Go Tell It on the Mountain Study Guide

Go Tell It on the Mountain by James Baldwin

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Introduction

James Baldwin was one of the most versatile and influential artists of the post-World War II generation, creating memorable short stories, novels, plays, essays and children's books. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was his first published novel, and many critics feel that it is has stood as his best. It is a traditional bildungsroman, a novel tracing the psychological and spiritual development of its central character, John Grimes.

In the first chapter, John's family life, ruled by anger, poverty and guilt, is explored, leading to the fifth chapter, when, after night's religious service, John is accepted into his church's community because he has undergone a seizure-like conversion, writhing on the floor and speaking in foreign tongues. The middle chapters give the background stories of his aunt, his father, and his mother, who migrated to New York from the South and endured various difficulties that are reflected in John's life.

There is a strong autobiographical aspect to the novel, as many of the details in John's life mirror those in Baldwin's life, including his impoverished upbringing in Harlem, his angry vitriolic father, his fascination with an older male church member and his religious conversion at age fourteen. Explaining how writing ills first novel helped him come to terms with the troubled he faced growing up, Baldwin said, *"Mountain* was the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else."

Author Biography

James Baldwin was born in 1924 in Harlem, New York City. Many of the details in the life of John, the main character in *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* parallel facts in Baldwin' s own life. He was an awkward, gangly boy who suffered the abuse of his stepfather, a laborer and storefront preacher who had moved to New York from New Orleans. In contrast to the squalor and anger that he experienced at home, Baldwin was a resounding success at Public School 24 and at Frederick Douglass Junior High School, where his teachers recognized his brilliance and verbal skills. At age fourteen, he, like John, experienced a religious conversion during the service at his church, the Mount Calvary of the Pentecostal Faith Church.

After that, Baldwin became a preacher himself, and throughout high school he addressed the congregation at the local storefront church at least once each week. After high school he worked briefly in New Jersey, and then moved to Greenwich Village, the section of New York City that was a famous gathering place for artists. For five years he worked menial jobs and published short pieces in intellectual magazines such as *The Nation, The Partisan Review, The New Leader.* and *Commentary.*

With the help of famed African-American author Richard Wright, Baldwin received the Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust Award for financial help while writing his first novel. In November 1948 he sailed to France, and he never lived in America again, although he traveled here frequently on speaking engagements. He felt that America was too socially oppressive, both because he was black and because he was homosexual.

Go Tell It on the Mountain, his first novel, was published in 1953, and it gained immediate popularity among American intellectuals, establishing Baldwin as one of the keenest observers of the American racial situation. None of the other seven novels he wrote is considered to have been as successful, possibly because they sublimated storytelling to their message. From the early 1940s to his death in 1987, Baldwin was recognized as a master of the personal essay. Several of his pieces, compiled in such collections as *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction* 1948 *1985* have created a lasting effect on American social life, particularly in the area of race relations. James Baldwin died of cancer in 1987, at his home in the south of France.

Plot Summary

Part I

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* chronicles the experiences of its young narrator, John Grimes, in Harlem in 1935. The novel opens on the morning of John's fourteenth birthday and centers on the events that lead up to his spiritual conversion later that evening. The narrative also provides a history of his family, of his stepfather Gabriel, a preacher in Temple of the Fire Baptized; of his aunt Florence, Gabriel's sister; and of his mother Elizabeth. All of these stories add poignancy and context to John's efforts to come to terms with his present and his future.

On that morning as he is lying in bed. John thinks about his family's expectations that he will follow in his father's footsteps into "the holy life" but wonders if that is the path he wants for himself. His lack of devotion to the church angers his father. John remembers one Sunday morning when Father James, another preacher in the church, warns Elisha and Ella Mae. two young church members, that "disorderly walking" together could lead to them "straying from the truth." This public warning shames them and so they stop meeting. John acknowledges the same sexual stirrings in himself and masturbates while in bed. Afterwards, feeling as if he has just sinned, he decides he will not devote his life to the church. He notes that he has been singled out in school for his intelligence as early as the age of five. At that point he knew he had "power other people lacked," which helped him withstand his father's beatings and his lonely childhood. John admits his hatred for his father. Since his father was "God's minister" and he knew that he would have to first bow down to his father before he could bow down to God, his heart is also "hardened against the Lord".

Later that morning his mother gives him money for his birthday and predicts that he will turn into a fine man. She tells him she knows "there's a whole lot of things you don't understand" but that God will help him find his way: John feels overwhelming love for her. After finishing his chores, he walks to Central Park, thinking about his options: church, the "narrow way," full of poverty and hard work; and the city, with its white world of riches and sin. His father has told him that all whites are "wicked," that God will punish them, and that they will never accept him into their world because he is black. On 42nd street he watches a movie about a white "evil" woman making a "glorious" fall from grace. John decides that like her, he wants to make others suffer as he has. Yet as she faces damnation on her deathbed, he thinks of Hell and struggles to find a compromise for himself.

When John returns home, he discovers that his brother Roy has been stabbed while "looking for trouble" in a white neighborhood. John notes his father's love for his brother but not for him. After wiping the blood off Roy's face, Gabriel turns on his mother, insisting that she should have kept Roy out of harm's way. When she tries to defend herself, he slaps her. Roy then curses his father, who beats him severely with a belt. Elizabeth and Roy cling to each other after Aunt Florence pulls his father off of him. That

night, as John cleans the church before the evening service, he wonders if Elisha still thinks about sinning and meditates again about his own confusion. Later that evening, his mother, father, and aunt arrive for the service.

Part II

In this section, Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth take over the narrative one at a time as they pray. Florence starts to Sing a song her mother used to Sing. Fighting her pride, and trying to humble herself before God, she admits she has forgotten how to pray. She is filled with hatred and bitterness but also the fear of death. While struggling to pray, she sees a vision of her dead mother and Gabriel cursing her. Florence then thinks back to her family and growing up in Maryland. Desperate to escape from home where her mother focused only on her brother, Florence moved to New York City at the age of twenty-six, leaving Gabriel to care for their dying mother.

Florence remembers her husband Frank, who left her after ten years of marriage and later died in France during the war. She also remembers getting a letter from Deborah, her neighbor in Maryland who eventually moved to New York and married Gabriel. The letter reveals Deborah's suspicions that Gabriel fathered a child with another woman. Florence determines to use the letter some day to humiliate Gabriel. Returning to the present, she 'feels that she will not be saved and that everyone is laughing at her attempts

Gabriel also recalls the past, beginning with his "redemption," which occurred when he was a young man. After a night of drinking and sex, the burden of his sin became too great and he asked God to save him. He felt that this "was the beginning of his life as a man." His first major test as a preacher came at the Twenty-four Elders Revival Meeting, where he delivered a rousing and well-received sermon on sin and redemption. Recognizing Deborah's confidence in him and deciding that the two of them were among God's chosen, he married her. Yet dreams warned him of temptation. His thoughts turn back to the present as he thinks about his family. Since he is not John's birth parent, he wants Roy, his son by Elizabeth, to be the son God promised him would carry on his name in the church.

Gabriel recalls the child he fathered with Esther while he was married to Deborah. He remembers his struggle over his desire for Esther and his growing hatred for Deborah and their passionless, barren marriage. When Gabriel discovered the pregnancy, he stole money from Deborah so Esther could have their baby elsewhere in order to spare both of them the shame of an illegitimate child. After Esther died, his son Royal returned and was raised without knowing his father. The narrative then abruptly shifts to the present and to John who, while attempting to pray, hears a voice telling him "salvation is real." He believes that if he were saved, he would be his father's equal and thus could love him, but he decides that he wants to continue to hate him and hopes his father will die.

Gabriel takes back the narrative and returns to the morning Royal died. When Deborah told Gabriel the news, he cried. Deborah then confirmed her suspicions about Royal and asked Gabriel why he didn't offer Esther more support. She insisted that she would have helped him raise Royal. Gabriel's thoughts then jump into the future when, after Deborah died, he married Elizabeth and promised to help her raise her son John. Gabriel saw this act as his last chance to redeem himself in the eyes of God. Returning to the present, he gazes into John's eyes and sees Satan and the eyes of all who have rebuked him. Gabriel feels the urge to hit John, but restrains himself and orders him to kneel down before God.

Elizabeth prays for John's deliverance. When her thoughts return to the past, she remembers her three "disasters"-when her mother died, she was taken away from the father she loved and was forced to live with her aunt. At eighteen, she met "wild unhappy" Richard, John's father, a man she loved deeply. After he was falsely accused and arrested for robbery, Richard was savagely beaten by white officers. The night he was released, he slit his wrists. Elizabeth blamed herself for his suicide, speculating that the knowledge of her pregnancy might have saved him. A few years later, Florence introduced her to Gabriel who had moved to Harlem after Deborah died. Gabriel soon asked Elizabeth to marry him, promising to take care of her and her son. Trusting his word, she agreed. When the narrative returns to the present, John is writhing on the threshing floor.

Part III

John, filled with "anguish," faces his sin and lies helpless and afraid on the floor of the church. During this torment, he has a vision of Hell. As he struggles to raise himself out of the darkness, he asks God to have mercy on him and to help him. He then becomes filled with joy. As the family walks home, Florence shows Gabriel Deborah's letter and tells him he needs to look at his own sin, and then he can accept John as his son. She warns him that she will show others the letter unless Gabriel changes. John, walking next to Elisha, acknowledges him as his brother and protector. As they reach their home, John looks at his father who stares back coldly at him. The novel closes with John declaring, "I'm ready. I'm coming. I'm on my way."

Part 1: The Seventh Day

Part 1: The Seventh Day Summary

James Baldwin's Go Tell It on The Mountain is the story of a young man coming of age under very difficult circumstances and little guidance. Through the course of the story, he will go from a boy hobbled by the destructive behavior of a dysfunctional family to one that has begun to break free and make meaningful emotional ties outside the constraints of his family. Part I is told from the point of view of the main character John, a boy whose 14th birthday marks a turning point in his life.

The setting for the story is the borough of Harlem in New York City during the mid-1930s. The boy, John, has had an upbringing of the strictest sort focused mainly on the church and religious life. In contrast, the backdrop for his family's small zealous church and derelict apartment is a neighborhood filled with hard-drinking, fast-living men and women, who the people of his church hold in harsh contempt. The story begins on a Sunday morning with John's apparently pious family dutifully walking to church. As they pass through the Harlem streets, they witness the remnants of the night before: stragglers from Saturday night carousing, bleary-eyed drunken men, and women staggering home clothed in "tight bright dresses". Any doubts that John harbors about his religion are kept to himself and outwardly, he appears to be one of the "faithful". In fact, everyone in John's circle expects that he will one day become a preacher like his father.

John's life is dominated by his father, Gabriel, who is a brutal, angry man who rules his family through fear. Gabriel is a deacon at their evangelical Baptist church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized. It is because of the strict surroundings fostered by Gabriel that John is taught to see the things that go on around him in black and white, either good or evil: there is no acknowledgement of vagaries or moderation. This sentiment is summed up by a church member when she exclaims, "Ain't no such thing as a little fault or a big fault. Satan get his foot in the door, he ain't going to rest till he's in the room." As a result, the children are denied the innocent pleasures of youth such as dances, movies and frolics with their schoolmates. Because such activities are private and not dominated by the church's presence, they are considered as having the potential to lead them down the path to destruction. John's father violently enforces strict adherence to the church's preeminence in every aspect of the family's lives; any action that he interprets as straying from the path of Godliness, or as questioning his moral authority is harshly squelched with blows.

John knows that his father had had another life down South that he never discusses with the family and remains a mystery to him and his siblings. During his life in the South Gabriel had once been a pastor of his own church and had another wife, Deborah, who had died. John wonders whether his father might have been different in those days, why he came North and what had passed between his father and his former wife. Perhaps his father's past holds the key to the reasons why he is now so harsh and

angry. John senses his father's resentment of his current job as a factory worker and wonders if he longs to lead his own congregation again but cannot because of his obligations to his family.

John's mother is also something of a mystery to him. He searches her face and her words for clues as to how she really feels about his father and whether she really loves him. Although she never gives away any unmistakable sign of dissent, he senses that she is an unwilling partner in the children's violently unyielding upbringing. He knows that his father uses the same threatening anger to control her that he uses to control the children. In one instance, in bright sunlight that filters in the kitchen, she looks like a stranger to him. The light reveals the lines carved in her face by the stress of trying to protect her children from their father: a tight mouth, a forehead wrinkled by knit brows and creases at the sides of her eyes. Yet when the sun goes behind the clouds, her face resembles one he had seen in an old photograph, before she married his father: happy, sweet and confident. Because of the transformation, his mother has gone through over years of living with his father, its mysterious origins and her unwillingness to offer any explanation, John both pities and hates his mother.

John is the eldest, with the next in line being his brother Roy. The two boys have very different characters. John is shy and quiet and outwardly, he is docile and obedient, though inwardly he is angry and defiant towards his abusive father and the rules he is forced to live by. Roy on the other hand is brash and rebellious. Their differences are highlighted when, peeping through a basement window, John and Roy secretly observe two neighborhood "sinners" having sex standing up. John turns away while Roy keeps watching and even returns to the window later to watch repeatedly. Roy also brags about what he does with the girls down the street, knowing that his older brother would not dare play such sexual games. Their parents have a hard time making Roy attend Sundays at the Temple of the Fire Baptized; and his mother is unable to keep him under control at home while his father is away at work. Roy is often told that if he does not change his ways he will end up in jail, or worse Hell. In contrast, "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up" and though John feels quiet contempt for the church, the people of the congregation (the saints) believe that one day John will be "saved". Despite these differences in their character, Roy is inexplicably the father's favorite while John feels that no matter how hard he tries he does not know how to gain his father's approval.

There are two sisters, a younger one named Sarah and the baby Ruth. Sarah is mildly annoying in her rigid adherence to her father's rules and appears to be something of a sentry for him while he is away at work at the factory. Thus, Sarah's presence gives the family no real respite from the father's constant harsh surveillance. Ruth is yet a baby and we find that John's mother is pregnant again with another child. All of these children are the mother's responsibility to watch, feed and keep clean, a burden that weighs heavily on her thin shoulders.

The final member of the family is Aunt Florence, Gabriel's older sister. She is a strong, proud woman who is the only one with the courage to stand up to Gabriel. Aunt Florence does not make much of an effort to hide her disgust at the way her brother is

rearing his family and she tells him what is on her mind often. Florence has no great respect for the place the church holds in Gabriel's home; in fact, she regards it with disdain. John understands that Florence remembers his father's life before he came North and that this gives her a unique power over him that none of the rest of them share. Although she could answer many of the questions that John has about his father's past, he never dares to ask her about it.

Another important character in the book is Brother Elisha, a young man from Georgia. Elisha is the charismatic teacher of John's Sunday school class and nephew of the pastor Father James. John is enamored with Elisha; and although he does not listen to the words of Elisha's Sunday school teachings, Elisha mesmerizes John during the class. Though Elisha is only seventeen he has already become a preacher at the Church and leads the congregation and "the saints" in songs and dances where they are overcome with religious fervor shouting out, falling to the floor and thrashing about. These loud showy displays frighten John, but at the same time impress upon him that the feeling of God's presence, though lacking in him, is very intense to others. Elisha is gifted in his ability to stir the congregation into these religious frenzies, which gives him a special place in the church hierarchy.

