



Spring 2015

Struggling towards Salvation: Narrative Structure in James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain

Darren Spirk
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Spirk, Darren, "Struggling towards Salvation: Narrative Structure in James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain" (2015). *Student Publications*. 399.

https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/399

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/399

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Struggling towards Salvation: Narrative Structure in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Abstract

This paper argues that John Grimes, the protagonist of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, represents the struggle inherent in the path towards salvation and holds the potential ability to break down the binaries that create this struggle. Of particular interest is a similarity in the narrative framing of John's story with Jesus Christ's, as told in the four Gospels. The significance of both their symbolic power is dependent on a multitude of narrative viewpoints, in John's case the tragic pasts offered of his aunt, father and mother in the novel's medial section. Their stories inform the identity crisis the black church creates for John in the first section yet ties him to this church for his ultimate conversion on the threshing floor at the novel's close. Baldwin critiques the conversion experience as largely relational to the power structure of the black church, but he also highlights the cultural and historical necessity of converting through the unfortunate fates of those who refuse the experience. John's ultimate significance as a Christ-like figure of salvation maintains an ambivalent relationship to the black church while offering love as an avenue for bridging the binaries facing him and serving greater collective purpose for the plight of the oppressed.

Keywords

African-American Literature, James Baldwin, Christianity

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, North America | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority | Religion

Comments

This paper was written for Professor McKinley Melton's senior seminar, *ENG 403: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature: The Bible & African American Literature*, Spring 2015.

Darren Spirk
English 403
05/02/15

Struggling towards Salvation:
Narrative structure in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

The final section of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* finds its protagonist John Grimes on the threshing-floor of his small Harlem church, giving into the power of God and solidifying the future clergyman's role predicted for him by the surrounding community. In one sense, the novel presents the reader with clear continuity in its structure: the first section outlines John's personal battle with sin and his ambivalent relationship with God, and his actions in this final section attempt to remedy such issues by moving himself towards a life of Christian morality. Yet Baldwin in no way seeks to bring his reader to a sense of resolution by the final page, instead presenting his novel's end more as a beginning for the young protagonist. John's final words—"I'm ready...I'm coming. I'm on my way" (Baldwin 226)—mark a sense of what *will* come, not what has.

Scholars offer rather different viewpoints regarding the ultimate stakes for John at the novel's close. Shirley S. Allen universalizes John's experience as one of psychological identity formation, claiming that "the conversion which frees John from sin is also his psychological initiation into maturity, which frees him from the umbilical cord, and racial hatred" (186). Dolan Hubbard argues for John's affirmative relationship with Christianity, outlining how "Baldwin uses John Grimes as a symbol to illustrate how a community reconstitutes its fractured soul by using Christianity as a mode of coming to terms with its place in the universe" (113). Miriam Sivan connects John specifically to the African American experience, offering that "John Grimes's journey...mirrors this movement from imprisonment to freedom, from a vague sense of

self to a greater consciousness not only of who he is and might be but also of a readiness to start out on the journey to know more” (30). While these readings present clear ways for the reader to understand John Grimes in relation to his race, his community and his formation of an identity, the largely affirmative stance that each scholar assumes presents John’s struggle as behind him rather than before him. I instead aim to present John as a collective figure for the struggle towards salvation, emphasizing the work that is still to be done by the novel’s close. In doing so, it is useful to think of John’s relation to the ultimate figure of salvation in the Christian faith, Jesus Christ.

By offering John Grimes as a potential Christ figure, I seek to draw parallels less from the particulars of their experiences and more from broad similarities in the framing of their stories. The argument that John can work as a Christ-like figure is evident in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as even the title itself—an allusion to a Christmas Carol—pays ode to the birth of Christ. More explicitly within the text, John’s conversion is immediately preceded by Elizabeth remembering her experience birthing him (Baldwin 191). Such birth imagery offers that John’s experience is meant to be read as the start of a new life for John and his community, much like the birth of Christ marks the start of a new age for mankind. What I believe is particularly relevant about the parallels between John and Christ, however, is the similar structure of their stories. Christ’s story is told through the Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; not until we have put together all four of these perspectives can we arrive at his full story. Nor can John Grimes’ story be fully understood without the vital perspectives offered by Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth in “The Prayers of the Saints” that shape his identity formation.

Yet such parallels are not to discount the clear differences in the framing of John and Christ’s stories. The latter’s is told by the disciples in an effort to preserve Christ’s record

through memory, looking back on his accomplishments in order to solidify his status as the ultimate figure of salvation. Baldwin instead offers a family history for John that preempts the accomplishments he has yet to achieve. The symbolic significance of John Grimes is then deliberately in flux—his relation to salvation is necessarily more complicated and presumptive. The multiple perspectives that tell Christ’s story frame the multiplicative nature of Christ’s identity, offering the different layers through which we may engage with the concept of salvation. I argue that Baldwin pushes this narrative technique further, using the perspectives in “The Prayers of the Saints” chapters to similarly point to the multiplicative nature of John’s identity but instead offers different ways that we can imagine the struggle towards salvation in particular. Christ’s story marks the work that has been done and the paths that we may subsequently follow, but John’s story marks the work that is still before us and the paths that must be created. John’s ultimate significance, of which he himself is still not conscious, is his potential for breaking down the binary distinctions that have plagued those before him. John’s experience in the novel offers a reorientation of such distinctions—purity and sin, whites and blacks—that will allow him the ability to, as he himself notes, “one day win that love which he so longed for” (Baldwin 13).

