approval. He watches the white people walk through the streets and thinks about being accepted by them all one day, despite his father's disgust of white people. He is hoping to be loved and accepted, but is worried about his sexuality (class notes). In the end of the novel, John becomes saved and he finds acceptance with the church and God; he no longer worries as much about his father's acceptance.