This honored position that Elisha holds is dampened one day when his uncle, pastor Father James, vilifies him in front of the congregation for being in danger of committing a great sin. Elisha's great sin is simply his youthful relationship with Sister Ella Mae, consisting of innocent things like after school walks and trips to the beach. However, this blossoming romantic relationship is seen by Father James as dangerous and is cut off through the public humiliation of the two. Watching this John realizes the complete control that the church has on the lives of the faithful, none allowed a personal life apart from the church.

John yearns to escape from this permeating stranglehold on his life but is afraid to do so in an obvious way; so he tries to set himself apart in any quiet way that he can. He excels in school, having been noticed by the teachers as promising student, who could lead "his people" and do great things. John takes inward pride at his status at school, but not because he could be a leader of "his people", a thing he has absolutely no interest in doing. Rather, his accomplishments at school hint to him that he might find, in his own separate abilities, an escape from his father's world. He takes particular pride in knowing that the white principal once singled him out as being especially talented. (Placing significance on the opinions of white people is in stark contrast to his father's vituperative damnation of all white people as evil and his insistence that no white person would ever do anything good for a black person.) John draws great strength from his private identity as intellectually gifted. He sees himself as having a potential that the others around him lack, giving him reason to think he can escape their fate and find a life rich in the things he has been denied in his father's house. His private pride enables him to withstand the brutality of his father's beatings, and gives him the strength to quietly defy the church's teachings until one day his confidence is shaken. That day is the day of his fourteenth birthday. The author describes this change when he writes, "John's secret heart had flourished in its wickedness until the day his sin first overtook him".

On his birthday he wakes up and looks at a yellow stain on the ceiling above his head, feeling gripped by guilt and shame over a sin committed the day before. He has masturbated in the bathroom at school. To make matters worse, his older male classmates were the objects of his sexual fantasies. So not only is his sin of the worst kind- sexual, it is in an unspeakable from- homosexual. This experience is one that he cannot shake off and begins to erode his feeling of superiority that had given him the strength to inwardly defy his father.

In his shame, he leaves his bedroom to join his family in the kitchen, hoping that his birthday will be forgotten; initially is seems that it will be. He enters the kitchen where his mother and Roy are busy fighting about his father. Roy is bitterly complaining about the beatings and overbearing rules his father gives the family. All the while, their mother is angrily defending these things as evidence that his father loves them and only tries to protect and care for the family. In a passage that foreshadows two stabbing events we will learn of later, their mother tells Roy he should be more careful about his own rebellious conduct before "somebody puts a knife in you." The argument between Roy and his mother weighs on John's already unhappy spirit. Instead of being wished a happy birthday, John is teased by his brother and then tersely sent to clean the parlor in preparation for Sunday morning by his mother. There John fights a losing battle against copious dust and filth. He tries to sweep the dirty worn rug and polish the family's spare belongings but the dirt is so stubborn and his efforts seem not to make any difference. The depressing, dirty parlor is not a very convincing argument for the father's great success at caring for the family; John feels defeated.

Once finished with the cleaning John's mother calls him to her, surprising him with a gift of money for his birthday. The rare possession of a small sum gives him a transitory feeling of possibility and freedom. In a minor act of defiance, he crosses Central Park, which takes him from poor Harlem to the wealthy white neighborhoods of Manhattan. There he wants to spend his money among people his father regards as sinners- white people. He is drawn to explore these neighborhoods of possibility, but as he walks through the streets of the white neighborhoods, he feels uncomfortable and alien. Then he goes to the movies, something that he is forbidden to do by his father and the church. The movie he sees is *Of Human Bondage,* a story about the destructive relationship between an upper class doctor and his malicious lower class girlfriend. Watching the movie, he takes the side of the mean-spirited prostitute who psychologically torments her weak, disabled, upper class lover. At the end of the movie when the cruel woman succumbs to tuberculosis and dies, John is stunned to see the lessons of his father played out even in the "wicked" cinema. Since he had empathized with the bad character, John leaves the show more convinced of his own evil proclivity. His secret pleasure of going to the movies on his birthday becomes a sour experience.

When he returns home he sees a trail of blood leading up the stairs to the apartment where he finds his brother Roy lying on the couch. Roy is surrounded by the whole family, including their aunt Florence. John learns that Roy has been slashed in the face with a knife in a fight with some white boys. When John sees Roy up close he is relieved because he understands that although Roy is badly hurt, he will not die. Yet, his relief is cut short when Gabriel begins blaming Roy's injury on their mother's neglect,

demanding to know why she lets Roy go out carousing. Florence then defends their mother's innocence and begins to bitterly criticize Gabriel for the way he is raising the children. In the horrible fight that follows Gabriel ends up striking his wife in the face with full force, knocking her down into Aunt Florence's arms. At this, Roy threatens his father if he ever strikes her again, calling him a bastard. This defiance brings a blind rage into Gabriel and he removes his belt and, muttering "my Lord, my Lord" under his breath, repeatedly whips the injured boy with all of his strength. It is not until Aunt Florence grabs the belt away that the whipping stops. His mother then picks up Roy, who is in anguish, off of the floor.

Despite this horrendous experience at home, that night John goes on to church as planned to prepare for a Saturday night "Tarry service". He is supposed to clean the dirty church, a job reminiscent of cleaning his family's hopelessly dilapidated parlor. Since Elisha is at the church preparing for the service too, the banter between the two is uncharacteristically light. Elisha and John start horsing around and get in a friendly wrestling match, which John perhaps enjoys a bit too much. After they finish cleaning the church, Elisha questions John about when he will be ready to be saved. He explains how his devotion to the church has brought him great joy. John listens but does not feel swayed.

Later people filter in for the service. As usual, the crowd is thin, consisting of two older, peevishly pious women, Sisters MacCandless and Price. When they surmise that no one else is coming they begin the service with singing. It is during the songs that John's mother and father enter the church accompanied by his Aunt Florence. John is shocked to see Florence with them as she has always regarded their church with disdain and they had just had the huge row at home. Not only is Florence there, but also she comes in an ominously quiet way. John understands that her presence there has great significance, and that only some horrible, desperate yearning could ever persuade Florence to come to this church to pray.

Part 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

Go Tell It on the Mountain was James Baldwin's first novel and immediately won critical acclaim. Like many first novels, this one is highly autobiographical. Baldwin was raised in Harlem, in stark poverty, in the years before the civil rights movement. He was the illegitimate son of a domestic worker and never knew his father but had a strict religious stepfather who was a small time preacher. Baldwin was also homosexual, during a time when being gay was much more taboo than it is today. These things strongly influenced the content of his novels including this work.

This is the story of a boy's coming of age and the struggles he has living in the shadow of family secrets. The whole story takes place over the span of the 24-hour period of John's fourteenth birthday but weaves in and out of the past through flashbacks. We learn of the challenges that John faces in becoming a man. His father is cruel to him, unwilling to offer the sincere guidance that an adult man should give a son to help guide him through adolescence. Instead he presents to John with a world of irreconcilable

extremes: God and the Devil; good and evil; piety and debauchery; rich and poor; black and white. When John has to make choices in his life he has been taught that there is one right choice and all others are wrong with the right choice generally so extreme that it is difficult to live by. His brother Roy expresses this same frustration with his father's attitude and his disallowance of expressing his feelings to him during the argument with their mother; he complains that he cannot talk to his father as he can with her. This rigidity on the part of John's father is paralyzing for John and he must break free of it before he can become a man in his own right.

John feels that something about his parents does not make sense, that there is some secret hidden from him. He is confused by his mother's unflagging subservience to his father. He suspects that she has a hidden past because of old photographs family photographs showing that she once did not look careworn and sad. In her expression in these pictures, he sees a different person, one who is proud and happy. He also suspects there is some important secret about his father's past, the time before he came north. He is particularly disconcerted about the circumstances surrounding the relationship that Gabriel had with his first wife. John knows that Aunt Florence knows all of Gabriel's past and somehow this gives her the clout to stand up to him. Therefore there must be some things she knows about Gabriel that keeps him in line give Florence reason to have little respect for him. John wants to ask his aunt about this but he is afraid to.

No matter how hard he tries, his father never seems satisfied with John. The people in the congregation and teachers at school all think that John is an exceptional boy but his father never recognizes any of the good things that he does. In contrast, his wild brother Roy, who has none of the qualities that his father claims to value, is the clear favorite. John feels that he is somehow different but he does not know why, this confuses him.

Baldwin uses the presence of dirt, dust and grime to help him illustrate the depressing surroundings that the family lives in. Indeed the family name is grimes, which is unlikely to be a coincidence. The Grimes home is dirty, no matter how hard they try to clean it. It is old and dilapidated and dirt is in every crevice of the kitchen. When John is sent to clean the parlor dust is embedded in the carpet and will not come out no matter how hard he sweeps. The same is true of the church and when he and Elisha try to clean it, they just seem to move the dust around. The neighborhood is also dirty, run down and depressing, but when John goes to other parts of the city to try to escape, he feels like an outsider. Trapped in his squalid surroundings, and no matter how hard he tries, he cannot escape the dirt. When he tries to go to the more well off neighborhoods of Manhattan he feels like an outsider because he is black. So the only escape from his depressing surroundings is a spiritual one, but he feels that since religion is his father's domain, he does not want to seek a haven in spirituality either.

John is isolated by his mother's distance and his father's brutality. The only guidance he is offered by his family is that he must follow a strict religious lifestyle. He is told that if he is not saved he will become like the drunks on the Harlem streets and God will turn his back on him. However, John does not feel a connection to his father's life and just goes through the motions at church. At school, he is praised, but all of his teachers are

white, so although he values their opinion he does not believe that they would ever really care about him.

Because he does well in school and his white teachers praise him, John feels that he is special and different from his father. This gives him a secret strength to withstand his father's harsh treatment. After he masturbates at school however, his shame takes away this one bit of separate strength that he feels. His self-confidence is further eroded by his experience at the movies where he finds he took the side of the movie's evil character. John is in a very vulnerable part of his life and this, together with all of the troubles that he contends with at home, makes him ripe for a religious transformation.

The extremely violent beating that Roy gets from Gabriel weakens John further. By the time he gets to the church, he has had a difficult 14th birthday. In the church though, the good Elisha treats him with kindness and camaraderie, a welcome respite from his depressing home life. While there are other passages where John is described as feeling triumphant, these are private feelings not shared with anyone else and usually brought on through rebellion against his father. With Elisha though, he has true feelings of happiness that come from the bond of friendship that they share. The only heartfelt conversations that John has in the whole book are those he shares with Elisha. These interactions are the only times that John feels relief from his oppressing life. John's strong admiration of Elisha is a powerful force. Since he is a prominent member of the congregation, Elisha offers an alternative to John's father that allows him to stay within the safety of his church.

The passage describing the family-fight after Roy gets stabbed is particularly shocking. Gabriel's emotions and reactions do not seem reasonable; his punishment of Elizabeth and Roy seems to be irrationally cruel. Although initially Gabriel is uncharacteristically tender with Roy and at the same time, he is inexplicably harsh with John, who is blameless. He then accuses Elizabeth for allowing Roy's unruliness, getting furious with her when she tries to defend herself. Finally, when Roy insults Gabriel for hitting Elizabeth, Gabriel's blind fury and violence demonstrates the kind of behavior the family contends with that makes them live in fear.

Later in the book we will learn that long ago, Gabriel had had a son who died from a stab wound he suffered in a gambling dispute. So when Roy comes home having nearly come to a similar end, Gabriel is undone. When Elizabeth further warns Gabriel that if Roy is not brought around then he is in danger of being killed, Gabriel brutally over reacts because of what had happened to his first son. Florence knows all about Gabriel's past, so she has the moral high ground when intervening in Gabriel's unfairness with his family. All of this is unknown by John, so to see the present without knowing the truth about the past is baffling.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 1: Florence's Prayer

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 1: Florence's Prayer Summary

In this chapter, many of the questions that trouble John's mind are answered through the recounting of the past told from Aunt Florence's point of view. At first, we learn that the reason for Florence's visit to the church is that she is gravely ill and realizes that her own death is now at hand. She has come to the church with Gabriel and his family to "set her house in order." It is difficult for this proud woman to be aware of her despised brother's sense of vindication at seeing his sister humbled before God. She comes because recently her thoughts have been continually plagued by memories of the important people in her life who predeceased her and the anguish she feels over unsettled differences she had with them that can never be set right.

During the Tarry Service, as the others wail and sing in their religious ecstasies, Florence's mind is repeatedly swept away to unresolved incidents of her past. First, her mind turns to Gabriel and Florence's mother who was a former slave and a woman whose life was one of terrible hardship. Florence and Gabriel were the last of many children she had raised and lost, to either illness or slavery. She was deeply religious because she was weary of life on earth and devoid of hope for anything better in this world. Because of her own life of bondage the Bible passages that she repeatedly referred to related the stories of the Israelites' slavery, their escape as the chosen people, the prophecy of Judgment Day and the fate of proud, once powerful sinners who will not be saved. This constant preaching wore Florence down because she wanted to move forward in her freedom and find a better life for herself.

Life in the shadow of fear and oppression made their mother frightened and religious. She worshiped a wrathful God who was to be feared. In the church Florence reflects on one instance indicative of how her mother became the way she was. One night, when she and Gabriel were young teenagers, several white men raped their black sixteen year-old neighbor, Deborah. (Deborah later became Gabriel's first wife.) Deborah's father went into a rage and threatened one of the men only to be beaten and left for dead by them. Later that night Florence and Gabriel cowered with their mother in their shuttered home, fearing reprisal from angry whites. Florence's little family knew from experience that any incident between a black person and the whites in the town puts the whole black community in danger of retribution. That night however, they were lucky and were spared.

Florence then goes on to recall her young life with her mother and brother that led her to feel bitter about them. In addition to obsessing about her past as a slave, their mother put concrete obstacles between Florence and her desire for a better life by favoring Gabriel because he was a boy. Gabriel was given all of her attention and the best food

and clothes in the house. Florence's role was seen by her mother as little more than a maid, someone to help elevate her brother. Yet her brother did nothing to deserve his preferred status: he would stay out all night drinking heavily, slept with women all over the town and squandered his opportunities for education. Their mother never gave up on him or let Florence have a chance, though. She continually begged Gabriel to turn his life around and to be saved by God. Florence felt that she was smarter and better than her brother, and resented her mother's favoritism. Because of these circumstances, Florence grew to hate Gabriel and resent her mother and her religious devotion.

Florence dreamed of escaping from her mother and brother so she could find a better life for herself. However, since her mother was very sick and bed-ridden Florence planned to wait until she died before leaving them and moving north. This changed because one day the man of the house where she worked invited her to be his concubine. She decided that she could not stand her life in the south any longer and it was time for her to leave. When, with bags packed, she announced that she was about to leave on a train to New York, Gabriel and her mother were stunned. Gabriel, still hung over from a night of drinking, tearfully begged her to stay to take care of their mother since he could not do it himself. Florence felt pleased to be able to take revenge on her brother, and leave him behind to earn his favored position with their mother. Their mother cried and begged, not for Florence to stay but rather, for God to have mercy on her sinful daughter; that was the sum of her reaction. Florence left her home and boarded the train angry and exasperated with her family.

The reader is then taken back to the present, in the church where the service continues. As Florence prays, her mind turns to another relationship in her past that was filled with regret- her failed marriage to a man named Frank. Florence felt that Frank drank too much and she disapproved of his friends and how he too freely spent his wages. For these reasons she blamed her inability to live in a home of her own on Frank's weakness of character. As she saw it, his problem was not that he could not earn money but that he refused to save any of what he made. They constantly fought over what she maintained was his weakness. However, the rancor of their fights would briefly melt away at night when Frank came into their bed to whisper in her ear and make love to her. Frank stayed with Florence for ten years, during that time all his efforts were denigrated until he finally left Florence to take up with a less attractive but more compliant woman. Years later, Florence learned from this woman that Frank died in the war in Europe and was buried in France. Now, in her old age, she bitterly regrets all their pointless struggles, but it is too late. She will never be able to reconcile with Frank and is destined to die alone.