My argument highlights the deliberately structured nature of Baldwin’s text. In the first section, Baldwin introduces John’s personal struggle with sin and the binary distinctions that complicate his formation of self, ultimately leading John to seek disconnection from the black church. The second section moves away from John’s conditions to outline the familial and historical roots through which he must unconsciously return to the black church in order to work towards salvation. In particular, I will examine the significance of conversion experiences in relation to the power of the black church and the similar struggles with sin and binaries that

plague John and his elders. Such facets of the text then culminate in the novel's third section, wherein John embraces the spirituality of the black church while simultaneously acknowledging the power that love has to break down the binary distinctions on which this very church is built. The text leaves John as a figure of salvation, but emphasizes the work he must do to transfer his personal salvation to more collective purpose.

John seeks salvation as early on as the novel's first section, wherein he lays in bed on the morning of his fourteenth birthday and ruminates on his sin. The structure of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is curious for laying out a clear path for John at the start, and then subsequently obscuring this path as the novel progresses. Perhaps John's most vital memory in this scene is of the white principal who enters his first-grade classroom and, rather than admonishing him for some mistake, instead offers, "You're a bright boy, John Grimes....Keep up the good work." The moment works for John as a realization that "gave him...if not a weapon at least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself" (13). John already realizes the potential to use his intelligence and his positive relationship with white America—he finds the power to construct his identity through the "alien and impersonal" nature of the principal's gaze (12)—in order to provide himself with a possible way to achieve salvation.

In the same passage, John contrasts whiteness and the secular power of intelligence with blackness and the spiritual power of the church, the latter manifesting in the figure of his father Gabriel: "He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his death bed. And this was why, though he had been born in the faith...John's heart was hardened against the Lord" (13-4). John feels perpetually oppressed by his father's presence, and Gabriel, as head deacon of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, represents the Christian faith at large

in John's rather insular understanding of the world. This connection is shown more clearly as John watches his congregation and explains "the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's fathers" (12). Baldwin juxtaposes John's distaste for the black church community's embrace of God with the young protagonist's own desire to step outside of the patriarchal order of his father.

The binary distinction that faces John between the white secularity of the school and the black spirituality of the church is complemented by a more central binary between purity and sin. Kelly Brown Douglas outlines how the black church in America continues a tradition of 'platonized' Christianity, wherein the immaterial world of the soul and man's rationality is positioned in an antagonistic relationship against the material world of the body and man's sin (351). And it is under such distinctions that John feels unable to deal with his own sin. He "struggled to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit. But there was none, for he had been raised in truth. He could not claim, as African savages might be able to claim, that no one had brought him the gospel" (Baldwin 34). John understands that the only way to be accepted into the religious community is through achieving purity of the soul and concomitantly rejecting bodily sin, an idea reified by the scene wherein Father James condemns Elisha and Ella Mae for showing the mere potential of sexual desire for one another.

For John, his sin manifests in his burgeoning homosexual desire, providing a further reiteration of both the binary distinctions with which he is faced and his own liminal position

within them. Only in the space of the secular school can John enact his sin and even begin to understand it:

In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak. (11)

Again Baldwin positions the church and John's family as prohibitors of sinfulness—in the case of Father James even offering condemnations of heteronormative behavior. Douglas argues that white oppression of black sexuality has caused this intense conservatism, which has also led the black church to be especially harsh towards queer behavior (348-9). That John sins in the school lavatory by giving in to thoughts of homosexual desire implies that John can only work towards understanding his queer identity through secular, not spiritual, means.

Additionally for John, whiteness becomes a marker of a less antagonistic relationship with sin, most notably seen in his trip to the movies. John is fascinated by the immoral white woman at the film's center, claiming "It was unimaginable that she would ever bend her knees and come crawling along a dusty floor to anybody's altar, weeping for forgiveness" (Baldwin 33). John is shocked by the woman's liberality and complete lack of remorse, both of which would merit serious condemnation from his church. More importantly, though, the text notes that "John could not have found in his heart had he dared to search it, any wish for her redemption" (33). John appreciates both the secular means of ascension provided by the school and the lack of conservatism and redemption possible for the white race. At the beginning of *Go Tell It on the*

Mountain, Baldwin deliberately depicts John Grimes as seeking disconnection from blackness and spirituality.

