

John's only escape: church as a way out



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James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on The Mountain* is an autobiographical look into the corruptible nature of the black male condition as it relates to the church. John Grimes is a young boy but his narrative suggests that his existence is shaped by forces outside his being. These forces are institutional, familial, and ultimately forms internalized racism in John. The ending of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* suggests that John has been defeated by the overwhelming power of the secular and sacred because in the end he escapes to the one place that he believes has been cleansed from filth, sexual repression, and racialized hierarchies.

Baldwin emphasizes the overpowering influence that cleanliness and filthiness play in the lives of the Grimes family. Certain spaces are limiting in the way that they are perceived whether it be as domestic or public, clean or dirty. Three different liminal spaces are represented in the twenty-four hour period that the text takes place in, the home, the secular world, and the church. All of these places make John feel constricted or free based on how clean they are and why. Gabriel experiences a provisional moment within the kitchen of a white family. Gabriel cheats on his wife and it is through this overpowering temptation that he, like Adam, falls. Baldwin writes, "how he worried, in some buried part of his mind, about the open door, about the sermon he was to preach, about his life, about Deborah; how the table got in their way, how his collar, until her fingers loosened it, threatened to choke him" (145). Baldwin synthesizes sex, violence, and power within this single moment as Gabriel yields to the temptation of a woman, the passion of the act, and the urge to regain power within a white space. It is in this space that Gabriel attempts to assert power and to diminish the oppression that he

faces as a black man but in the end Gabriel becomes bitter and ashamed because his is constantly perceived as less than. Another moment within the narrative in which cleanliness and filth collide within the domestic sphere is in the description of the Grimes family kitchen. Baldwin explains, ““ The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean” (14). Kitchens provide a dichotomizing aspect of the home. They are a place where food is prepared but also a place of intense violence as seen through Gabriel's outbursts and they are a place which will never be clean. The pervasive infiltration of sex, violence, and dirt creates an unwelcoming atmosphere within the home and it is this precise atmosphere that John attempts to escape.

John's home also provides a place of intense shame of his physical body. On the morning of John's birthday he feels ashamed for masturbating in his bed, especially with the thought of his family in the house and his brother in the room with him. John sees a yellow stain on his ceiling and it morphs into the shape of a woman. This stain shows the traction of the shame that John's sexuality brings out in him. On the seventh day the Grimes family eat in the kitchen and Baldwin writes that, “ The pale-end of winter sunlight had filled the room and yellowed all their faces” (14). The light, which is usually a sign of holiness, becomes an indicator of shame and evil and it overcasts the Grimes family. The yellow light and the yellow stain demonstrate the inescapability of John and his family's insecurity. They have no power over how the sun shines and therefore they have no power over the shame placed upon them by outside forces or even the forces of their very lineage.

In a pivotal moment in the text, John looks out over the skyline of New York City and marvels at the power he desires in his life. It is John's repression at home, due to his inability to please his father and his overwhelming shame that causes him to want to destroy the city before him. In this moment on the mountain John, "felt like a giant who might crumble this city with his anger; he felt like a tyrant who might crush this city beneath his heel; he felt like a long awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cries, Hosanna!" (32). This significant distinction between wanting power and wanting to destroy shows that within the secular space John feels just as hopeless as he does at home. In John's domestic world his father represses his very existence and in the secular world racism and gender stereotypes restrict John completely. For John, there is no escape except when he feels an exultant liberation within the confines of the church.

Throughout the narrative John struggles with his budding sexuality and it is through this struggle that John's desire for Elisha comes to the surface but only in the boundaries of the church. The overtly sexual language used to describe John and Elisha's playful fight in the church demonstrates the clash of sexuality and religion in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and this collision demonstrates John's struggle to come to terms with his faults and expectations of manhood. Baldwin comments, "He saw the veins rise on Elisha's forehead and in his neck; his breathe became jagged and harsh... and John, watching these manifestations of his power, was filled with wild delight" (48). This moment is laden with sexual tension but this fight also functions as a way for John to challenge his own masculinity. John measures

himself up to Elisha in order to judge his own sense of power because he wants to be accepted by Gabriel, his father. John attempts to fight Elisha directly but fails and therefore he does the only other thing that he can do. John has a spiritual awakening to demonstrate that he is just as good as Elisha. Due to the fact that this fight takes place not only in the church but in a place that is clean, John's step towards salvation is not muddled with institutional forces from the outside and it is the only tangible way of escape as John sees it.

Despite John's anger and confusion regarding his race and expression of masculinity he is still able to find a sense of escape through a spiritual awakening. John's journey on the threshing floor is an experience that all members of the congregation go through in order to be saved. This complete disregard of the material world and the power of the visions take John into a spiritual in-between and further into a place of liberation. John recounts that, " He knew, without knowing how it happened, that he lay on the floor, in the dusty space before the alter that he and Elisha had cleaned" (195). The idea of dust in this case does not connote filth because in this moment John is being born again like Adam was born from the ground. The church is a sacred and clean space and it is the only place where John can be delivered from evil. The rebirth of John is something erotic and something that mimics an ultimate killing off of John's physical body and all of the turmoil and shame that it brings him. John sheds his pain and becomes a new man, one that is saved and will metaphysically live on forever. It's vital to note that John, through his rebirth, has killed off his old self. Like Royal, he voluntarily commits a type of suicide in order to escape the filth of the domestic and

secular world and to unite himself in a movement of saints. John is ultimately defeated as he returns to the only clean and safe space that he knows, the church.

Though Baldwin writes *Go Tell it on The Mountain* as a coming of age tale, this narrative is also a story of how overwhelming oppression can be and the ways in which people seek to escape that oppression. John feels that he has no power so he uses religion as a way to regain a sense of self and destroy the anger, shame, and disappointment that he expresses early in the text. Though John's story is significant, it is not explicitly unique to his or even Baldwin's experience. James Baldwin suggests through his text that black people, and black men specifically, seek refuge in the church and use their spiritual awakenings as a tangible system of rebirth and escape.