Finally, we learn that Florence keeps, in her purse, a letter that she believes proves her brother fathered a bastard child who he then abandoned. Deborah wrote this letter to Florence when she and Gabriel were married. Florence keeps it in her purse, waiting for the perfect moment to confront Gabriel publicly. She believes that with this evidence she can cut him down for good and show everyone that his holy demeanor is a sham. But now she realizes that since she will probably die soon and Gabriel will out live her, she may never see the day that he is brought low, and that instead he is seeing that day for

her. She weeps quietly. As Florence cries, the "saints" shout their exaltations to save this sinner. This distasteful display only increases her pain and magnifies her feeling of loneliness. She realizes that none of the battles she ever fought was won, that all her struggling was in vain.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 1: Florence's Prayer Analysis

In Florence's prayers the secrets of the family's past begin to be uncovered thereby allowing the reader to understand why the world presented to John is so unsettling. The first chapter, being from John's point of view, reveals the family's life as it is now, how it got that way is hidden. The reader has a sense of how a vulnerable a child feels and the difficulty of coming of age in an environment of secrets. John senses that there are important past events that he does not know about but is afraid to ask about. In *Florence's Prayer,* the reader begins to learn why things are as they are.

In this chapter, we learn why Gabriel has no power over Florence and why she detests him. She is disgusted by his show of strict piety because she knows that when he was young he was a selfish and unruly boy who grew up into a drinking carousing young man. She believes that he remains unchanged despite his assertion that he has changed. In him, she sees the same self-centered lout she always knew, now hiding behind a veneer of righteousness. The truth about his character starts to become known through flashbacks of the life-long relationship between the brother and sister.

Florence had always wanted to better herself; she was a beautiful intelligent woman but she never had any opportunities to improve her lot. She had so much potential but was forced to live an impoverished life, which made her a bitter person. Much of Florence's story is tinged with regret and a longing for things to have been different. Not only does Florence blame herself, but also she blames her mother, brother and husband for her inability to enjoy the basic pleasures in life. Her jobs are menial because she never got a good education. For this she blames her mother and her brother because when they were growing up her mother favored Gabriel in every way and as a result, he got the education that she deserved. She feels that her life would have been different if he had never been born.

When Florence was working at one of her menial domestic jobs, the man of the house made a pass at her. This made Florence desperate to leave the south and pursue her lifelong dream of moving north. She had stayed behind to take care of her mother. When her life at home became unbearable, she left her mother even as she lay dying. But her move north turned out to be a disappointment and never brought her any prosperity so that she left her terminally sick mother makes her feel guilty.

After Florence moved north to find better opportunities, she married Frank. Although when she married him, Frank had habits that she disapproved of, she believed that she would be able to change him into a "good" husband. She wanted them to save up enough to buy a little house of their own, but they could never save any money. She

blamed Frank for squandering his paycheck, thereby depriving her of another thing she wanted very badly. In trying to change Frank, she picks fights with him constantly, which only makes things worse. Their constant quarreling eventually drives him away; in the end, he dies in Europe during World War I without ever reconciling their differences. She heard about his death from his second wife, without learning the details. The finality of his death makes her sorry that they fought so much. Therefore, her relationship with Frank is another one filled with disappointment and unfulfilled expectations.

Now Florence realizes that she is going to die without ever having done the things that she wanted to. She knows that she could die without exposing the truth about Gabriel and bringing his downfall. Bringing Gabriel down has been so important to Florence that she carried the crucial piece of evidence against him, Deborah's letter, in her purse for thirty years. The sense that her life has been a waste makes death an impossible thing for Florence to come to terms with.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 2: Gabriel's Prayer

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 2: Gabriel's Prayer Summary

The chapter Gabriel's Prayer is told from Gabriel's point of view. Like Florence's prayer, it is the musings of Gabriel's mind during the Tarry Service. The story line weaves in and out of the present service and past events in his life. In this chapter, we learn that Gabriel's own nature and spotted past cause him to see sin in everyone around him. As a young man, he spent many nights out getting drunk and ending up in the beds of strange women. He would then quietly slink back home, nursing a hangover, to listen to his mother's preachy admonitions. His mother wanted him to follow a righteous path and while he felt that he should, when night came he was always too weak to follow through. During this period of his life, his mother is sick and dying but she stays alive to be sure that her last child would follow a Godly path.

Despite his weakness for drinking and chasing women, Gabriel felt that he should try to live up to his mother's hopes for his immortal soul. But he desired this for reasons that reveal a selfish and shallow character: "he wanted power- he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed, His well-beloved . . . He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God." The source of Gabriel's piety is not from a love of God or a hope to do good deeds but from a desire to place him above others and use his high position to control them.

One morning while walking home from a night of carousing, he underwent his long-awaited religious transformation. In the throes of religious ecstasy, brought on by fears that God had abandoned him because of his sins, Gabriel ended up on his knees wailing against a tree. He had visions, and he was saved. After that morning, he renounced his past actions and was so wholly converted that he became a preacher. His fiery sermons always had an accusatory tone, admonishing the congregation for their sinful misdeeds. He would proclaim that he was once like them and so knows how evil they are. Now he has seen the light and wants to show them how to follow him.

Soon after his change, his mother died. With no woman to care for him, Gabriel began a relationship with Deborah, a plain but devout woman. Deborah was the neighbor who, having been raped by the gang of white men at sixteen, carried the stain on her soul in the eyes of the community. (No man could look at Deborah without imagining what had happened to her on that night.) Because of what she had been through, she was sternly religious, shunned men and dressed in dour, shapeless clothing. However, Gabriel keeps company with Deborah because all of her attention was focused on him. She spent her days feeding and caring for him and in the evenings, they discussed his sermons. Her devotion to him fed Gabriel's hungry ego.

Gabriel became a well-known preacher in his small Georgia community. So, when a huge revivalist meeting attracted the most well respected evangelist ministers from Chicago to New Orleans, he was invited to participate. He socialized with the elder ministers but was disappointed in what he saw as their lack of discipline and piety. Passing judgment on those supposedly distinguished ministers made Gabriel feel superior. In keeping with his sense of superiority, he gave a sermon castigating the congregation for the sinful nature inherent in them, warning of the special danger to the immortal souls of people who have strayed from a religious life and admonishing them to reform. "There is no righteousness in man" he preached, "All men's hearts are evil, all men are liars." His tone was angry and accusatory, but his charisma and obvious conviction in his beliefs stirred the audience deeply. Because of his sermon, Gabriel instantly became the young star of the conference.

At the end of the gathering, there was a big dinner for the preachers only. The women created a splendid feast and scurried about bringing food in and out of the dining room. At one point, Deborah came into the room bringing them another dish of food. After she left, one of the preachers joke in a lewd manner about her rape, getting chuckles from the other preachers seated at the table. Gabriel, already with misgivings about the depth of their piety, was enraged at their callous disrespect of Deborah. In a contained fury, he confronted the man who insulted her. Nervous, the other pastors quickly tried to gloss over the gravity of the remark but Gabriel will not be appeased, preferring to set himself above them by remaining quietly angry. This scene unsettled the other pastors and gave Gabriel the upper hand over them. After seeing how standing up for Deborah could bring him power in the eyes of others, Gabriel surmised that she would make an ideal wife for him. He asked her to marry him and she accepted.

The story then weaves back to the present with Gabriel thinking about John and Elizabeth, who are in the church with him praying. We learn through his musings that John is her bastard son from before their marriage, that he is angry with Elizabeth because she does not regret the weakness that brought John into the world. He is disgusted that she acknowledges no difference between John, her illegitimate son, and his own son Roy.

Thinking of Roy, his mind turns to the circumstances that led to the birth of another Roy, this was his first son. This Roy was a bastard child he conceived with a beautiful but irreligious woman, Esther, who he worked with while married to Deborah. His bleak, childless marriage to Deborah is a contrast to the brief but passionate affair that got Esther pregnant. Months after he had already broken off with her, Esther told him she was pregnant but he refused her pleas to run off with her. Instead, he stole money from Deborah's sugar bowl and gave it to Esther to leave town so he wouldn't be embarrassed. She parted with him bitterly, disgusted with his conduct. In time he heard, through Deborah, what happened to Esther: all alone, she moved to Chicago and secretly gave birth to a son she named Royal. (Gabriel had once told her that if he had a son, he would name him Royal, so the child's name was further proof to him that the child was indeed his.) Esther died in childbirth alone and neglected. After her death, Esther's parents took in their newly discovered grandson. Through the years, Deborah took particular pains to tell Gabriel news of Royal: he grew up spoiled by his

grandparents displaying an untamed nature much like young Gabriel. Gabriel occasionally bumps into Royal around town, but never goes out of his way to get to know him or help him in any way.

One night during a torrential rainstorm, Gabriel came home to news from Deborah that Royal was stabbed to death in a gambling dispute. Gabriel was numbed and cries uncontrollably causing Deborah to reveal that she knew all along that Royal was his son. She calmly admonished him for turning his back on Esther and Royal, finally saying she would have loved to have raised Royal as her own. Gabriel, hardened and unmoved, retorted that raising his bastard son would have been a sin. Despite his rejection of Royal, Gabriel's refusal to accept his illegitimate son and the finality of his son's death haunts him for the rest of his life.

His dull marriage to Deborah combined with the loss of a woman he loved and the death of his only child made him secretly detest his plain wife. In his mind all of these things were not his doing as much as they were Deborah's fault and so he and treated her shabbily. She became sick and slowly died in her loveless home.

As the storyline weaves back to the present, in the church, we learn that John is reconsidering, no longer wanting Gabriel's love. At the very end of the chapter, Gabriel sees with John giving him a hostile stare. He is surprised and enraged at the brazenness of Elizabeth's bastard son.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 2: Gabriel's Prayer Analysis

This chapter gives insight into why Gabriel is such an unyielding and angry man, and why he mistreats his family while professing to love them so much. By the time the chapter is finished, Gabriel is exposed as a vain, selfish, shallow man who is blind to his own faults while harshly judging other people's actions. His true character is evident in his behavior as a young man. He only transforms himself because of fear for his immortal soul and a desire for power not from a love of good or God. From the time he is "saved", his actions are focused on maintaining his status, but he still does many wicked things and does nothing but bring pain to those around him.

Love never moves Gabriel to do anything; he is purely motivated by self-interest. This selfish behavior never brings him any happiness, but rather makes him a bitter and angry person who harms every life he touches. He allowed Florence to live a deprived youth while he enjoyed every advantage available to the family, only to squander them. He married dutiful Deborah because he thought it would bring him power, but ends up hating her because she is plain and ugly. This brings her sad life more misery. He initiated the affair with Esther for his own lustful gratification, but demonized her behavior as sinful leaving her to die alone far away from her home and loving family. He marries Elizabeth and then resents her for not regretting the birth of her bastard son. He hates John for being a better son than Roy is because he is another man's child. He claims to be a Godly man, but he damages the lives of everyone around him.

Gabriel and his two sons Royal and Roy play out the theme that the sins of the fathers are paid for by the sons. All three men have a similar basic character, tending toward drinking, carousing and chasing women. Gabriel thinks that he has changed into a good God-fearing man blind to the fact that he is fundamentally unchanged. The reason for his transformation is purely self-interest: he changes because he is afraid of God not because he wants to be a good person. Without true atonement by Gabriel, his sons will suffer for his sins. Royal has already paid with his life and Roy has come close to meeting the same end.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 3: Elizabeth's Prayer

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 3: Elizabeth's Prayer Summary

In this chapter, we learn all of the secrets that make Elizabeth such a mystery to her son. Through it, she is revealed as the most profoundly good character in the story. As in the other chapters in Part 2, this one weaves in and out of the present church ceremony through the character's musings over past events.

When the chapter begins, the small church service is in full swing, with people singing, weeping and crying out. In the midst of this, Elizabeth's mind turns to her childhood. She remembers a mother who she never loved and a father she adored. Her mother did not seemed to care about her, but her father was indulgent and loving. Her mother died, when Elizabeth was eight, and her mother's sister insisted that since her father ran a "house" and a "stable" (two disreputable businesses), Elizabeth must come live with her in a Christian environment. She took her far away from her father and she rarely saw him in the years that followed. Although the aunt professed to care about Elizabeth, she did not treat her in a loving way, so Elizabeth grew up wishing her doting but "sinful" father would return for her. Because this never happened, so she was raised by a judgmental aunt who claimed to love her, but who never demonstrated any warm feelings.

Elizabeth grew into quiet but passionate young woman who longed to escape from her unhappy home. Her opportunity came when she met Richard, a curt young grocery clerk. Richard read and smoked on the job, getting annoyed when he had to stop to wait on customers. One day Elizabeth came into the store and found herself there alone with Richard. To her surprise, he was kind to her and she instantly fell in love with him. In a short time, they decided to move to New York together and to be married. Elizabeth lied and told her aunt that she was going to New York alone to find better opportunities. Once there, they found low-paying work at the same hotel but moved into separate lodgings.

Their love intensified but they decided to put off marriage until their finances improved. In the anonymity of New York City Elizabeth fell into an intimate relationship with Richard that she would not have entered back home under her aunt's watchful eye. She also uncomfortably found herself running in the same kind of social circles as her father was in, associating with the kind of people he had brought around. These were Richard's friends who drank, smoked and poked fun at religion. If it had not been for Richard she never would have done these things, but they were very much in love and were happy together.

Though Richard's father had abandoned him, his mother died when he was a baby and he was passed from home to home while growing up, his challenges only made him more determined to better himself. He was a self-educated man and voracious learner. At night, Richard attended school and on their weekends together, he took Elizabeth with him to libraries, museums, parks and theaters in New York. In part, his desire to know about everything was fueled by his determination never to let a white person make him feel ignorant. Elizabeth loved the way he knew so much about everything, admiring his passion for learning and his strong sense of self-respect.

Although their life in New York was happy, Richard was stressed by their meager circumstances, so Elizabeth never pressed him to marry her. When she found herself pregnant she could not tell him immediately because she did not want to trouble him. Thinking back, she now regrets this since she believes that if he had found out, he would be alive and her life would have been different. Before she had found the right moment to tell him of her pregnancy Richard was mistakenly arrested in a racist incident. He had been returning to his own apartment after having escorted her home, and found himself on the subway platform with three young black men his age that had just knifed a storekeeper. Just because he was also a young black man he was taken to jail where white policemen tortured him into signing a confession that stated that he was one of the robbers. He spent weeks in jail until his trial, but finally he was acquitted on lack of evidence.

When he came home dirty and disheveled, he would not tell Elizabeth all that had happened to him. Nevertheless, he was so disturbed by the experience that he broke down and cried on the bed until he fell asleep. The next day Richard killed himself. Elizabeth carries the burden of Richard's death with her because she felt if she had only told him about her pregnancy he would be alive; he wouldn't have left her side and been out alone the night he was arrested, nor would he have killed himself and left Elizabeth and their child alone in the world.