Yet by the novel's third section, whiteness and the space of the school make no explicit appearances, and John finds himself embracing the religion that he outright despises at the text's start. For the reader, an explanation for such incongruity appears in the medial "Prayers of the Saints" chapters. Shirley S. Allen—in noting that the threshing-floor connects Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth with John—offers that "the prayers of the saints, then, function as prototypes for John's ordeal...setting both the religious and psychological conditions for salvation. When John's turn comes, the reader is fully aware of the dangers and the seriousness of the test" (179). Allen sets up many of the elements that I aim to examine when dealing with the various conversion experiences in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but her argument emphasizes John's separation from his three predecessors while I instead focus on John as deeply rooted to them. Through these chapters, the reader connects John back to blackness and spirituality in preparation for his own, largely unconscious, choice to do so on the threshing-floor. Such connections are made through the conversion and non-conversion experiences in the "Prayers of the Saints," which position characters in relation to the power structures inherent in the black church and their respective struggles with sin. In this section of the novel, then, the reader understands that John's identity is informed by a collective force that shapes his specific conditions.

In "The Prayers of the Saints," all three central figures give into their initial resistance to Christianity in the hopes of achieving salvation, but the reasons for which they do so vary greatly. The second section of the novel begins with Florence finally kneeling down at the altar of the Temple of the Fire Baptized after a lifelong resistance towards giving into God in such a

spectacular manner. “Florence’s Prayer,” which delves into her troubled past, is bookended by her own actions of giving into the Lord in the present day. She seems set for failure at the start, as “neither love nor humility brought her to the altar, but only fear” (61). Florence has been fearing the oncoming grip of death and her indeterminate future thereafter, a fear that finds its source in the “many voices” that “came to her bedside to curse her.” The voices of her mother, Gabriel, Deborah and Frank come to her, and Florence notes that “she would have begged forgiveness, had they come with ears to hear” (62). Instead she finds that in order to alleviate the woes that arise from this collective force, her only option is the way of God. Yet, at the end of her chapter, Florence is still troubled by religion, with Baldwin describing her as “divided between a terrible longing to surrender and a desire to call God into account” (86). The multitude of designations that define and oppress her—the daughter who cannot be educated, the wife whose husband does not allow her to control their money, the black woman whose miracle skin care will never alter her complexion—cause Florence to fall between the binary of one who either fully accepts or fully rejects God.

Gabriel’s conversion experience is in many ways antithetical to Florence’s. While Florence gives into the Lord late in her life, and with much ambivalence, Gabriel fully embraces the holy path in life at a relatively young age. That these experiences are distinct from one another is also supported by the role of Gabriel and Florence’s mother, Rachel. When Florence throws herself down on the threshing-floor, she simultaneously hears Rachel’s voice urging her on and feels the hands of death on her shoulder, and this culminates in the voice of her mother then telling her, “God’s got your number, knows where you live, death’s got a warrant out for you” (86). Although the scene is set up to position the mother as affirmative, her quick

association with the hands of death complicates this, and her final sentiment seeks to bring Florence to a place of fear and not salvation.

Gabriel's conversion experience is instead positively guided by the voice of his mother: "When he heard [her] singing, which filled all the silent air, which swelled until it filled all the waiting earth, the heart within him broke, and yet began to rise, lifted of its burden; and his throat unlocked; and his tears came down as though the listening skies had opened....When at last he lifted up his eyes he saw a new Heaven and a new earth" (93). There is a clear connection between Gabriel hearing his mother's voice and him going through the steps that bring him to salvation, her presence initiating his move from sinfulness to purity. The mother's role in these two moments is therefore not unlike her role elsewhere in the novel, in that she affirms Gabriel because of his maleness and suppresses Florence because of her femaleness.

Indeed, Gabriel's conversion experience provides continual reminders of the privilege he holds over other characters. Most prominently, his conversion does not take place within the structure of the church, and Gabriel thereby does not have to admit his sin in front of his community. Gabriel instead converts alone, out in nature on one of his many walks home from a sexual encounter. The natural imagery that Baldwin uses in this scene, notably the rejoicing of various animals that closes the scene, further highlights, and perhaps ironizes, the natural or biological preeminence that he holds in life. That Gabriel is able to convert outside the space of the church also points to the privilege the black church offers for men, as he does not need the testimony of others to prove the validity of his experience. Finally, Baldwin keenly depicts Gabriel as the only character who is able to speak his own conversion into being. His conversion passage is set off by his own words, and he continually interjects to offer sentiments like, "Then I praised God, Who had brought me out of Egypt and set my feet on solid rock" (93). Every

other character must have their experiences described for them, but Gabriel dubiously holds the power to define himself. In so doing, he has no difficulty placing himself on one side of the binary between purity and sin, despite how his questionable actions throughout the novel contradict this very placement.

