

JOHN GRIMES' QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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ABSTRACT »»»

Many african writers like Leopold Sedar senghor made the apology of the african culture. Some African writers even talked about the African culture as if it was the norm from which standpoint all other culture could be regarded as inferior. However were different for african American writers who brought up in an environment where the European culture was viewed as the norm. For example, James Baldwin, a 20th century African American found difficult to determine in such a multicultural context or melting pot who really he was. Under such circumstances, James Baldwin could hardly overlook the question of racial identity. In this article, through the study of his main character, John Grimes' quest for identity, we will try to understand the position defended by the writer on the issue of racial identity in his of his first autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Montain*.

Keywords:
Conflict, identity, mirror, darkness, complex.

RESUME »»»

De nombreux écrivains africains, tels Leopold Sédar Senghor ont fait l'apologie de la culture noire. Certains écrivains africains ont même parlé de leur culture comme si elle était la norme à partir de laquelle, il fallait considérer toutes les autres cultures comme inférieures. Cependant la réalité fut toute autre pour les écrivains africains amércains qui ont grandi dans un contexte où la culture occidentale est considérée comme la norme. Par exemple, James Baldwin, écrivain africain américain du XXième qui a vécu



dans un tel contexte a eu du mal à définir sa propre identité. Dans cet article, à travers l'analyse que nous faisons de la quête identitaire de John Grimes, le personnage principal de son premier roman autobiographique, *Go Tell It on the Montain* , nous essaierons de comprendre la position défendue par l'auteur sur cette question.

Mots-clés:
Conflit, identité, miroir, ténèbres, complexe.

INTRODUCTION »»»

Many conflicting trends have developed about the notion of quest for identity in the United States. About the importance that James Baldwin gave to the issue of African american identity, Clarence E. Hardy admits that "People who in some sense know who they are can't change the world always, but they can do something… to make a life a little more human. Human in the best sense. Human in terms of joy, freedom which is always private, respect, respect for one another, even such things as manners"[168] . So, Clarence E. Hardy admits, without contest, James Baldwin was sensitive to the question of identity because it is at the core of human life. Basically, all human being has his own identity. Though we all belong to the human species, we are endowed with a particular personality, character, traits, that makes of each one of us a unique being with his own identity. But why is it that some people like James Baldwin found it difficult to know who they are really? Why is it that he has to make a quest for identity? To where did this quest finally led him and his autobiographical character, John Grimes? Using sociocriticism, we will first highlight how the Church made difficult the expression of the African american's identity. Then we will focus on what helped John Grimes and James Baldwin to rediscover their identity.

Throughout *Go Tell It on the Montain* , many characters make a quest for identity. Nevertheless, in this article we will focus only on John Grimes' quest for identity. Why do we choose to focus only on him? Firstly, because he is the main character and secondly because all the other character's quests for identy are mentioned in the novel, only to make the reader understand John Grimes' own. According to Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, in *Go Tell It on the Montain* John Grimes' quest for identity is both personal and collective. It is a triptych, with John's story the side panels and the central panel giving "the

[168] Clarence E.HARDY, *James Baldwin's God Sex, Hope and Crisis in African american Holiness Culture* , USA : UTP, 2003, p.103.



converging stories" of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth. [169] For Carolyn Wedin Sylvander through this dramatic and structural arrangement of the novel, James Baldwin suggests that John Grimes' quest for identity is passed on, generation to generation among African Americans , from parents to son. Whether or not JohnGrimes knows about those experiences of his mother and father, made before his birth, the story keeps on going and repeating itself. In fact we hear about the other characters' quest for identity through a series of flashbacks that bring us back to the past, into the life of John's Grimes and the one of his relatives. The quest for identity is made by this device one of the main theme of the novel and appear as something peculiar to the African Amercan family. For Therman B. O'Daniel, the purpose of all these series of flashbacks is to keep the reader mindful that the present which involves John Grime's search for identity is to be understood within the context of the lives of the elders. At various points, Baldwin uses flashbacks to have a character' views qualifying the reality described. What role does the Church play in this quest for identity?