Elizabeth recalls all of this, worrying about what will become of their son John at the hands of his stepfather. She then thinks of how she met Gabriel through Florence soon after John was born. She was working nights cleaning offices, having to leave John sleeping alone in their dingy rented room. She kept no friends and refused all invitations, rushing home from work in the wee hours to feed her baby. Florence was working in the same dismal job at the same place. Elizabeth liked her no-nonsense personality and so let her become her only confidant. One Sunday she brought John to Florence's apartment for tea. On the subway ride to Florence's home, Elizabeth fretted over what would happen to John without his father's support and guidance. She was in a vulnerable state that day when she met Gabriel at Florence's apartment. He had just moved to New York from the South. To Elizabeth Gabriel seemed to be a strong man with firm convictions, perhaps an ideal father.

Elizabeth's humbled state attracted Gabriel's attention. Her feelings of loss and searching were met by his assertions that all prayers will be answered if one would just give himself to God. With no better options, God was her last and best hope. At that time too, Gabriel seemed to listen to her troubles and give her comfort, unlike now when

he blamed her sinfulness for what had happened to her in the time before they met. Before they got married, he had been kind to little Johnny too, and promised to raise him as he would his own son.

While remembering the frightening experience of giving birth to Johnny all alone, she thinks of the sound of his first cry. Then she hears his voice cry out again, yet she hears his voice in the church. She is brought out of her dreaming and back into the present.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints, Chapter 3: Elizabeth's Prayer Analysis

In *Elizabeth's Prayer,* the reader gets to know what John cannot about his mother Elizabeth. Through the story told in this chapter we understand how Elizabeth came to be the woman that she is, and why she keeps her past a secret from John. The truth is revealed concerning the mystery of her change in personality, a change that John knows about from seeing at an old photo of her.

The character of Elizabeth is unique in the story because she shows the capacity to give other people real love. Her children do not fear her as they do their father, and she loves and protects them. On John's birthday, she is the only one who remembers it and gives him a birthday present. She had deep, loving relationships with her father and her first love, Richard. No other character is described as having sincerely loving relationships with other people in their lives.

Relationships between children and their fathers are an important theme in this novel and Elizabeth's is the only one that was tender and loving, in the others the father is either abusive, neglectful or absent. Elizabeth's father doted on her when she was very little and she adored him in return, never forgetting him even years after they were separated. Elizabeth's true love was John's father Richard, making John special because he was conceived by people who shared a profound relationship. This makes John a unique character in the book, as he is the only one born of true love. In contrast, neither of Gabriel's sons is conceived in love, instead the first is conceived in Esther's lust and the second in Elizabeth's resignation. John's beautiful origin manifests itself in his exceptional intelligence and sensitivity, distinguishing him from Gabriel's sons. Gabriel resents John's gifts and jealously desires them for his own sons, hating John all the while. This confuses the naïve John, but as he is born of good, he is able to remain strong even in the face of Gabriel's evil brutality.

Elizabeth's life has been a disappointing one through no fault of her own. Her capacity for love has never been rewarding because each person she has loved has been taken from her in some form or another. First, she is deprived of a relationship with her father after her mother dies and her aunt insists on raising her. Because Elizabeth's aunt disapproves of her father's lifestyle, she almost completely cuts him out of Elizabeth's life. As a result, the remainder of Elizabeth's childhood is endured under the tutelage of her aunt who proves to be a cold and disapproving guardian.

The second disappointment that love has brought to Elizabeth was in her relationship with Richard. They shared a beautiful relationship but because she loved him so much, she did things that, in the end, brought her unhappiness and took Richard away from her. Although she wanted to get married, she did not pressure Richard because she did not want to add to his troubles. She knew that he wanted to marry her only when he felt he was ready to be a good husband, after he finished school. If they had been married, they would not have had separate apartments and he would not have been at the subway the night of his arrest. To add to her feelings of guilt, she did not tell him of her pregnancy because she wanted to protect him. In her mind, this mistake caused him to be out on that fateful night of his arrest that ultimately led to his suicide.

Finally, her love for John brings her the unhappiness of her marriage to Gabriel. Elizabeth marries Gabriel to protect John from the hardship of being raised by her alone. While John was a baby she left him alone at night while she went to work, a situation that brought her constant pain and worry. When she met Gabriel, he was kind to her son and promised that if they married he would treat him as his own. After they were married though he broke his promise and once he had a son of his own, he was cruel to John, hating him with increased intensity as John tries to do things to earn Gabriel's approval. Gabriel also becomes mean to Elizabeth a fact that is shockingly depicted when Roy comes home injured. Gabriel unfairly blames Elizabeth and when she tries to defend her position and hits her in the face so hard that it knocks her down.

Elizabeth is also separated from John although in a more subtle way. She is unable to share the truth about his origins with him because keeping the lie about his parentage is the only thing that prevents Gabriel from openly rejecting John. This falsehood brings a void between the two that makes John feel alienated from his mother and prevents them from having a close relationship. Therefore, although John and Elizabeth are not physically lost from one another, at a spiritual level there is an ever-weakening connection.

Therefore, although Elizabeth is a relatively good character in the story, she does no better than the rest when it comes to being happy. In the end she has no friends or confidants and she is married to a man she does not love. She finds herself feeling isolated and alienated with no obvious way out of her state of loneliness. In the end, her situation is not so different from Florence's although her character is much different and she arrived at that point via a different path. Florence is an independent person who never had a truly loving relationship with anyone while Elizabeth formed close bond that directed her on her life's path. Nevertheless, in the end both women find themselves at a similar place, both feeling alone, helpless and hopeless. When she was young, Elizabeth's father had told her, "If one had to die, to go ahead and die, but never let oneself be beaten." Yet, in the end Elizabeth cannot find a way to follow her father's advice. Because she loves her children and cannot abandon them to be raised by Gabriel without her protection, she remains in her unhappy home and literally and figuratively lets herself be beaten.

Part 3: The Threshing Floor

Part 3: The Threshing Floor Summary

In this chapter, John experiences an ecstatic religious transformation that is described in fantastic terms. Much of this section of the book is devoted to describing dreams and visions that John has while experiencing a religious ecstasy. During the service, John is overcome by wanting to be like Elisha and wants to become saved as a way to escape his father's domination. This yearning is described here: "In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and, with that authority, to confound his father." While in the church, during the small evening service he suddenly feels himself overwhelmed by feeling, drops to the dusty floor and begins to writhe and scream. He hears an evil voice tell him to leave the church forever but he finds that he cannot move his body and so he remains.

John sees the man he believes is his father looking at him with hatred in his eves. He then has several visions of his father who, in his dreams, keeps threatening to beat sin out of him. First, he remembers seeing Gabriel naked in the bathtub, just as Noah had seen his own father naked. Not knowing the truth of his parentage, John worries that he too will be cursed with his father's sins as Noah was. He then envisions himself walking with Gabriel on a narrow white street bordered by tall shining buildings. Gabriel tells John he is the Devil's son and yet John is defiant, telling his father that he is not so great himself, that he knows what he does at night with his mother and that he hates him. In retaliation, is father attacks him with a knife but John escapes from him.

Next is a passage that tells of his revelation regarding why life is so bleak for him and his family. He hears a terrible murmuring sound, this sound had filled John's life since as long as he could remember. The sound is said to be made by some dark army and is identified as the fear of murder that intimidates black people. "The darkness hummed with murder: the body in the water, the body in the fire, the body on the tree." He fears that terrible things will happen to him too. He hears a voice that tells him to go through the darkness, toward the light and God and the murmuring stops. John sees the Lord for a moment and so he is set free and is saved.

After John is saved, the first voice he hears and the first face he sees is Elisha's. Elisha is smiling and extends his hand to help John. With joy, he asks John if he has been saved; John with tears on his face says yes. Then all the others at the service gather around him, happy for him and praising him. He then goes to his mother who is crying and hugs him, but he feels confused by her reaction because it is not as joyful as the other's. Next, he goes to his father who looks at him coldly and does not touch or embrace him. When he tells Gabriel he is saved, his only reply is a severe remark that he must prove that he is saved through his actions. John, with a new strength to resist his father's cruelty, says he knows that he is indeed saved and he prays to be protected

from anyone or anything that wants to harm him. He feels a wall going up between himself and his father. Next Aunt Florence comes to his side and very tenderly says that she knows that he has been saved.

By now it is very early morning and just starting to get light outside. The service is over so the small group walks out to the dirty streets together, with John and Elisha walking together talking and the women congratulating a crying Elizabeth. Florence and Gabriel are walking together too. Pulling the rumpled old letter from Deborah out of her purse, Florence takes this opportunity to confront Gabriel about his illegitimate son. Gabriel is temporarily stunned but regains his composure enough to scold Florence about minding her own business. He tells her he has made his peace with God and that she should not bother him about this. But she insists that God does not forget past transgressions as men do. She tells him that because of the way he is, he only brings sadness to people. She threatens that although she is dying, she first will give Deborah's letter to Elizabeth so that his wife will know that he also had an illegitimate child. They part ways angry at each other; nothing is resolved between them.

Part 3: The Threshing Floor Analysis

In this chapter, a ray of hope finally emerges for a single character in the novel- John. It is through John's transformation into one that is "saved" that he begins to gain freedom from Gabriel's hold on him. At last, he stops trying to please the man who he believes is his father, and rejects him as the only conduit to his salvation. Instead, he embraces the kind and brotherly Elisha as the one who ushers him through his transformation into a world where he can escape his dismal reality. He finally embraces the role of God in his life, because it is not forced on him by his overbearing father but is presented as a joyous event by Elisha.

During the visions that John experiences he sees Gabriel in ways that highlight the menacing treatment that he has always been subjected to. In these dreams, Gabriel threatens to "beat the sin out of him" and ultimately tries to stab him. In his vision, though, John is defiant in ways that he does not dare to be in everyday life. This does play itself out in a more subtle way in real events in the church. Throughout the service, while John is in ecstasy, Gabriel watches him with recognizable hatred in his eyes. Afterwards when John approaches his "father" with tears of joy streaming down his face, to tell him that he has joined him in the pursuit of a religious life, Gabriel regards him with disdain and tells him that he will believe him when he sees proof of it. There is no love in Gabriel's heart or happiness for John's newfound devotion. This is in contrast to the other church members who are thrilled with John's newfound status as one who has been saved. However, a glimmer of hope for John is felt because he tells his father that he knows that he is indeed saved indicating that he no longer desires or needs his father's approval.

In contrast to Gabriel, Elisha is overjoyed with John's transformation. When John comes out of his ecstasy Elisha is there to help and embrace him with a genuine sense of brotherhood. After the cold rejection by his father, Elisha is there to give John support

and the two boys walk home together in the early morning light. This bond forming between the two gives the reader a small sense of relief in an otherwise bleak story. Of all the characters, John is the only one who seems to have a hope of breaking free from a joyless existence.

None of the other characters however displays a sense of closure with their troubles. Gabriel never changes from his angry and brutal ways, remaining ever hateful and frustrated in his relationship with John because he does not have a son of his own whom he feels proud of. He and Florence have a fight at the end, demonstrating that the two still hold great animosity for one another. There is no forgiveness between the brother and sister and likely never will be as Florence will surely soon die. Elizabeth remains a deeply saddened woman who has no hope of escaping her dismal situation. As she leaves the church she is in tears of despair over her lost life with Richard, which the other women in the congregation mistake for tears of joy over John's religious transformation. This only serves to highlight her state of isolation from the people in her life. Her sadness puts a void between her and her son John, who is so important to her because he is all that remains of her beloved Richard. Since her past and John's origins must be kept secret from John, the two never become emotionally close, thus deepening Elizabeth's loneliness.

Although the Church is depicted as the only accessible place for the Grimes family to lift themselves out of their dismal life of poverty, it is in and of itself a depressing and filthy place. While John is on the floor, unable to stand up, dust and dirt fill his eyes and mouth. The dirt in the church is like the dirt that permeates the family's apartment: no amount of cleaning can remove it. Just as John had tried to clean the family parlor, he and Elisha make an effort to clean the church, but it is impossible to remove the dirt and dust. This intractable dirt highlights the depressing surroundings with which the family is faced. Even their church, the centerpiece of their whole lives, is just a storefront church. They have nothing of real material value so the only escape from their dreary existence for any of them is to find spiritual salvation.

The place where this salvation is found is the church during prayer: on the threshing floor. Threshing is the act of harvesting grain, when the kernel is separated from the chaff, in a sense purifying the good from the bad. Before John's experience in "The Threshing Floor" he is troubled and plagued by doubts regarding his own worth and place in the world. This is largely because of his alienation from his parents that leaves him with no guidance to grow by. After his experience in the church, the reader has the sense that John is coming into his own and will free himself from his father's hold on him. He will be guided into manhood by Elisha and gain the respect of the other members of the congregation.

Characters

Elisha

Seventeen years old and recently arrived in Harlem from Georgia, Elisha is the nephew of the pastor of the Temple of the Fire of the Baptized. He has been publicly chastised in front of the congregation for "walking disorderly" with Ella Mae Washington, meaning that they had been walking without supervision and might have given in to temptation and had sex.

John is infatuated with Elisha. At Sunday school, "John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admiring the leanness, and grace, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit, and wondering if he would ever be holy as Elisha was holy." While clearing the church to prepare for the Saturday evening tarry meeting, John and Elisha wrestle: He saw the veins rise on Elisha's forehead and in his neck... and John, watching these manifestations of his power, became wild with delight."

John's spiritual possession follows Elisha's, both in style and in time, raising the question of whether it is a true religious experience or just an imitation. At the end of the novel Elisha kisses John on the forehead and tells him, "Run on, little brother. Don't you get weary. God won't forget you. You won't forget."

Elizabeth

Early in the novel, as the Grimes family goes about their Saturday morning chores, Elizabeth, the mother, appears to be an apologist for her husband's brutality, explaining to her children that Gabriel works hard to provide for them. She is kind to John; she is the only one in the family to remember his birthday, and she tries to distract the family with prayer when, after Gabriel has slapped her, Roy curses his father and tells him to leave her alone. It is not until much later in the novel that the reasons for her meekness appear.

Like the other characters, her childhood was a difficult one. Her mother, a cold woman that Elizabeth did not love, died when she was young, and her aunt, who thought Elizabeth was snobbish, took custody of her so she would not be raised by her father, who ran a house of prostitution. Elizabeth was devastated, because she loved her father dearly. When she was eighteen she met Richard at the local store and fell in love with him. When he moved to New York, she did too, but to keep up her reputation she lived with a "respectable" relative of her aunt, who was actually a spiritualist who conducted séances on Saturday nights. Elizabeth and Richard both worked in the same hotel and were planning to marry when he had enough money saved He killed himself, though, before Elizabeth could tell him about her pregnancy.

When the baby was born, she withdrew from society, and despaired that the child, John, would never have a father. At work, she became acquainted with Florence, and through her met Gabriel. Gabriel took an interest in her son, and when he proposed to Elizabeth he told her he would "love John Just like my own," a promise clearly broken in the favoritism he shows for Roy.

Ella Mae

The granddaughter of Praying Mother Washington, she was called before the congregation early in the novel for spending time with Elisha without an escort. After John has undergone his spiritual transformation, Ella Mae is noticeably absent: "She had a bad cold, said Praying Mother Washington, and needed to have her rest."

Florence

In the novel, Florence has two secrets. One is that she is dying, and this is why, to John's surprise, she shows a sudden interest in going to church. The second is that she knows, through a letter sent her thirty years earlier by Gabriel's first wife, that her brother had fathered a child out of wedlock with one of the local girls. "For she had always thought of this letter as an instrument in her hands which could be used to complete her brother's destruction. When he was completely cast down she would prevent him from ever rising again by holding before him the evidence of his bloodguilt."