If Florence's conversion is set against Gabriel's, and by association the power that Gabriel holds, Elizabeth's explicitly places her at the mercy of his power. Elizabeth's conversion is the quickest and least spectacular that we find in the novel, in part due to her willing acquiescence at the time. Though the reader learns that Gabriel constantly suspects Elizabeth never truly repented her illicit relationship with Richard that produced John, her conversion experience does not carry the same sense of emotion and anguish as Gabriel and Florence's. The moment is set off by Gabriel asking Elizabeth, "Sister...don't you reckon you ought to give your heart to the Lord," and the rest of the conversation consists of Gabriel assuring her that if she falls down at the altar, he will marry her and take in John as his own (189-90). Elizabeth, believing that Gabriel will keep his word, rises when the pastor makes his altar call and then leaves the church with Gabriel, weeping "in her great joy that the hand of God had changed her life, had lifted her up and set her on the solid rock, alone" (191). Elizabeth sees that becoming a member of the black church, and principally becoming the wife of a black preacher, will save her and John, though the reader understands the questionable conditions under which Gabriel 'saves' Elizabeth and her son. Elizabeth outwardly chooses one side of the binary between purity and sin for the protection that it offers, not as a sign of her own desires.

When looking at the experiences of Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth, conversions in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reflect the characters' relation to the power structures around them more so than they bring them to a personal sense of salvation. Florence distances herself from the

church because of the inequality of power that it breeds, yet her fall at the altar highlights the indeterminate fate that results from setting oneself against such power. Gabriel's ability to convert places him in the position to fully harness the power of the church, but his inability to confront his own sin makes him an undesired figure of the cloth. Elizabeth gives into the power of the church in order to save herself and her son, but Gabriel's hypocrisy offers her little, and she remains personally unrepentant of her time with Richard. In the space of Baldwin's novel, conversions are experiences that should be scrutinized and thought of in relation to the power the black church has to oppress and empower, and in each "Prayer" chapter the focus is on Gabriel's power in particular.

When scholars discuss the impact of conversion experiences in "The Prayers of the Saints," however, they mainly focus on the protagonists of each chapter and regret to acknowledge characters in this section of the novel who explicitly choose *not* to convert. I offer that the experience of Esther in particular complicates the way we view conversions in the novel, as her outright refusal to convert dictates a harsher fate than for those who do convert. Rather than undermine the critical viewpoint that Baldwin presents to the reader regarding conversion, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* uses the non-conversion experience to highlight the isolation and probable demise that results from cutting oneself off from the black church community, even if one does so with good reason.

Again, Esther's conversion experience is set in relation to Gabriel's power, as he attempts to convince her to fall down at the altar much like he does later to Elizabeth. Gabriel convinces Esther to come to his service, but despite his powerful call for sinners to come and repent before the eye of God, Esther shows no desire to do so: "But she did not rise, only looked at him and looked about her with a bright, pleased interest, as though she were at a theater and were waiting

to see what improbable delights would be next offered her” (118). The levity with which Esther receives his sermon is jarring in a novel so filled with religious guilt and scorn, and her later conversations with Gabriel position her as a powerful adversary to the black church’s fundamentalism. Gabriel is astounded by her flippant attitude regarding the church, but Esther offers that “that spirit [of the Lord] ain’t got to work in everybody the same, seems to me” (119). That Esther does not need traditional religion is also heightened by her claim that “I just don’t feel it *here*,” placing Gabriel’s hand on her breast (122). Here Baldwin connects Esther’s rejection of traditional religion with her unabashed sexuality, a moment that speaks compellingly to the novel’s questions regarding the authenticity of religion while also prefiguring her and Gabriel’s subsequent sexual encounter.

Esther’s lack of remorse positions her much like the white woman from the film John sees in the first section, although Esther’s role is remarkably more complicated given her ability to confront and criticize Gabriel, a prominent figure of the church. Esther’s fate, however, proves no different than the woman’s in the film. Despite the idea that Esther’s criticism should hold a lot of weight for the reader, her choice to escape Gabriel’s hypocrisy by moving to Chicago with their unborn child leads to her early death and concomitant removal from the novel. Her fate combined with that of other non-religious figures in “The Prayers of the Saints”—Florence’s husband Frank dies while abroad in France, and John’s natural father Richard commits suicide after his arrest—urges the reader to reconsider the role of the conversion experience. Though no character has a wholly positive, wholly authentic relationship with Christianity in the novel, those who convert are the ones who survive, no matter how intensely they struggle.

As we turn to John’s conversion in the novel’s third section, the reader can see his decision as unconsciously informed by these past experiences. By the end of the first section,

John is torn between his preference for white secularity, a space that will allow him intellectual development and a less antagonist relationship with his homosexual desire, and his reticence about black spirituality, a space that oppresses his thoughts and fills him with guilt. While “The Prayers of the Saints” in one sense reifies John’s concerns, giving the reader an increasingly critical lens through which to view the repressive power of the black church, the section also highlights the *necessity* of such power given the historical and cultural context. For instance, were it not for Gabriel and the black church, Elizabeth undoubtedly would have struggled to provide for herself and John. Conversely, when Esther attempts to fully disconnect from the church and provide for herself and Royal on her own, she does not have the means to do so and Royal is sent back to the community from which she escapes.