At the end of the novel, the day he is "completely cast down" turns out to be the day his stepson John enters the religious community. The letter is from Deborah, a friend from a neighboring farm when they were growing up. As children, Florence and Deborah each had experiences that made them angry and frustrated Deborah was gang raped by white men and shunned by the black community because of it, and Florence lost her chance to go to school, have new clothes or even eat a hearty meal when her mother gave all privileges to Gabriel because he was a boy. Florence left home at age twenty-six and Deborah later married Gabriel.

Florence moved to Harlem where she met Frank, who was a land, good-natured man but was foolish with money. Florence dreamed of owning a home, but Frank wasted his paychecks on ugly presents for her and on drinking with his friends. When she last saw him, they were in the middle of an argument and he said, "All right, baby. I guess you don't never want to see me no more, not a miserable, black sinner like me." He walked out of the door and never came back. Years later, the woman he had lived with most recently informed Florence that he had died in France during World War I.

Frank

Florence's husband Frank was a good-natured but weak man, always spending money foolishly instead of saving it, inviting his drunken friends over and constantly apologizing to Florence. One day, during an argument, he walked out, and though she expected him

to return that night, or the next morning, he never came back. She found out that he had rued in France during the war from the woman that he had lived with for a few years after he had left her.

Gabriel

John's father is a deacon at the local church in Harlem, and he had a successful career as a preacher when he was young, but he started life as a troubled boy who broke church laws by drinking, gambling and having sex with women. Gabriel's mother was harsh with him, trying to collect his behavior with spanking and forcing religion on him: "And, after the beating, with his pants still down around his knees and his face wet with tears and mucus, Gabriel was made to kneel down while his mother prayed."

His behavior did not change, though, until he was twenty-one, when his sister Florence left home and Gabriel was left to care for his aging, sick mother by himself. Faced with the silent watchfulness of his once-fiery mother, he begged God with prayers that he would be able to leave his evil ways and follow a religious life. One day, as he was to repeatedly tell the story, his prayers were answered: "I opened my mouth to the Lord that day and Hell won't make me change my mind."

Soon after this he began preaching, and made such a name for himself that he was invited to be one of twenty-four preachers on the bill for a "monster revival meeting." Disgusted with the crude remarks the older preachers made about a neighbor girl, Deborah, who had been gang-raped by whites when she was young, Gabriel soon married her, confirming his religious sincerity to himself. But it was an unhappy marriage, and when one of the other employees where he worked showed an interest he ended up sleeping with her. The affair with Esther lasted nine days. Gabriel was cold to her in breaking it off and even colder in refusing to help when she told him she was pregnant. "She put out her hands to reach him, but he moved away"-with that gesture of rejection and denial his life became a web of deceit that ruined his early promise as a preacher.

Esther died in childbirth, naming the infant Royal to spite Gabriel, who had wanted a son named Royal "because the line of the faithful is a Royal line." The boy was raised by his grandparents and died in a knife fight in Chicago, never knowing that he was Gabriel's son. After Deborah died, Gabriel moved to Harlem, and at the time of the novel he is married to Elizabeth and raising John, who she had before she met him; Roy, the new Royal, who should be the start of his Royal line but who drinks and fights as Gabriel did as a young man; and two girls, Sarah and Ruth.

Deborah Grimes

Deborah grew up as a neighbor to Gabriel and Florence. When they were young, a gang of white men raped Deborah, and when her father went to threaten them for what they had done, they beat him and left him for dead Deborah and Florence were friends growing up, and when Florence left to live in the North, Deborah became close to

Rachel, Florence's mother. Eventually Gabriel married Deborah, but they had a cold marriage: she did not talk with him, possibly because she was in awe of his religious authority, and he was secretive about his feelings. When Gabriel cried upon hearing that his son Royal had been killed, Deborah told him that she had known about this son all along, and would have been willing to raise it as her own if he had asked her to.

John Grimes

One of the first things to cross John's mind when he wakes up at the novel's beginning is "that it was his fourteenth birthday and that he has sinned." The particular sin he refers to appears to be a combination of homosexuality and masturbation, as he had "sinned with his hands" while in the bathroom at school, "thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher." It soon becomes apparent, though, that John is likely to feel like a sinner no matter what he does-his stepfather, a Deacon of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, has physically and verbally abused John all his life, showing favor to John's younger brother Roy.

Gabriel Grimes married John's mother when John was young, and he does not know that he and Roy are of different fathers. As a result of the abuse he suffers, John harbors a hatred of shocking intensity toward his stepfather: "He lived for the day his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed." In balance to Gabriel's destruction of his self-esteem is John's secret satisfaction that he has been chosen for something better in life. He is a shy, awkward boy, but "he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had within himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself; and that, perhaps, With this power he might one day win the love which he longed for."

When it appears to him that his family has forgotten his birthday, John bitterly tells himself that it is all right, that they have done it before and he deserves no better, but his mother gives him money to buy a present and he is grateful to her. He goes to a movie in Times Square and finds himself sympathizing with the villainess, a "violent and unhappy woman," because "nothing tamed or broke her, nothing touched her, neither kindness, nor scorn, nor hatred, nor love."

The one person in the book that John respects and admires is Elisha, a boy at the church who is just a little older than him. They joke around in a tender, sparring way while setting up for the Saturday evening service, then they wrestle. In the novel's climax in Part Three John's spirituality is confirmed to the church members when he falls to the "threshing-floor" in a fit of religious ecstasy, flailing about and talking in unknown languages. The elders of the church (Sister McCandless, Sister Price and Praying Mother Washington) are delighted that he has "got religion," and Elisha takes responsibility for him as a "little brother."

His stepfather is hesitant to believe in John's spiritual conversion and points out that "it ain't all in the singing and the shouting-the way of holiness is a hard way," reflecting his own inability to lead a good life. John himself seems skeptical that what happened to

him was a meaningful, lasting religious conversion, but he is glad for the way that it gains him social status and binds him to Elisha.

Rachel Grimes

Gabriel and Florence's mother, who had been a slave before the Civil War.

Roy Grimes

John's younger half-brother, Roy is actually the second son named Royal to be fathered by Gabriel-the first died in a knife fight before Gabriel moved to New York and married Elizabeth. As his only son, Gabriel favors Roy, even though Gabriel thinks of himself as a man of God and Roy is wild, skipping Sunday school and arguing with his mother and hanging out in the streets with a gang.

On the Saturday in 1935 that this novel takes place, Roy comes home with a knife cut across his face, having been in a fight. His father is unable to accept Roy's wild ways, so he turns the situation on meek, churchgoing John, telling him that he should learn a lesson from this. When Elizabeth reminds Gabriel of the fate of the first Royal by telling him to discipline Roy "before somebody puts another knife in him and puts him in his grave," Gabriel slaps her Roy shouts With incredible daring at the abusive man: "You slap her again, you black bastard, and I swear to God I'll kill you."

Sister McCandless

One of the women who attends tarry services on Saturday night at the Temple of the Fire Baptized.

Esther McDonald

Gabriel had given up sinning and married Deborah when he met Esther, and before long he was having an affair with her. The affair only lasted for nine days before he ended it, but Esther came to him weeks later and told him she was pregnant. When Gabriel refused to leave Deborah and marry her, Esther decided not to blackmail him with public disclosure of her pregnancy. Showing a religious fervor that he could never get her to feel with his preaching, she said, "I shamed before my *God-to* make somebody make me cheap, like you done." She moved North with money Gabriel gave her and died while giving birth to Royal.

Royal McDonald

Gabriel's first son, Royal was raised by ills grandparents in the town that Gabriel lived in, but he never found out who his father was. Deborah befriended Royal's parents and

gave Gabriel periodic updates on the boy's life. The last time Gabriel saw Royal, there had been a racial incident in town, and white men were looking for any black man they could abuse. Gabriel thought of revealing his identity, but the fear of being caught in the street talking made him mutter a weak warn ing to Royal and hurry away. Two years later word came that Royal had been killed in a knife fight in Chicago.

Sister Price

One of the women who attends tarry services on Saturday night at the Temple of the Fire Baptized.

Richard

Richard was John's father, Elizabeth's true love. She had moved to New York to be with him, and they planned to be married, but one night after dropping her at her doorstep, while waiting on the subway platform, Richard was arrested. Three black robbers, escaping the police, had run past him, and the police had assumed he was with them and arrested him, held him in jail and tortured him to confess. He was released for lack of evidence, but the night of his release he slit his Wrists, having never found out that Elizabeth was pregnant.

Praying Mother Washington

One of the women who attends tarry services on Saturday night at the Temple of the Fire Baptized.

Madame Williams

Elizabeth's aunt that she lived with when she moved to Harlem. Madame Williams is a spiritualist, conducting séances in her apartment on Saturday nights.

Themes

Identity (Search For Self)

Go Tell It on the Mountain is primarily about John Grimes' quest to find out who he really is, to distinguish the values of those around him from the ones that he holds. It is no coincidence that the novel takes place on his birthday, which is the day representing a step forward into maturity, or that it is his fourteenth, marking the boundary between childhood and young adulthood because it implies the start of puberty. The point of growing up is discovering one's own identity.

John comes from a family that is involved in his life, but, because of his father's thoughtlessness and bullying tendencies, he cannot accept that his role in this family is who he really is. Even without knowing that Gabriel Grimes is not his real father, John holds him at a distance. This could be explained as a result of Gabriel's harshness, while Roy's wild ways, which reflect the childhood Gabriel had, might be the result of his father's narcissistic pampering.

The identity that John prefers is that of "Great Leader of his People,"_ a fantasy clearly derived from his education in the Bible. With hope, he sees glimmers of this Identity being possible in the praise he receives at school, but unfortunately his family's values are deeply ingrained and he views himself as a sinner. Looking at his features in a mirror, John does not know what to think of himself, "for the principle of their unity was indiscernible, and he could not tell what he most persistently desired to know: whether ills face was ugly or not.'"

To settle the question of ills identity, John goes beyond the features of his own personality and attaches his interests to someone outside of the family, Elisha. The loud, showy religious experience he has in the end is satisfying to his identity in several ways: it allows him to be like Elisha by having a seizure similar to his; it makes the strongly religious side of his family pleased by "converting" John into their religious life; and it satisfies his youthful ego by being loud and exotic and drawing everyone's attention to him.

Duty and Responsibility

In the middle of the novel comes a moment where Gabriel refuses to face his duty squarely, and the results of his action reverberate across time and end up affecting all of the members of the Grimes family. In this pivotal episode, Gabriel convinces himself that his responsibility to Deborah and to the people who value his preaching would be betrayed if he admitted to getting Esther pregnant. So he backs away from her, avoiding the touch of her hand, as if pretending that he is not responsible for the child could change his moral obligation.

As a result of his action, Esther left town to give birth, which probably causes the strain that made her die during labor. If his father had raised him, Royal would not have been spoiled the way his grandparents spoiled him, and his life would not have headed "towards the disaster that had been waiting for him from the moment he had been conceived." Florence might have been able to give up on the sibling rivalry of her childhood and concentrate on preserving her marriage if she had not received the letter that told her Gabriel had been unfaithful to her friend Deborah. If he had shared Royal's life, Gabriel would not have fooled himself and Elizabeth into thinking that he was willing to accept the duty of raising her child John, and they would therefore never have been married.

The novel certainly does not present responsibility as a pleasant thing, as seen in the way that John, feeling responsible for his family, feels like a sinner, while his brother Roy, who causes the family nothing but grief, sails along merrily with a clear conscience. In this book, where consequences carry on from one generation to the next, responsibility is treated seriously.

God and Religion

Although this book's main setting is a storefront church, and the strongest character, Gabriel, was once a successful preacher, and the main character, John, has a religious experience that helps him calm his greatest worries, it would be inaccurate to call this a book about religion. The truly devout characters, Elizabeth and Elisha, keep their religious feelings to themselves and only discuss them when asked. To Gabriel and John, religion is a matter of posturing, of behaving in certain accepted ways for the benefit of those watching. Gabriel's abuse of his family members indicates that he is aware of a difference between public and private life He seems to have no more faith in God's omnipotent power than Richard, who told Elizabeth, when she mentioned the love of Jesus:

"You can tell that puking bastard to kiss my big black ass." Richard was at least sincere in his disdain for God, while Gabriel as a result of his difficult childhood, has learned to say things that people want to hear, just like the Twenty-Four Elders he joined, who he thought of as "circus performers, each with his own special dazzling gift"

Race

The fact that the characters in this book are black is undeniably significant, but, because they seldom interact with white characters, this cannot be considered a book that pretends to deal with race relations. The presence of racism and bigotry is felt throughout the story: in the rape of Deborah and the subsequent beating of her father; in Gabriel's nervousness about talking to Royal in the street; in John's belief in his own special gift because a white teacher showed interest in him; in the treatment of Elizabeth and Richard by white policemen. Functionally, race is used here as a tool to highlight characteristics that are already present: the meek seem meeker and the bold

seem bolder when they let their personalities show in front of white people. There are very few positive white characters shown here, but Baldwin is not trying to portray reality, he is trying to show how things look from within this closed community. Blacks and whites seldom have any reason to interact here unless there is trouble.

Style

Setting

The setting of this novel-the impoverished part of New York known as Harlem, and more specifically the storefront church within the Harlem community-was undoubtedly a key reason for the book's popularity upon its first publication, giving intellectuals an inside look at a world not many of them had known. This setting may be the reason some people read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* today, even with the inner city well documented by television cameras. The important thing about this setting, though, is that it is integral to the personality of the characters, affecting them and being formed by who they are.

The adult members of the Grimes family, for instance, all came to New York for different reasons. Florence came first, thirty years earlier, rebelling against the limitations put on her as a woman; Gabriel to escape the deaths of his illegitimate son and his barren wife; and Elizabeth came with hope and love for Richard. The fact that three such diverse characters end up in the same small section of town says much about how narrowed opportunities for African-Americans were. Similarly, the fact that they all attend the Temple of the Fire Baptized despite their different reasons (Florence in despair, Gabriel to control and Elizabeth with true religious devotion) helps define the narrowness of the options each character has.

John is a true son of New York. He goes to Central Park to feel triumphant while looking out over the powerful metropolis and goes to a seedy theater in Times Square to experience the lower side of life. But he can also connect with his country roots at the local church, which is itself urban enough to have a busy hospital across the street.

Flashback

The novel starts on a specific Saturday morning in 1935, but it intermingles stories from the family that go back in time to 1876, and it refers to times even earlier-back to the time of John's grandmother Rachel on the plantation before the end of the Civil War in 1865. Technically, a flashback occurs within the mind of the person that it happens to, and it happens "in scene"-that is, the narrative travels to the specific place and time of the flashback and does not just summarize what happened then. The scene where Rachel learned that the slaves were free is not a flashback because it is presented in Florence's memory as something her mother told her; Richard's death is not rendered in flashback because the action is not described as it occurred, only the evidence that his landlady found the next day that he had slit his wrists. The sermon that Gabriel gave at the Twenty-Four Elders Revival Meeting *is* rendered as a flashback, presented in his memory with actual details. The "Prayers of the Saints" section of this book is told mostly in flashback, but returns periodically to the real setting of the story, John's fourteenth birthday.

Stream of Consciousness

Much of the final chapter of the book, "The Threshing-Floor," applies a form of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Thoughts are presented as they pass through John's mind without reason or order, imitating the ecstatic experience that he is having on the floor of the church. John's thoughts are not recorded directly, but are filtered through the third-person narrator, who interprets what John is thinking-it is, for instance, unlikely that John would use the words "malicious" and "ironic" to describe the voice inside of his head.

Historical Context

The Rise of Harlem

The Harlem area of New York City, where the Grimes family resides, is internationally famous as a predominantly African-American neighborhood with a rich cultural history spanning back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The first great wave of blacks started migrating to New York in the 1890s. Like Gabriel and Florence, this was the generation that had been born after slavery ended in 1865, the children of freed slaves in the South-a generation with a greater sense of freedom than any before them. Between 1890 and 1910, the black population in New York City tripled.

At first Harlem was planned as an upscale neighborhood for wealthy blacks, but an economic depression in 1904-1905 cut off money for investment and development. Huge apartments that were meant for wealthy families were cut up with makeshift walls or rented to several families to live in together. Blacks arriving in New York City almost always ended up in Harlem, where they were allowed a degree of peace they were not given anywhere else. They migrated from the South, where Jim Crow laws made it legal to keep blacks at economic disadvantage and where violence against blacks was left unpunished. They arrived from Panama, where thousands of workers from the West Indies had been transplanted to build the Panama Canal and then left without jobs when the canal was completed in 1914. They also came from the Armed Forces, since a great number of the 370,000 blacks who had served in World War I had seen racial tolerance in the rest of the world, particularly France, and found it hard to go back to their small-minded home towns.

By the 1920s, Harlem was a vibrant community, the center of the African-American world. The Harlem Renaissance is the term used for the intellectual and artistic community that flourished in Harlem in the 1920s. Harlem nightclubs, such as the famous Cotton Club, were popular with affluent white New Yorkers, so that black entertainers could earn more in a week in Harlem than they made in a month on the road, battling travel conditions and racism. As Harlem's fame grew, more people arrived.

But then in 1929, the stock market crashed, and in the months that followed the country sank into the worst financial depression in its history. No one had money for entertainers and the artists scattered to find jobs. Racist employment practices gave preference to unemployed whites over unemployed blacks. The Depression ruined Harlem: the thriving neighborhood became an overcrowded slum, where the lucky residents had menial jobs and the unlucky residents were unemployed. By 1935, the year this novel takes place, the former center of culture was well on its way to becoming an international symbol for poverty and urban blight.

Civil Rights

Go Tell It on the Mountain was published just as the Civil Rights movement in America was starting to show results, bringing greater social justice than there had been since the Civil War ended almost a century earlier. After the slaves were freed, black Americans were still not accorded equal social status. In the North, they were not held back by specific laws so much as by covert actions that were not talked about in public. In the South there were laws passed that prevented black citizens from advancing. Blacks were kept from gaining political power by voter registrati8on laws, which put restrictions on voters that favored whites. Some places required land ownership in order to vote, even though blacks had never been able to earn high enough wages to buy property; another favored trick was the I.Q. requirement, which allowed election judges to ask increasingly difficult questions of blacks until they failed to answer one, at which point they were rejected as voters.

In 1896 the Supreme Court approved the legality of segregation in America as long as both races were offered facilities that were "separate but equal." This led to a two-tiered society that seldom practiced equality. Throughout the South, blacks ate at different restaurants, slept at different motels, drank from different water fountains, rode on different train cars, etc. Although the accommodations for blacks were usually shabby, people of any race could be arrested for crossing the color line.

In the mid-1950s, due in part to writings by authors like Baldwin, blacks and whites both became less tolerant of discrimination. The Supreme Court of 1954 ruled that the idea of "separate but equal" was impossible, that one side would always be left with substandard facilities, and so they ordered that public schools had to be open to people of all races. In 1955, one of the modern heroes of race relations, Rosa Parks, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man-the resulting year-long boycott of the bus system, which made officials realize that they needed their black passengers as well as the white ones, brought international attention to the boycott's leader, Dr. Martin Luther King.

In 1957, Orval Faubus, Governor of Arkansas, stood with protesters in front of a high school in

Little Rock and refused to let nine black students enter; the President sent National Guard troops to protect the students, showing that the federal government would protect equality even if they had to act against the state government.

Critical Overview

Critical praise for the success of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has not faded since 1953, when the book was first published. One of the earliest reviews, by J. Saunders Redding in *The New York Herald Tribune Book Review* told potential readers that the book was more than just entertaining, and that "even the most insensitive of readers will put the book down with a troubled feeling of having 'looked on beauty bare.' "

While even the most insensitive of critics has recognized Baldwin's great achievement of having vividly recreated the life and times of a young African-American boy in Harlem, the problem facing critics has been in analyzing the book's significance. Early examinations, in keeping with the prevalence of racial segregation in the early 1950s, showed a fascination with the depiction of Harlem, and therefore early reviewers tended to group it with other novels by blacks at the time. An example is the review written by Granville Hicks in 1953 in the *New Leader* that mentioned that "[t]he other talented Negro artists, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, have recently written about Negroes without writing novels of protest." Hicks' review maintained that Baldwin's book was not primarily about race, but yet he categorized Baldwin with Wright and Ellison, viewing him as a black Writer at the same time he tried to play down race.

The technique of bringing race up while denying that race is an Issue provided the lead for Richard K. Barksdale's 1953 essay "Temple of the Fife Baptized," which began, "James Baldwin has written a very fine first novel. It is a story by a Negro, about Negroes, set in a predominantly Negro environment; and yet it is not essentially a 'Negro' novel." By 1958, the country had come face-to-face with the fact that segregation caused an unjust society: the Supreme Court had found segregation of public schools unconstitutional; Dr. King had led the boycott of the Montgomery bus system; and the President had sent federal troops to Arkansas to overrule state troops who were trying to obstruct integration. Critics stopped being concerned about which novels by black authors could rightly be considered "novels of protest" because protest was out in the open and no longer hidden in the pages of literature.

Robert Bone's 1958 essay "James Baldwin," revised when it was included in his 1965 book *The Negro Novel In America,* unquestionably found race to be the most significant factor in *Go Tell It on the Mountain:* "The overwhelming fact of Baldwin's childhood was his victimization by the white power structure,"_ he wrote, reflecting the times, using a phrase ("white power structure") that would not have been available to the novel's first reviewers.

As the 1960s progressed, race relations became even more of a topic for front pages, and, consequently, less fertile territory for reviewers. Analyses of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* tended to look at its less obvious themes, such as the Freudian relationship between John and Gabriel and the homoerotic one between John and Elisha, or the subculture of the evangelical church in Harlem. Edward Margolies traced the objective distance gained by the passage of fifteen years since the novel's publication: "This is in a sense Baldwin's most ambitious book, in that he endeavors here not only to

interconnect the lives and psychology of all the characters but also to relate the Southern Negro experience and the consequent of urban slum living."

In the 1970s Shirley S. Allen dismisses the earlier critics who had overemphasized the cultural significance of the novel: it deserved, she said, "a higher place in critical esteem than it generally has been accorded. Although critics have recognized its widespread appeal, often asserting that it is Baldwin's best work, and although teachers of literature have incorporated it into the standard literature, they assume that the work is primarily important as an interpretation of 'the black experience,' comparing it with *Invisible Man, Native Son* and Baldwin's own essays." Those essays, written mostly in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, may be what eventually drew readers away from looking at it as a novel about race, because the author showed so much awareness of race in his nonfiction writing, leaving literary critics to examine instead areas like psychology and religion, where they might hope to turn up new ideas.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an Assistant Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland and has written numerous critical articles for essay collections, journals, and educational publishers. In the following essay she explores how the variety of narrative voices in Go Tell It on the Mountain *illustrate how psychological and social forces can impede the search for self.*

In his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* James Baldwin divides his narrative into three distinct parts. The first section, "The Seventh Day," sets the novel's central action, what Shirley S. Allen, in "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's 'Go Tell It on the Mountain,'" calls John's "initiation into manhood." John completes that initiation and discovers a sense of self in the closing section, "The Threshing Floor."

Between these two sections comes "The Prayers of the Saints," which is broken into three narratives that focus on the history of John's family: his stepfather Gabriel, his mother Elizabeth, and his Aunt Florence. Marcus Klein in "James Baldwin: A Question of Identity," argues that the different narrative voices in this section produce "a technical fault" in the novel since "John doesn't really know the lives of his aunt, his stepfather, and his mother. Only the reader does." Yet Baldwin's juxtaposition of these family stories with John's own contextualizes his struggles to find his identity. The histories of his stepfather, his aunt, and his mother illuminate the same choices and obstacles John faces on his journey to selfhood.

The first section of the novel reveals John's confusion over his future. "The Seventh Day" opens with John lying in bed on the morning of his fourteenth birthday, considering his family's expectations that he will become a preacher like his father. He acknowledges, though, his lack of devotion to the church and his inability to feel the "joy" others feel in service to God.

The primary impediment to John's acceptance of "the holy life" lies in his destructive relationship with his father. Gabriel has severely beaten John throughout his childhood and has never been able to accept him as his own son. John, unaware that Gabriel is not his biological father, Cannot understand his father's coldness and brutality. When he sees his father's tender concern over Roy's injuries, John is forced to admit that his father loves his brother but not him.

At this point, John voices his hatred for his father, admitting that "he lived for the day when his father would be dying and he ... would curse him on his deathbed" This hatred prompts his decision not to follow in his father's path. Since his father was "God's minister" and he knew that he would have to first bow down to his father before he could " bow down to God, his heart also becomes "hardened against the Lord."

John's second option is to devote himself to the world of the city, where, as some have insisted, he "might become a Great Leader of His People." John admits little interest in leading his people, but life outside of the church tempts him, offering a world "where he

would eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to the movies as often as he wished." Many have recognized his superior intelligence, which gives him a sense of "power that other people lacked," a power that might some day enable him to become successful in the world outside the church and to gain the love and recognition that he longs for.

John often escapes the bleakness of his neighborhood and walks downtown where he observes fine shops and beautiful women. Here he decides that devoting one's life to the church is the "narrow way," full of poverty and hard work. Yet, his father has told him that he will never be accepted into the City world because of the color of his skin. The issue of racism adds to John's suffering and thus becomes another impetus for his struggle to find salvation.

His father has also taught him that this life is filled with sin, which John sees illustrated during that afternoon in a movie about a white "evil" woman making a "glorious" fall from grace. While John admires her independence, as she faces damnation on her deathbed, his fear of a similar end resurfaces. Just that morning, after masturbating in his bed, John had felt "the darkness of his sin" and a "wickedness" in Jus heart. The conflicting urges to gain salvation, to flee his father's control and brutality, and to enjoy success and comforts in the outside world produce confusion and prevent a clear vision of his future.

In the second section, members of John's family attempt to pray for comfort, salvation and a sense of communal identity as they, like John, assess their past and present conflicts and look to their future. All four suffer the same obstacles of racism, poverty, and failed relationships that have impeded their search for selfhood. John's own tortured struggle interrupts each narrative, forcing the reader to return the focus to him and to recognize the similarities among the histories.

Florence's prayer begins the novel's second section and traces her battle against the same impediments that John faces. She, like John, tries to fight her pride and humble herself before God but fails. As she recalls her past, she reveals 'how Gabriel had dominated her life but in a different sense than he does John's. When Florence was a child, her mother put all her energies into raising and providing for Gabriel while Florence's needs were ignored. She also remembers incidents that illustrated the racism that Gabriel warns will prevent John from enjoying a life outside of the church. She recounts the devastating effects the rape had on Deborah and suggests that differences in their sign tone helped break up her marriage to Frank.

As a result of her family problems and experiences with racism, she, like John, is filled with hatred and bitterness but also the fear of death. Florence's prayer complicates John's quest, though, when she asks God why she "who had only sought to walk upright" was going to die "alone and in poverty, in a dirty, furnished room." The fact of her unrelieved suffering suggests John's religion might not save nor grant him a clear sense of self.

In his prayer, Gabriel provides another example of one who has been unable to find peace through devotion to the church. His faith fails to help him assuage his feelings of guilt over his affair with Esther and the birth of his illegitimate child, Royal. He notes that even after his conversion, he is plagued by dreams of temptation that produce frustration and doubt over his religious commitment. The insecurities that result from the racism he has experienced and his own capacity for sin prompt his abusive behavior toward his family and his especially harsh treatment of John. By refusing to acknowledge the illegitimate John as his son, Gabriel, in effect, refuses to acknowledge his own illegitimate son, Royal, and to confront the guilt associated with his birth.

Elizabeth's prayer begins with a focus on John. As she sits in the church, she weeps for John's deliverance, "that he might be carried, past wrath unspeakable, into a state of grace." She then recounts a life filled with pain and loss. Like John, she has suffered from the absence of love, first when she is separated from her father and then when the injustice of the "white world" takes Richard from her. Her dream of providing a happy home for John crumbles under Gabriel's stern hand.

She has, however, been able to renew and find comfort in her faith, believing that "only God could establish order in this chaos; to Him the soul must turn to be delivered." Her belief in God's grace and in John's abilities and her love for him provides comfort for John. She tells him she knows "there's a whole lot of things you don't understand," but that God will help him find his way, and she predicts that he will turn into a "fine man."

Elizabeth's prayer is brought to an abrupt close when she hears John's cries as he writhes on the threshing floor. John's anguish over his relationship with his father and his inability to find a sense of selfhood combine with his fear of damnation and produce visions of torment. At this point, John reaches out to God, determining that a devotion to the church is the only route to salvation. After John's conversion in the church, Elisha, another character that Baldwin includes in the novel to provide a context for John's struggle to achieve identity, promises to serve as his brother and protector.

In the novel's first section, John notes that Elisha has experienced the same sexual stirrings as does John, and that Elisha, after being reprimanded by the preacher, reasserted his devotion to his religion and stopped his "disorderly walking" with Ella Mae. Elisha's support throughout the novel, and especially at the close as the family walks home after church, prompts John's closing declaration, "I'm ready. I'm coming. I'm on my way." John thus appears to have found his place in his commitment to God and the church.

However, narrative elements in the novel's final section, as well as in the prayers of his family, suggest that John's resolution may be tenuous. His conversion has not settled the conflict with his father or gained John his love and respect, as evidenced by Gabriel's cold response to his son's newfound joy. Gabriel's conversation with his sister as they are trailing behind John and Elisha reveals his persistent inability to face his past failures and to accept John as his son. Gabriel's continued rejection and the peripheral threat of racism and poverty remain, and thus threaten to weaken John's sense of self and his devotion to his religion.

Baldwin's juxtaposition of narrative voice in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* provides no easy answers for John as he struggles to rise above racism, poverty, and family tensions in order to define himself and his place in his world. In his successful merging of structure and thematic import, Baldwin illustrates the difficulties inherent in the quest for selfhood.

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Bawer discusses some of the religious aspects of Go Tell It on the Mountain.

Baldwin's own most valiant attempt to capture the "ambiguity and irony of Negro life" was his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), which centers on a Harlem family not unlike his own. Like the Trinitarian God, the book is divided into three parts: John" who is the focus of the first and third parts (and who, like Baldwin, is known as "Frog Eyes"), is the stepson of Gabriel, a preacher who believes "that all white people [are] wicked, and that God [is] going to bring them low," and who feels that God has promised him a son to carry on his holy work; the second part, itself divided in three and consisting largely of flashbacks, outlines the earlier lives of Gabriel (who many years ago, we learn, had a mistress and an illegitimate son, both of whom died as a consequence of his refusal to acknowledge them), of Gabriel's sister Florence, and of his second wife, Elizabeth (whose ill-fated and fervently atheistic first lover, John's father, loved art as much as Gabriel loves God). Baldwin renders this family's inner history-the details of which John will probably never know, though It has profoundly influenced his own life-with both the tenderest sympathy and the harshest insight; he sees the life of faith from both inside and out, and by exploring the past through these several pairs of eyes not only conveys something of the richness and mystery of a family's life but reminds us that to understand is to forgive. And he does a remarkably vivid job of capturing the streets of New York as seen by a boy raised on Pentecostal sermons:

And certainly perdition sucked at the feet of the people who walked there, and cried in the lights, in the gigantic towers, the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses; ills words were printed on the great movie posters that invited people to SID It was the roar of the damned that filled Broadway, where motor cars and buses and the hurrying people disputed every inch with death. *Broadway* the way that led to death was broad, and many could be found thereon: but narrow was the way that led to life eternal, and few there were who found It.