The power of the community in black culture finds its roots in West African cosmology and remains in place today. Miriam Sivan, in speaking of the communal bond to the black church that was sometimes severed when blacks migrated north, notes that “many who forfeited this bond fell into an often destructive vacuum fomented by the pathology of an unmitigated racism and the treacherous social and economic conditions that were its most obvious symptoms” (32). In the context of Baldwin’s novel, this sentiment rings true with Richard, who experiences peril at the hands of white racism, as well as Esther, whose unsuitable social and economic conditions in Chicago lead to her demise. John’s task at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is then to connect himself back to this community while still moving himself forward to achieve a true sense of salvation. Even if only at the unconscious level, John’s struggles are informed by the struggles of those who came before him, and in order to be “a Great Leader of His People” as those around him suggest (Baldwin 12), John cannot merely address his own concerns from a

personal space but must address the collective forces that affect his individual identity, thereby solidifying his status as a Christ-like figure of the struggle towards salvation.

At the end of “Gabriel’s Prayer,” the reader is transported from Gabriel’s past back to the present-day situation in the Temple of the Fire Baptized. In a religious fervor, Elisha has fallen on the ground, and all present in the church kneel down to surround him. John rises as Elisha begins to speak in tongues, and he and Gabriel meet each other’s gaze:

Gabriel had never seen such a look on John’s face before; Satan, at that moment, stared out of John’s eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet John’s staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother’s eyes when she beat him, of Florence’s eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah’s eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther’s eyes and Royal’s eyes, and Elizabeth’s eyes tonight before Roy cursed him, and of Roy’s eyes when Roy said: ‘You black bastard’” (150).

John assumes the perspective of all the figures in Gabriel’s life who plague his mind, in large part characters who Gabriel himself has oppressed. And it is only from taking on such perspectives that John is able to instill fear in Gabriel, who “stared in wrath and horror at Elizabeth’s presumptuous bastard boy, grown suddenly so old in evil” (150). That Gabriel successfully commands John to kneel back down by the end of the passage, not to mention that he misconstrues John’s assumption of power as necessarily evil, marks the power Gabriel still holds. John’s embrace of such collective woes, however, remains a vital tool for fighting the patriarchal power of the black church, even if he must still do considerable work to harness that tool effectively.

That John's struggle is similar to those depicted in "The Prayers of the Saints" is fairly evident in the text. The plight of Florence in particular shares several similarities with John's. As the eldest child who sees a younger sibling gain the attention of one's parent, Florence feels an oppression much like John's. She too has a contentious relationship with religion: her mother asks Florence and Gabriel to pray, "but in her heart Florence never prayed. She hoped that Gabriel would break his neck. She wanted the evil against which her mother prayed to overtake him one day" (Baldwin 68). This passage evokes John's sentiment that one day he wishes to curse Gabriel on his death bed, showing that both he and Florence use Gabriel's undeserved religious privilege to disconnect themselves from their own sense of spirituality.

Yet there are still distinctions to be made in the specifics of John and Florence's conditions. While the former cherishes the secular education he receives, the latter is denied the education that she desires because of Gabriel, who in turn learns little from the schooling that he receives (67). That Florence's gender differentiates her situation from John's points to what Vivian May terms Baldwin's use of a multiplicative sense of identity, wherein the various factors of one's self are simultaneous and relational, not merely hierarchal (104-5). Baldwin does not merely deal with Florence and John in terms of their blackness, instead revealing the different factors of gender and sexuality that are equally important to their identities. Furthermore, May notes that even with such distinctions, connections between characters exist because "Baldwin's many-layered rendering of multivalent identities requires a certain humility and a belief that to identify with someone's position does not require sameness" (105). For instance, though John receives education and Florence does not, their struggles are tied together by the similarly antagonistic role that Gabriel plays for both of them. Gabriel does not succeed in hindering

John's education as he does with Florence, but he condemns John's desire for schooling because of its proximity to whiteness and secularity.

Similarly, though Florence is heterosexual and John is not, they both struggle with the way that their sexual desires subordinate them to others. John's homosexual desire places him in a position of deviance, while Florence despises how her husband Frank can use her sexuality against her to maintain the power in their relationship: "And while he spoke, his hand was on her breast, and his moving lips brushed her neck. And this caused such a war in her as could scarcely be endured. She felt that everything in existence between them was part of a mighty plan for her humiliation" (82). Even within the confines of a heterosexual marriage, Florence, in a similar manner to John in the first section, feels that her body betrays her. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* therefore achieves through the shared struggles of its characters a delicate balance between respecting both the specificity of John's identity, which the reader learns in the first section, and the collective power—found in "The Prayers of the Saints"—that bears implications on that identity.