The novel, whose style has something of the stateliness of the King James Bible and the music of black vernacular, splendidly evokes Harlem's sights and sounds, its frustrations and hypocrisies. Baldwin excels at small descriptive touches, as when Gabriel observes the "distant and angry compassion" in his illegitimate son's face. This is, as Campbell says, [in his *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin]* "Baldwin's most accomplished novel, technically, and his most disciplined," free of the "idealizations, the sentimentality, the jarring tones and overlong conversations, even the moral fervour, which, separately or all at once, were to mar, in part or whole, his later novels."

Yet Campbell is also right to call *Go Tell It on the Mountain* "somewhat stiff and formal." Though Baldwin aims for a natural-seeming lyricism (and though the novel does rise to

beautiful lyrical heights), there is too often an air of contrivance about it. Like a sermon in a black church, the prose is sometimes poetic and inspired, sometimes windy, repetitious, bombastic. Baldwin hammers us relentlessly with biblical verses-and with good reason, for his purpose is to Impress upon us the ubiquity of religion in John's family and his sense of being bound inextricably to God-but it doesn't take long before we're weary of it all and the verses seem like mere gimmickry. Many of the novel's more protracted sentences, too, which should sound fresh and musical-like hymns, say, With long melodic lines-strike one as rather too self-consciously constructed; and the frequent flashbacks-which were to become a familiar device in Baldwin's work, as if to suggest the immense history that lies behind even the most seemingly negligible occurrence in black America-are less dramatically effective than they are confusing.

Source: Bruce Bawer, "Race and Art. James Baldwin" in *The Aspect of Eternity' Essays by Bruce Bawer,* Graywolf Press, 1993, pp. 17-35.

Critical Essay #3

A review of Go Tell It on the Mountain *which focuses on Baldwin's use of irony.*

Critics have complained that the point of view in James Baldwin's first novel is problematical. Very early in the novel we are told of the adolescent protagonist's religious doubts and we are led to trust a narrator who seems to state his case unambiguously. We are told in an opening church scene that John Grimes has no real belief, but it is the faith of his family and fellow church members that make the concept of faith real to him. Later, at the novel's end, during John's conversion, (when the reader would expect John's religious conflicts to end), no real resolution is offered. The reader is left with the question: Has John been converted (or saved) or not? The question remains because of Baldwin's use of an ironic voice during the conversion scene and his resort to heavy situational or dramatic irony.

At the moment of his "salvation," when John is knocked to the floor by the power of the Holy Ghost, he hears a "malicious, ironic voice which insist(s), that he rise-and, at once, ... leave this temple and go out into the world." The ironic voice tells John to get up and take charge of his life. It urges John to be in awe of no one; least of all his father (who is also John's Pastor and who, ironically, stands over him with an accusatory air during his "conversion"). To the voice, John's father, and by implication, God-the-Father, are judgmental forces that should be defied: "Get up, John," the voice says, "Get up, boy. Don't let him keep you there. You got everything your Daddy got."

Yet, when the ironic voice leaves, John hears another voice which tells him to "Go through." Shortly after this voice is heard, John experiences his "conversion": "And a sweetness filled John as he heard this voice, and heard the sound of singing: The singing was for him ... the light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul." The ironic voice, it seems, has been banished forever.

Yet, immediately after John has "come through," Baldwin shifts from narrative to dramatic irony. At the very moment when his mother's face should be a welcome sight (as a fellow saint), John feels total estrangement. The converted's first impulse is to tell everyone how he's "got over"-to "go tell it on the mountain." But at John's conversion the novel's very title is rendered ironic. John has no voice to speak to his mother or the other saints; "no language, no second sight, no power to see into the heart of any other." "Salvation" has meant learning the truth about his own heart and it is a truth so horrifying that he knows "he could never tell it," because it would be blasphemous.

When John leaves the stone front church with his fellow "saints,"' the Harlem streets are appropriately still quite filthy. Gutter cats (emblematic of nightly sexual jaunts) slink by. The uncomprehending saints rejoice at having recovered one "lost sheep" and equally rejoice when sirens wail, indicating another sinner "struck down."

Thus, on this day of rebirth, one day after his natural birthday, John is neither purged nor "washed whiter than snow." If he saw his face darkly in the household mirror before, there is more profound darkness to come:

He would weep again, his heart insisted, for now his weeping had begun; he would rage again, said the shifting air, for the lions of rage had been unloosed; he would be in darkness again, in fire again, now that he had seen the fire and the darkness. He was free-whom the Son sets free is free indeed-he had only to stand fast in his liberty. He was in battle no longer, this unfolding Lord's day, with this avenue, these houses, the sleeping, staring, shouting people, but had entered into battle With Jacob's angel, With the princes and the powers of the air."

Perhaps John's abiding sense of evil comes from his burgeoning homosexuality. The joy John feels at being "converted" is rooted in the wellspring of despair relieved only by the loving arm of his fellow "saint," Elijah, which hangs *heavily* on John's shoulder as they walk away from the church.

It is Elijah who seals John's "deliverance" with a "holy kiss." But how holy is this kiss when John has felt such unambiguous infatuation for his virile, handsome friend? Thus the irony of John's "conversion" is tripled: it leaves him with a deeper sense of mankind's innate evil; it frees him, not from sin, but from the tyranny of his father's authoritarian control by replacing his father with another more supportive male presence; finally it liberates him from "closet" feelings and brings into the light his homoerotic needs.

When John says "I'm coming... I'm on my way" at the novel's end, the reader cannot be sure which "Promised Land" he refers to.

Through ironic voices and situational irony, Baldwin distances himself from his protagonist and casts doubt upon the meaning of John's salvation, leaving it to the reader to wrest his own interpretation from the multiple directions of the text.

Source: Maria K Mootry, A review of *Go Tell It on the Mountain,"* in *The Explicator,* Vol. 43, No.2, Winter, 1985, pp. 50-52.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Allen explores Baldwin's use of irony in Go Tell It on the Mountain *as a means for answering various questions raised while interpreting the novel.*

A number of questions raised in critical interpretations of James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* can be answered by studying his use of irony. Such questions include Baldwin's artistic distance from the characters, his attitude toward their religious beliefs, the identity of the ironic voice in Part Three, and the meaning of the novel's denouement. Although there are at least three different kinds of irony in the novel, they are closely related because they result from the narrative technique Baldwin employs, an internal and subjective point of view limited to the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the main character. In order to transcend the limitations of this point of view, Baldwin uses irony in the narrator's diction, irony of statement and event in the action, and an ironic voice as a character.

In the major action of the novel, which is the struggle of young John Grimes to leave childhood and achieve maturity with a sense of his own identity, the narrator is limited to John's internal point of view. Although he speaks in the third person, this point of View is strictly maintained, so that even the physical appearance of the hero is described subjectively through comments he hears from others and the images he sees in the mirror.

The point of view is further limited by confinement in time. Although the narrator uses the past tense, he recounts events as they happen, unedited by the perspective of time. We follow John Grimes through the course of his fourteenth birthday as if we were experiencing the events with him. Careful use of adverbs denoting present time, such as "now" and "still," maintain this sense of contemporary action. So does a scrupulous use of tenses, particularly the past-perfect for every event occurring even recently before the moment of the present action and frequent use of "would" to express future time in the past tense. A few sentences taken from the episode of Roy's injury illustrate Baldwin's use of tenses:

His mother leaned over and looked into Roy's face with a sad, sympathetic murmur. Yet, John felt, she had seen instantly the extent of the danger to Roy's eye and to his life, and was beyond that worry now.
Now she was merely marking time, as it were, and preparing herself against the moment when her husband's anger would turn, full force, against her.

The effect of this narrative style is immediacy and directness like the first-person, present tense point of view, but it avoids the literary awkwardness of that form., Although such a narrator is not uncommon in modern fiction, Baldwin's use is remarkable for consistency and suppleness. He also exploits fully the freedom of a third-person narrator to use whatever diction the author chooses without limitation to language characteristic of the protagonist. Baldwin's excellent command of language

(improved over his earliest short stories) and his talent for almost poetic expression are used to present the thoughts of a Harlem schoolboy without restriction to his grammar and vocabulary.

In fact, the contrast between the narrator's diction and the dialogue of the characters emphasizes both the universality of their inner conflicts and the particular circumstances of their lives as Negroes in America. Baldwin's ear for language and his skill at representing it in print are nowhere better displayed than in the dialogue of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* where the dialect is conveyed with such subtlety and economy that the rhythms, accent, and colloquialisms of Harlem speech do not blur the individuality and dignity of the speakers. Contrasted with the dialogue is the educated and highly literate voice of the internal narrator, compelling the reader's understanding and sympathy beyond suggestions of race or class.

The separation between the subjective narrator and the character that is implied by use of the third-person form is also useful in this novel because in Part Two, "The Prayers of the Saints," the narrator enters the minds of three other characters serially, maintaining the same point of view in relation to each as his relation to John in Part One and Part Three. The narrator becomes in thoughts, feelings, and perceptions John's aunt, then his stepfather, then his mother; but his diction remains his own. This device is important for preserving the continuity of the novel, which has few external indications of continuity.

Having set up this type of narrator, with immediate and intimate knowledge of the character, Baldwin partially overcomes his limitation to a single, internal point of view by introducing verbal irony into his diction. Sometimes he merely uses a word with connotations opposite to the values assumed by the character, as when he describes the great preaching mission that Gabriel regards as the most important of his career as "a monster revival meeting" and his more venerable colleagues as "war horses." Sometimes he simply lifts out of its churchly context a word used with religious conviction by the characters, as when he speaks of the saints doing their housecleaning or refers to Praying Mother Washington as "the praying mother." Several times he describes obviously human motives in terms of divine providence with such naiveté that the statement becomes ironic:

Tarry service officially began at eight, but it could begin at any time, whenever the Lord moved one of the Saints to enter the church and pray. It was seldom, however, that anyone arrived before eight thirty, the Spent of the Lord being sufficiently tolerant to allow the Saints time to do their Saturday-night shopping, clean their houses, and put their children to bed.

He also uses biblical language to describe an action contrary to the spirit of biblical precept and thus reveals hypocrisy in the pious:

The ministers were being served alone in the upper room of the lodge hall-the less-specialized workers in Christ's vineyard were being fed at a table downstairs.

Although much of the irony is related to the religious views and practices of the characters, some is purely secular:

Elizabeth found herself in an ugly back room in Harlem in the home of her aunt's relative, a woman whose respectability was Immediately evident from the incense she burned in her rooms and the spiritualist séances she held every Saturday night.

The ironic detachment of the narrator is subtly suggested by Baldwin's careful use of the past tense to express a timeless conviction: "For the rebirth of the soul was perpetual; only rebirth every hour could stay the hand of Satan."

Such irony in the narrator's voice runs the risk of leading the reader's sympathy away from the characters and breaking the illusion of intimacy. Indeed, Wallace Graves has charged Baldwin with "literary cuteness" and lack of "moral energy" (honesty) in his treatment of John's mother and natural father, Elizabeth and Richard, because of the narrator's 'verbal irony in "Elizabeth's Prayer," where he finds a "shift in technique" from the "highly serious narrator elsewhere in the book." The narrator's irony, however, is not limited to one section of the novel, and it avoids literary cuteness by its subtlety and sparseness. The ironic voice that speaks occasionally through the narrator's diction merely reminds us that there are other points of view from which the ideas and actions might be regarded. Moreover, in many cases the character whose thoughts are being presented may actually share this double view, consciously or unconsciously. A good example is the description of Sister McCandless, seen through John's mind but infused with the narrator's irony:

There were times-whenever, in fact, the Lord had shown His favor by working through her-when whatever Sister McCandless said sounded like a threat. Tonight she was still very much under the influence of the sermon she had preached the night before. She was an enormous woman, one of the biggest and blackest God had ever made, and He had blessed her with a mighty voice with which to Sing and preach.

Similar ambiguity is found in Elizabeth's view of her aunt's threat to move heaven and earth:

Without, however, so much as looking at Heaven, and without troubling any more of the earth than that part of it which held the court house, she won the day.

Since both John and Elizabeth have serious reservations about the accepted view of the character being described, the irony may reflect their own feelings expressed in the more sophisticated language of the narrator.

The narrator's sophistication and detachment are balanced by his serious tone and poetic intensity of expression in describing important events or psychological perceptions in the lives of his major characters, so that his occasional irony is more like a wry smile than ridicule. The touch of humor in an otherwise passionately serious work relieves tension and gives the complexity of view needed to avoid sentimentality in so closely autobiographical a novel.

Baldwin also uses other kinds of irony to escape from the limitations of the subjective narrator in *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* Most obvious is the dramatic irony made possible by the three long flashbacks, which give the reader information unknown to other characters. For example, when Gabriel is thinking over the events in his life, the reader already knows, because of Florence's revelations, that Gabriel's wife is aware of his infidelity; and therefore the reader finds much irony in his account of scenes between them. Baldwin also uses irony of event to give the reader a corrective viewpoint So Gabriel's two chance meetings with his bastard son occur under circumstances that em phasize sexual potency and thus contradict the purely paternal relationship Gabriel assumes.

But the most important and pervasive kind of irony in this novel is developed through the use of biblical texts and Christian doctrine to comment upon the attitudes and actions of the characters. Critics disagree about Baldwin's attitude toward the religious faith he ascribes to the characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* often citing statements from Baldwin's subsequent essays to bolster, their arguments. The question is important for understanding the novel, since its main action is the conversion of the hero to that faith and the reader must know whether this resolution is tragic or victorious. Aside from other evidence, unrelated to the subject of irony, which I believe points to the latter interpretation, a cogent argument can be found in Baldwin's use of this religious faith to pronounce judgment on his characters by irony of statement.

For example, Gabriel is ironically judged by his own quotations from the Bible and doctrines of the church. Under the title "Gabriel's Prayer" is an epigraph taken from a Negro spiritual, which asserts, "I ain't no stranger now." This expresses Gabriel's conviction that he is "saved," the fundamental tenet of his religious faith and the basis for his holier-than-thou attitude. If this assumption were allowed to stand uncorrected, the reader would condemn that faith as illusory and deplore John's conversion to it, since Gabriel is revealed as more devilish than saintly. But Baldwin carefully shows the irony of Gabriel's assumption by contrasting it with his own preaching. We learn early in the novel that he has taught his sons that they are in more danger of damnation than African savages precisely because they are not strangers to the gospel. In one of his sermons, he stresses the need for humility and consciousness of Sin before God: "When we cease to tremble before him we have turned out of the way." In his thoughts about the tarry service, he remembers that "the rebirth of the soul is perpetual." Gabriel, the preacher and expositor of the faith, thus passes ironic judgment on his own self-righteousness.

Baldwin makes ironic Gabriel's favorite text, which is Isaiah's message to Hezekiah: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live"-a quotation Gabriel uses both to terrify ills children and to assert his own righteousness. The first mention of this text is Ironically placed just after the breakfast scene, which has shown how disordered Gabriel's house is in its family relationships. A second mention during Florence's prayer suggests the further irony that Gabriel is unaware of his own approaching death, or at least of the inevitability of death. But more significantly, the text is used to make ironic Gabriel's unshakeable confidence in the "sign" he believes he received from God. He seizes upon the advent of Elizabeth and her bastard as the sign that God has forgiven

him after he has ignored a sign that the reader recognizes as similar to that given Hezekiah the moment after Esther told him of her pregnancy, when the sun stood still and the earth was startled beneath his feet.

In another instance Gabriel's belief that God speaks aloud to men, sometimes through thunder, is turned ironically against his assumption of righteousness. First mentioned early in the novel, this belief becomes important during Deborah's confrontation of Gabriel with his mistreatment of Esther. He justifies his action as God's will: "'The Lord He held me back,' he said, hearing the thunder, watching the lightning. 'He put out His hand and held me back.' " To make certain that the reader sees the irony, Baldwin has Gabriel repeat his belief about the thunder: "'Listen. God is talking.'" Gabriel is thus contradicted by the voice of his own God. The final irony on this theme occurs in the conversation between Gabriel and Florence at the end of the novel:

"I been listening many a nighttime long," said Florence, then, "and He ain't never spoke to me " "He ain't never spoke," said Gabriel, "because you ain't never wanted to hear you just wanted Him to tell you your way was right"

Although Gabriel is the character most often ironically judged by his own religious convictions, Florence and Elizabeth also unwittingly pronounce judgment on themselves. Florence recites the conditions for successful prayer and then fails to meet them in her cry for salvation. Elizabeth tells herself that she is on her way up the steep side of the mountain, and then contracts a loveless marriage as "a hiding-place hewn in the side of the mountain."

By using the tenets of their faith for ironic comment upon the characters' actions and attitudes, Baldwin transcends the limitations of his subjective narrator and at the same time establishes as trustworthy the religious faith they profess, even when they misinterpret it. Within the novel the universe works according to the principles of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, and therefore John's conversion is the opening of his eyes to truth-a giant step on his way up the mountain.

In Part Three, "The Threshing Floor," Baldwin introduces an ironic voice that speaks to John during the early stages of his internal struggle. Critics disagree about the identity of this anonymous internal speaker. David Noble asserts that it is the voice of Gabriel, because it expresses Gabriel's wish that John would get up off the threshing floor. In order to accept this identification the reader must see Gabriel as a conscious hypocrite who could encourage John to rebel against his authority to prevent John's salvation, but Baldwin carefully shows Gabriel as an unconscious hypocrite, never capable of overt double-dealing. Other critics have taken the ironic voice as John's own common sense, fighting a losing battle against his weakness for hysterical religion. If the voice is common sense, then John's conversion is a tragedy and his joyful faith an illusion; and this interpretation is contradicted by the tone of the last few pages, by the meaning of the book's title and supporting epigraph, and by the serious attitude toward religious faith implied by Baldwin's use of it for ironic comment. Moreover, John's struggle on the threshing floor is described in terms of birth imagery, and the accomplished delivery sets him free from the womb of childhood. After his conversion he stands up to his

father on the equal footing of adulthood, refuting Gabriel's scornful doubts, openly recognizing the enmity between them, and refusing to obey his command. Obedience to the urging of the ironic voice would have prevented this deliverance and left John in his state of childish rebellion, a prisoner to his longing for parental love and his feeling of sexual guilt.

In terms of the novel, we see the ironic voice as an enemy who presses John to do what Gabriel secretly hopes he will do, what Florence did when she rejected her brother's church and her brother's God. The narrator describes it as malicious: "He wanted to rise-a malicious, ironic voice insisted that he rise-and, at once, to leave this temple and go out into the world." The voice comes from within John, expressing his own wishes, and its main attack is against any belief in this religion, which it attempts to discredit by associating it with "niggers" and by ridiculing the Bible's story of Noah's curse on Ham. The voice, then, is the voice of unbelief within John, which Baldwin describes as predominant in his state of mind before his conversion. At the beginning of the tarry service he is scornful of the praying women and replies to a kindly, though pious, remark by Sister Price with "a smile that, despite the shy gratitude it was meant to convey, did not escape being ironic, or even malicious." Like Florence, who prays, "Lord, help my unbelief," he is not a believer. His unbelief and hidden scorn are expressed by the ironic voice in the first stages of his struggle on the threshing floor.

The voice also expresses his rebellion against his father, his father's religion, and his father's social status. It labels the tarry service as a practice of "niggers," with the implication that John is above that level, and its spurs him to resist his father's authority:

Then the ironic voice spoke again, saying: "Get up, John Getup, boy. Don't let him keep you here. You got everything your daddy got."

This explicit connection of his sexual maturity with his father's enmity brings him to the brink of understanding, but it is not until the ironic voice leaves him that John is able to penetrate the mystery:

But now he knew, for irony had left him, that he was searching something, hidden in the darkness, that must be found. He would die if it was not found.

When he has rid himself of malice, he is free to search the subconscious depths of his mind until he grasps the true relationship of father and son-the Oedipal situation common to all human experience or, in Baldwin's interpretation, original sin.

Ridding oneself of malice is a necessary condition to salvation. Florence, unable to escape her hatred of Gabriel, founders on this rock, just as Gabriel's pride prevents him from reaching true understanding of the Oedipal situation. When John's malicious irony is swept away, he faces the psychic realities of his subconscious, and then only fear is left-the fear of being an adult, unprotected by parental love and responsible for his own life. Overcoming this fear is the final step-the step Elizabeth has not yet been able to take, and John makes it with Elisha's help. The ironic voice of unbelief, of the devil, of

childish rebellion is replaced with the humble voice of faith, of God's angel, of mature self-acceptance, saying, "Yes, go through."

Perhaps Baldwin is suggesting that all irony is in a sense malicious, that human problems cannot be solved by sophisticated detachment or even common sense reasonableness. Certainly the ironic voice of the narrator is lost in the passionate seriousness of John's religious experience, which is the climax and resolution of his conflict.

Source: Shirley S. Allen, *"The Ironic Voice* In Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain," in *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation,* edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, Howard University Press, 1977, pp. 30-37.

Adaptations

James Baldwin, Author, a videocassette from the Black Americans of Achievement collection, available from Schlessinger Video, 1994.

James Baldwin- The Price of the Ticket, a videocassette, available from California Newsreel, 1990.

My Childhood: Hubert Humphrey and James Baldwin. Videocassette of a 1964 motion picture from Benchmark Films, 1989.

The View From Here: A National Press Club Address by James Baldwin. Audio cassette available from Spoken Arts, 1988.

James Baldwin: An Interview with Kay Bonetti is an audio cassette available from American Audio Prose Library, 1984.

James Baldwin, an audio cassette from Tapes for Readers, 1979.

The Struggle, by James Baldwin. This is a record album from Buddha Records, #BDS2004, 1960.

Topics for Further Study

The adult characters in this book have moved to New York from the South, a move that was common among blacks in the early decades of the twentieth century. Choose a major northern industrial town, such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, or New York, and research the migration patterns of blacks to that city. Explain such details as how many people came from what states and how their arrival affected the city's political structure.

Storefront evangelical churches like the Temple of the Fire Baptized portrayed are a staple of American religion. Find out about one and report on its history, its structure, its membership, etc. If you live in a place that does not have any small churches like this one, do your report on a television ministry or one that is conducted over the Internet.

While spiritual hymns represent an important part of church life in this novel, the greatest musical influence seems to be when John, as an infant, is transfixed by the blues music that is playing in the hall of Florence's building. Explain the historical relationship between gospel music and blues, showing the evolution of each.

Compare and Contrast

1935: America was, like most of the world, in the midst of a long economic depression, which began with the collapse of the stock market on October 29, 1929 and lingered into the early 1940s.

1953: The United States economy finally absorbed the returning veterans from World War II, reaching the lowest unemployment rate since the war ended in 1945.

Today: The stock market reaches new highs every month, which keeps production high and unemployment low.

1935: Adolph Hitler, having become the chancellor of Germany two years earlier, began exercising the dictatorial control that would eventually lead to the extermination of millions of Jews as part of his government's "Final Solution."

1953: Josef Stalin died. He had ruled the Soviet Union Since 1928, and there are unconfirmed estimates that his government killed as many millions of citizens as were killed during the Nazi Holocaust.

Today: Mass murders by governments against various ethnic groups continues, including 250,000 killed in Bosnia in 1995 and 150,000 Tutsi civilians killed in Rwanda.

1935: Crime syndicates that established their power during Prohibition (1920 to 1933) continued to do battle with the government, making legends out of criminals such as Ai Capone, John Dillinger and Dutch Schultz.

1953: America was in the middle of the Cold War, with citizens suspected of belonging to the Communist party or associating with anyone who did could be blacklisted and lose their jobs.

Today: With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country no longer fears Communist influences; although alcohol is legal, the government wages a continuing "war on drugs."

1935: The Social Security Act was passed in order to offer government aid to senior citizens.

1953: During the post-war prosperity, the country experienced a huge swell in the birth rate, creating the "Baby Boom" generation of those born between 1947 and 1961.

Today: Government economists predict that unless the system is restructured the Social Security system will be driven to bankruptcy when the baby boomers start retiring in the year 2012.

What Do I Read Next?

Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz* takes place in Harlem in the 1920s and gives a stylized sense of how the community felt and operated.

James Baldwin is even more respected as one of the great essayists of his time than for his fiction. The comprehensive collection *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction,* 1948-1985, offers the best of Baldwin's works in one huge volume.

In December 1971, Baldwin appeared on the television show "Soul" with young rising poet Nikki Giovanni, known then for her militant stand on racial issues. The transcript of their conversation about the state of race relations in America was published as a book in 1973 titled *A Dialog.* A similarly interesting conversation, also transcribed to book form in 1971, is *A Rap On Race,* which renders the exchange between Baldwin and white anthropologist Margaret Mead.

In 1989, after James Baldwin's death, Simon & Schuster published a collection of essays, poems, and memoirs about him from writers whose life he had touched. The collection, *James Baldwin: The Legacy,* contains short works by such well-known authors as Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, William Styron, Chinua Achebe, Mary McCarthy and more, collectively giving a picture of Baldwin's gentle intelligence.

Giovanni's Room, Baldwin's second novel, published in 1956, is generally not considered a masterpiece in the same realm as *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* but it is highly regarded nonetheless. It is the story of David, an American student in France, and the torrid relationship that develops between him and a local barkeep, Giovanni. Many of the same social themes from the first novel are explored here, without the backdrop of American social mores.

Of the dozens of biographies written about Baldwin, two stand out: *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire,* by W J. Weatherby, published in 1989, and *Talking At the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin,* by James Campbell (1991). Campbell's book is more sympathetic to Baldwin, since the author was an acquaintance of Baldwin' s, while Weatherby is more academic. Both books, published soon after Baldwin's death, are heavily supported with interviews from people who knew him well.

Further Study

Robert A. Bone, "The Novels of James Baldwin,"' in *Tri-Quarterly,* Winter, 1965, pp. 3-20.

Bone suggests that in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin "approaches the very essence of Negro experience" and presents a "psychic drama" of religious conversion.

Ama Bontemps, *100 Years of Negro Freedom,* Dodd, Mead & Co, 1961.

At first glance, this book appears to be a primer for grade school children, but the author, Bontemps, was one of the most respected intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. This book is clear and straightforward, covering history lessons that are not touched by mainstream reading lists.

Jane Campbell, "Retreat into the Self' Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man' and James Baldwin's 'Go Tell it on the Mountain,"' in *Mythic Black Fiction' The Transformation of History,* University of Tennessee Press, 1986, pp. 87-110.

Compares confessional elements in both novels.

Richard Courage, "James Baldwin's 'Go Tell It on the Mountain': Voices of a People,"' in *CLA Journal,* Vol. 32, No 4, June, 1989, pp 131-42.

Courage argues that the novel "highlights the role of the black church in maintaining a sense of communal identity."

Michael Fabre, "Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain,"* in *James Baldwin A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Keneth Kinnamon, Prentice Hall, Inc , 1974, pp. 120-38.

Explores the religious and psychological symbolism of the novel.

Nell Fligstein, *Going North' Migration of Blacks and Whites From the South, 1900-1950,* Academic Press, 1981.

Fligstein, a sociologist, wrote this work for other professors, and it is filled with statistics and tables, but the average student should be able to get a good view of the abstract social dynamics that control the characters in Baldwin's novel.

David E Foster, "'Cause My House Fell Down': The Theme of the Fall in Baldwin's Novels,"' in *Critique,* Vol. 13, No 2, 1971, pp 50-62.

This article explores the fall from grace in many of Baldwin's novels including *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

James R. Giles, "Religious Alienation and 'Homosexual Consciousness' in 'City of the Night' and 'Go Tell It on the Mountain,'" in *CLA Journal,* Vol 7, No. 3, March, 1964, pp. 369-80.

Discusses themes of religion and homosexuality in John Rechy's *City of the Night* and Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

Howard M Harper, Jr., "James Baldwin Art or Propaganda?" in *Desperate Faith, A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Matler, Baldwin, and Updike,* University of North Carolina Press, 1967, pp. 137-61.

Explores the fall from grace in many of Baldwin's novels including *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Marcus Klein, "James Baldwin: A Question of Identity,'" in *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century,* World Publishing Company, 1962, pp. 147-95.

Examines the link between maturation and identity in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land. The Great Black Migration and How It Changed Society,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Covering a period later than the one portrayed in the novel-from the 1940s to the 1960s-Lemann explores the effect of the population shift on three specific cities' Chicago, Washington, and Clarksdale, Mississippi. The relevance of this book to Baldwin's novel is slightly abstract, but it is still helpful for understanding the social situation that the Grimes family faces in Harlem.

John R May, "Images of Apocalypse in the Black Novel,'" in *Renascence,* Vol 23, No.1, Autumn, 1970, pp. 31-45.

This article includes an exploration of Images of apocalypse in *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

Therman B O' Darnel, "James Baldwin. An Interpretive Study," in *CLA Journal,* Vol 8, No 1, pp. 37-47.

Analyzes the themes of homosexuality and racism in Baldwin's novels including *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

Horace A. Porter, *Stealing Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin,* Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

This book holds Baldwin to a high standard and is not at all shy about criticizing his flaws, but It is just as free with its praise The well-researched portrait of Baldwin that emerges here is that of a man of contradictions, who learned from the best of white tradition and kept his sympathies rooted on black culture.

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Shirley Allen, "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain,"* in *CLA Journal,* Vol. XIX, No 2, December, 1975, pp. 173-99.

Richard K. Barksdale, "Temple of the Fire Baptized," in *Phylon,* Vol. 14, 1953, pp. 326-27.

Robert Bone, "James Baldwin,'" in *The Negro Novel in America,* rev. ed, Yale University Press, 1965, pp 215-39. Granville Hicks, "Go Tell It On the Mountain,'" in *Literary Horizons: A Quarter Century of American Fiction,* New York University Press, 1970, pp. 87-90.

James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination,* Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 5-33.

Edward Margolies, "The Negro Church James Baldwin and the Christian Vision,'" in *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors,* J. B Lippincott Company, 1968, pp. 102-26.

J. Saunders Redding, "Go Tell It On the Mountain,'" in *New York Herald Tribune Book Review,* May 17, 1953, p. 5.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535