If Florence's past provides the most striking similarities to John's struggles at the start of *Go Tell It*, Elizabeth's provides the most powerful understanding of why John may be able to rise above such struggles. That their two chapters bookend Gabriel's further reiterates the patriarchal power that John must confront in order to potentially move from the struggle shared with Florence to the salvation potentially offered by Elizabeth. Despite John's ignorance regarding the contents of "The Prayers of the Saints," he is notably curious about his mother's elusive past in the beginning of the novel. In particular, John remembers a photograph of his mother that hints at an entirely different woman:

Her face became the face that he gave her in his dreams, the face that had been hers in a photograph he had seen once, long ago, a photograph taken before he was born. This face was young and proud, uplifted, with a smile that made the wide mouth beautiful and glowed in the enormous eyes. It was the face of a girl who knew that no evil could undo her, and who could laugh, surely, as his mother did not laugh now. Between the two faces there stretched a darkness and a mystery that John feared, and that sometimes caused him to hate her. (15)

John sees in this image of his mother a happiness that never reveals itself to him, that will never reveal itself inside the oppressive space of Gabriel's home. That John does not understand how this Elizabeth changed into the one he knows—the “darkness” and “mystery” that stretched between these two different versions—makes his mother an incomplete presence in his life. The intermittent feelings of hatred that accompany such unknowing further proves the significance of Elizabeth's background to John's understanding of his own identity. Elizabeth too shows awareness of its significance when she gives John money for his birthday: “she was trying to help him because she knew he was in trouble. And this trouble was also her own, which she would never tell to John” (26). “Elizabeth's Prayer,” however, reveals her trouble to the reader even as John remains in the dark.

“Elizabeth's Prayer” is illuminating for our understanding of John's experience on the threshing-floor due to its constructive relationship with sin and its introduction of love as a force more powerful than religion. The former emerges in the beginning of the chapter through Elizabeth's relationship with her father. Elizabeth has an intensely loving relationship with her father, but she is taken away from him by her aunt because he owns a brothel. Elizabeth's estimation of her father remains unchanged in the face of his undeniable sinfulness: “still in her

heart she could not accuse him. Perhaps his life had been wicked, but he had been very good to her. His life had certainly cost him enough in pain to make the world's judgement a thing of no account. *They* had not known him as she had known him; *they* did not care as she had cared!" (156). For Elizabeth, the goodness shown to her supersedes the supposed wickedness he displayed elsewhere in life. She thinks that judgment should be dependent on personal circumstances rather than stringent rules that apply to everyone, highlighting the pain that he has experienced and rebuking the disinterested position of those who judge in favor of her own position of love.

Love's power over religious morals becomes more strongly emphasized in Elizabeth's relationship with Richard. Elizabeth could not "deny that, so long as he was there, the rejoicing of Heaven could have meant nothing to her—that, being forced to choose between Richard and God, she could only, even with weeping, have turned away from God" (158). The love that Elizabeth experiences with Richard takes preeminence over other aspects of her life, and so Gabriel is actually correct to suggest that she never truly repented, as "Not even tonight, in the heart's nearly impenetrable secret place, where the truth is hidden and where only the truth can live, could she wish that she had not known him" (158). That the truth resides in the heart reiterates love's dominance over religion as a guiding force, although the unfortunate consequence for Elizabeth is that she is forced to make a choice in the first place—note that she does not turn away from God with scorn but "weeping." Elizabeth claims that, because she chooses Richard over God, "God had taken him from her. It was for all that she was paying now, and it was this pride, hatred, bitterness, lust—this folly, this corruption—of which her son was heir" (158). In a society grounded in the binary distinction between sinners and saints,

Elizabeth's intense love for Richard never allows her to be placed fully on the side of the saint, and her struggle with binaries then becomes John's struggle.

That there are collective powers informing John's experience on the threshing-floor is strongly emphasized by Miriam Sivan, specifically in his ability to tap into the West African roots of the African American religious experience. While Sivan claims that a figure like Gabriel "assumes that the Bible is his story, the *only* story for him, rejecting Africa in favor of church doctrine" (32), John instead positively connects with the African tradition in order to construct his identity. Sivan thus figures him as a representative of the African American experience in general. Her most significant textual evidence comes in her reading of John's dream-like experience on the threshing-floor wherein he imagines himself in a grave: "Here are the capture in Africa, the Middle Passage over the Atlantic Ocean, the subhuman conditions on large plantations and small farms, the attempt through racism and cultural obliteration to commit what Patricia J. Williams has called 'spirit murder'" (37). Sivan tends to read John's experience as largely affirmative, arguing that John's ability to connect to his historical ancestors allows him the power to combat his father and a racist America.

I instead offer that John's ability to rise above his struggles cannot be so easily determined. While Sivan in no way downplays the difficulty facing John by the end of the novel, her emphasis on West African roots grounds itself more outside the bounds of the texts rather than within the confines of the novel's previous sections. My aim is to read John's scene on the threshing-floor through his shared struggles with characters from "The Prayers of the Saints," principally focusing on the struggle with binary distinctions relating to the patriarchal power of the black church. I ultimately claim that, as is expected with Baldwin, he introduces love as the greatest tool to breaking down said binary distinctions. That such an argument does not come to

the surface as strongly as it does in Baldwin's other works stems from John's consistent ignorance regarding his family's past, but *Go Tell It* is perhaps most significant for offering *why* this ignorance matters: in order for John to be a great leader, he must find a way to transfer the knowledge of his personal struggle towards salvation to others in order to combat the larger systemic issues facing the oppressed.

To return to the scene wherein John envisions himself in a grave, it should be noted that before being introduced to the woes of the slave trade, John is also confronted with the woes of his family: "This sound had filled John's life, so it now seemed, from the moment he had first drawn breath....It was in his father's anger, and in his mother's calm insistence, and in the vehement mockery of his aunt" (203). Before connecting John to his larger cultural history, Baldwin connects him to the characters whose past lives have just been offered to the reader. John's life is filled with the emotions of these other characters, and yet he is still unaware of the source of their emotions. While such unknowing remains in place by the novel's end, more importantly the text anticipates John's arduous path towards knowledge: "Yes, he had heard it all his life, but it was only now that his ears were opened to this sound that came from darkness...that yet bore such sure witness to the glory of the light. And now in his moaning, and so far from any help, he heard it in himself—it rose from his bleeding, his cracked-open heart" (203). John's heart is the tool through which he will gain such knowledge—as in "Elizabeth's Prayer" it is the source of truth— and the starting point from which this collective sound emerges. Also note that Esther places Gabriel's hand on her breast to explain why she separates herself from the church, and that John cannot condemn the white woman from the film he watches because of his heart. In each previous instance in the book, love overcomes religion.

On the threshing-floor, however, John discovers the power of love in the midst of a seminal religious experience, posing the way of the heart and the way of God not as mutually exclusive paths but as having the potential to merge. Douglas Field sees less potential for such merging, as his analysis of love in the works of Baldwin highlights “salvation and redemption, not through God, but through a love that is founded on the sharing of pain. In contrast to characters such as John Grimes who agonise on the threshing floor at the mercy of an Old Testament God who might save or damn him, Baldwin offers salvation through support and love of another” (450). I instead claim that John’s experience is unconsciously founded on his shared pain with the characters from “The Prayers of the Saints,” and Baldwin offers love as the force to bring John into a place of knowing and eventually define himself outside of the sinner/saint binary through which he must begin his journey.

Therefore, while John’s conversion is dependent on binary distinctions, Baldwin simultaneously complicates such dependence and anticipates a more inclusive future for John. In particular, Baldwin complicates what can be considered the culminating moment of John’s conversion: “For his drifting soul was anchored in the love of God; in the rock that endured forever. The light and darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the lift and vision of John’s soul” (207). While such a moment causes Sivan to rightly affirm that “John...*does* believe that he has been saved by Jesus” (34), it also presents the reader with a marriage of disparate concepts. Darkness is not replaced by light, but they “kiss” each other. The symbolic significance of this moment is far-reaching—from the blending of sin and purity to love between blacks and whites—but more significantly the passage points to an interactive relationship between opposites, much as May outlines Baldwin’s use of “an interactive ‘multiplicative’ conceptualization of identity” (104). Most vitally for my reading of the novel,

Baldwin points in this moment to the sin that John must still confront even while assuming a role of purity. He cannot replace one with the other, but there will be necessary interaction between both.

The greatest marker of such complicated interaction between sin and purity in John's conversion is the dualistic presence that Elisha carries in the novel. Elisha guides John through his experience—Dolan Hubbard terms him the “mediator” who replaces the necessarily unqualified Gabriel (106)—but he also serves as a constant reminder of John's homosexual desire. While walking home after his conversion, John asks Elisha if he was the one “who prayed me through,” and Elisha responds that “yes, I was right over you the whole time. Look like the Lord had put you like a burden on my soul” (221). Elisha's status as perhaps the holiest figure in the novel poses him as the ideal guide for John's conversion, but John's clear desire for him proves that a wholly pure path in life is not, and should not, be in John's future. Elisha also works as a guiding force for John in the wrestling scene that takes place earlier in the night, a moment that Baldwin imbues with highly sexual language. John's interaction with Elisha offers him considerable strength, as “Usually such a battle was soon over, since Elisha was so much bigger and stronger...but tonight John was filled with a determination not to be conquered, or at least to make the conquest dear” (48). John realizes, even if unconsciously, that he can find power despite his sinfulness, that he has the ability to rise up in the world even though he will inevitably face difficulties. The journey before John will necessarily include the ambiguous, the interaction between opposites that disrupts the binary distinctions grounding his community, but he must assume whatever power he can to “one day win that love which he so longed for” (Baldwin 13).

John Grimes works as a Christ figure in Baldwin's novels in so far as his story is dependent on a multiplicity of viewpoints, and that his struggle towards salvation is imbued with and informed by collective powers that seek to bridge the individual and the community. As Christ's struggle on the cross ties him to the sins of his followers, John's struggle on the threshing-floor ties him to the sins of his predecessors. That the novel focuses so heavily on John's experience as marking a beginning proves that he, like Christ, will go on to become a great leader. Yet Christ's status as a source of knowledge makes his greatest challenge as a leader to impart this knowledge to mankind. John's status of unknowing, then, makes his leadership necessarily more vulnerable, and the work that he must do to bring others to salvation necessarily more involved. The differences between the two figures is reiterated by Christ's accomplishments being behind him by the conclusion of his story, and John's conversely being before him. *Go Tell It on the Mountain's* greatest concern, therefore, is the process through which we accomplish our goals, not the act of accomplishing itself.

It is fitting that when John realizes the work that is left to be done after his conversion—that his embrace of God is only the beginning and not the end—Baldwin once again brings in love: “Yet, as he moved among them...something began to knock in that listening, astonished, newborn, and fragile heart of his; something recalling the terrors of the night, which were not finished, his heart seemed to say; which, in this company, were now to begin” (209). His heart tells him that he has yet to come to a place of knowing regarding the struggles of his community, specifically his loved ones, in order to fully understand his own salvation and transfer such knowledge to others. Baldwin reiterates John's inability to transfer his experience when he faces his mother: “He wanted to comfort her, but the night had given him no language, no second sight, no power to see into the heart of any other” (210). Therefore, while Sivan is correct to

argue that John “will use language to become a witness to the collective and individual experience of African Americans” (38), she neglects to acknowledge the difficulty before him to *find* the language. If attempting to break down binary distinctions, John must confront the ambiguous aspects of identity for which we may not yet have the words and for which there may not be spaces in the church.

Go Tell It on the Mountain perfectly holds the liminal position towards Christianity that is shared by Baldwin himself. As Barbara K. Olsen notes, the ending of the novel “illustrate[s] the problem that the church’s idiom posed for Baldwin’s attempt to denounce the black church of his past. The sicknesses he bewails find their diagnoses and their cures within the Christian tradition itself. Baldwin in effect, then, has portrayed Christianity as self-corrective. It is flawed in practice but not in essence” (300). The structure of Baldwin’s novel clearly illustrates this self-corrective phenomenon: the oppressive nature of the church causes John to seek disconnection in the first section, but the power that the church holds is necessary for John to start his journey towards salvation at the novel’s close. Again, however, it is important to remember that John is at the beginning of his journey. His status as a Christ figure is not necessarily meant to tie him to Christianity, but to connect him to the concept of salvation and pose him as a bridge to his community.

Baldwin is rather firm to assert that he sees no problem in distancing oneself from religion under oppressive conditions, noting that “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him” (“Down at the Cross” 352). Though John Grimes turns to God at the novel’s end, this does not necessitate a long-lasting life of religious devotion. Nor, however, does the text need to downplay the role religion plays in moving John forward. The language that John

needs to speak his own salvation into being, and help others speak theirs, will depend on the church in so far as the church aids in this effort. If the church itself proves too dependent on the binary distinctions that cannot define John and those in his community, he may have to break away from Christianity. This does not necessitate that he has to break away from his status as a Christ figure, however. John can seek salvation for himself and others outside of the bounds of the church, and even though the power of love and the power of religion do not have to be pitted against one another, we must remember that it is love, not God, that he seeks to “win” at the novel’s start.

Bibliography

- Allen, Shirley S. "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*." *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1988. 166-188. Print.
- Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Random House, 1953. Print.
- . "Down at the Cross." *The Price of the Ticket*. New York: St. Martin's, 1985. Print.
- Douglas, Kelly Brown. "The Black Church and the Politics of Sexuality." *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*. Eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins. New York: Palgrave, 2004. 347-62.
- Field, Douglas. "Pentecostalism and All That Jazz: Tracing James Baldwin's Religion." *Literature and Theology* 22.4 (2008): 436-457. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*. Web. 22 Mar. 2015.
- Hubbard, Dolan. "The Sermon as Cultural History: *Go Tell It on the Mountain*." *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1994. 94-122.
- May, Vivian M. "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain*." *New Essays on Go Tell It on the Mountain*. 97-126. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 22 Mar. 2015.

Olson, Barbara K. "'Come-to-Jesus Stuff' in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*." *African American Review* 1997: 295. JSTOR Journals. Web. 7 May

2015.

O'Neale, Sondra A. "Fathers, Gods, and Religion: Perceptions of Christianity and Ethnic Faith in James Baldwin." *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V.

Burt. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1988. 125-43. Print.

Sivan, Miriam. "Out of and Back to Africa: James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain*."

Christianity and Literature 51.1 (2001): 29-41. *ATLA Religion Database with*

ATLASerials. Web. 22 Mar. 2015.

Standley, Fred L. "*Go Tell It on the Mountain*: Religion as the Indirect Method of Indictment."

Critical Essays on James Baldwin. Eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt.

Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1988. 188-194. Print.