THE CHURCH AND THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY »»»

Baldwin's fiction, John Grimes is a teenager brought up by his stepfather into the religious tradition of the Church. The Church is at the core of the plot in the novel because James Baldwin reckons that right from the time of their deportation to America, African american Church has played a central role both in building and in destroying the African Americans' identity. But why does James Baldwin view the Church, that way Clarence E Hardy gives us a clue when she says that "With the connections to African gods severed, the bible and the Church were nearly all American african americans had to fashion an identity that could withstand the hardships white american supremacy imposes". Even so, Baldwin in his first novel [*Go Tell It on the Montain*] does engage, even if less explicitly, how african american self-loathing and Christianity are interwoven in african american life".[170]
According to Clarence E. Hardy, James Baldwin has always believed that the organized african american Churches, no matter how they compromised, played a crucial role in giving back to african american their identity when taken by force from their homeland and were stripped off their connections to their ancestral culture. The afro-protestant Church helped them then forge a new identity and to achieve some measure of collective social power that could withstand the hardships white american supremacy imposes. The

[169] Wedin Carolyn SYLVANDER , *James Baldwin*, USA: FUP, 1980, p.36.
[170] Clarence E.HARDY, *James Baldwin's God Sex, Hope and Crisis in African american Holiness Culture* , USA : UTP, 2003, p.50.



religious ideology vehicled by the Church influenced deeply the African American's outlook. For example the negro spiritual which provided hope, some solace for suffering and a means of expression of personnal autonomy was an unique creation of the Black slave was "a derivation from Biblical lore and served as a means of intra-group expression in a hostile environment". [171] The African American were attracted to the Church because they were told there told that after death they could join their ancestors back in Africa that they missed. They also found their animistic features similar to the African beliefs that spirits dwelled in such objects as trees and rivers. [172] Moreover,inside the Church , African American enjoyed a brotherhood with fellow Africans who shared with them the same cultural heritage and faith. No wonder that for Elieen Southern, the black Church was "the first institution to be controlled solely by blacks". Basically, the Church serves an array of functions including a religious as well as cultural, social, educational and a political one. [173] Consequently, in James Baldwin's first novel *Go Tell It on the Montain,* the actions that unfold mainly take place right inside the "Temple of the Fire Baptized",and christianity is interwoven in the characters' daily lives. About the central part that Church plays in the plot of *Go Tell It on the Montain,* Therman B. O'Daniel observes:

> *The perspective put forth in the book [Go Tell It on the Montain] tells us-without qualification- that the chief institution of the society is religion and that all others are subsumed beneath it; human action and interaction are to be seen against the background of the Christian values, and the significance of human action derives from this context. This view is conservative because of its implied definition of man's nature and his relation to society.* [174]

For Therman B. O'Daniel, in *Go Tell It on the Montain,* the Church remains the chief institution of the society because all the other institutions like family, school, etc are subsumed beneath it. Characters' actions and interactions are to be seen against the background of the Christian values, and the significance of their actions derives only from this context. James Baldwin suggests in this novel that the characters' relation to their society and beyond them, man's relation to the society ought to be determined by his attempt to mold himself to the imperatives dictated by the religious institution.

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[171]Joseph E.HOLLOWAY. *Africanism in American Culture*. USA: IUP, 1990, p. 137-138;
[172] John BLASSINGAME, *The Slave Community : Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, Rev.ed, USA: NY, OUP, 1979, p. 72-74.
[173] Southern ELIEEN, *The Music of Black American*, 2nd ed, USA: Norton &CO, 1983, p 82, 199.
[174] Therman B. O'DANIEL, *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation* , USA: HUP, nd, p.6.



But what if the individual who has been brought up according to the Church principles, with time being find himself at odds with them? What if he no longer doesn't want the Church to mold his identity?
As he grows up, John Grimes starts his identity with the Church. He tries to evaluates the perception that the Church gives him of his own identity. When he realizes that perception of his identity was downgrading, he becomes more and more relunctant to share fully in the Church rituals .About his attitude right inside the Church, the narrator reminds readers the following:

> *He [John Grimes] watched them, singing with them- because otherwise they would force him to sing- and trying not to hear the words that he forced outward from his throat. And he thought to clap his hands, but he could not; they remained tightly folded in his lap. If he did not sing they would be upon him, but his heart told him that he had no right to sing or to rejoice."*[175]

The expression "and trying not to hear the words that he forced outward from his throat" is a synecdoche that allows the narrator to use a part of body to represent the whole body which feels relunctant to praise a white american god. Though he tries hard to make some sounds come out of his mouth, he doesn't mean it because his ears and other parts of his bodies are concerned by something else. The contrasting images "And he thought to clap his hands, but he could not" highlights the conflict of feeling and reveal the identity crisis that John Grimes is passing through. In the personification "If he did not sing they would be upon him, but his heart told him that he had no right to sing or to rejoice", the heart of John Grimes is given the ability to speak to him and to convince him that the rituals performed by the Saints is useless. This heart is like another person inside him that reflect his character, his real viewpoints, his identity.Nevertheless that person is not given all the freeness needed to express himself. In order to stress the gap existing between the religious education intended to mold his identity and John Grimes' skeptical attitude, the narrator explains:

> *Though he [John Grimes] had been born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by prayers and their rejoicing, and though the tabernacle in which they worshipped was completely real to him than the several precarious homes in which*

[175] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA : ed. Laurel, nd,p 60.



he and his family had lived, John's heart was hardened against the Lord.[176]

"The saints" is an ironic nickname given to the Churchgoes in order to ridicule the appearance of righteousness that they display inside the Church which is in fact in contradiction with their daily way of life. By giving such a negative picture of the effect that Church is having on those who let it shape their identity, the narrator is preparing the reader to accept John Grimes' refusal to let the Church shape his identity and even if he was born in such faith. John Grimes' mistrust and skepticism leads him to scrutinize the behavior of the Saints with a more critical eye. The narrator expresses John Grimes' skepticism in the words:

> *John opened the Church door with his fathers' key at six o'clock. Tardy 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 spirit 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.*[177]

The narrator tells us here in indirect speech what John Gimes think about the spirit of mind of those who come to the "Temple of the Fire Baptized". He insinuates that they are not too eager to come to religious service and ridicules their tendency to come late to religious service as their own convenient time , in the contrasting images «tardy service officially began at eight, but it could begin at any time». The narrator adds to the comic effect in the understatement « the spirit 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 ». Here, the narrator implies that if the so-called saints delayed too much in coming to religious offices, it is because they know their Lord, to bee too tolerant and patient with them. The narrator insinuates that implies here that Church alienates people from God by giving them a false representation of God.

Or John Grimes' quest for identity led him also to put into question the moral standards that has been foisted onto him by religion. He no longer recognizes to the Church the right to teach him what is good or bad from God's standardpoint. For example the narrator reports that when at his birthday, in front of a cinema, he hesitates about whether he should buy or not a ticket and look at a movie. Formally, he could have not even come near to a cinema

[176] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd , p 21.
[177] Idem, p.49.



because his father has taught him that the Church views it as a lustful place. But now, John Grimes thinks differently. For him, the time has come to decide by himself about what to do, without being influenced by the point of view of his father. He then bought a ticket with the money his mother gave him, enter inside the cinema and sat down to look at a violent movie. Right from the beginning of the movie, he feels an antipathy for the hero, a woman without morals who acts contrary to the principles in which he was brought up. But as the movie goes on, he lets himself be seduced by her and starts feeling affection and an admiration for her. In fact, the narrator states: "The woman was evil (…). He limped about looking soft and sad, and soon all John's sympathy was given to this violent and unhappy woman."[178] . The contrasting images "He limped about looking soft and sad, and soon all John's sympathy was given to this violent and unhappy woman.", reveals the deep confusion and embarassement that John Grimes feels about the moral standards that were passed on to him through his stepfather. He really feels uncomfortable with it. He no longer what to think about that woman who he finds evil and sympathetic, soft as well as violent. Through the contrasting images the narrator highlights the fact that when he makes his judgement on the basis of the moral standards that were foisted onto him by the Church he can only see the woman as devilish, sinful, violent, and as the embodiment of evil. Nevertheless, the reader is also made to understand through that figure of speech that when John Grimes tries to see the heroe of the movie according to his own standards, he finds her as soft and worthy of his sympathy.But John Grimes has a clear representation of his own identity?

Back home, looking at his image in a mirror, the narrator pictures how John Grimes sees himself. In front of the mirror, John Grimes looks at himself, the first time, surprised about the reflection of his image that appears to him in a mirror. He can't believe his eyes. In the simile " He stared at his face as though it were, as indeed it soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger, a stranger who held secrets that John could never know " he is compares as a stranger to himself.[179] John Grimes looks then as a stranger to himself because he is able to realize in front of the mirror that he has a unique identity that his different to what other people have been saying that he is, from childhood. He finds out that he is not ugly and dirty boy resembling the devil that his stepfather told him he was. Explaining the reasons why African American had such a negative viewpoint of their identity, Clarence E. Hardy used to say:

[178] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p 38-39.
[179] Op.cit , p.27.



> *In the legend the black body itself is depicted as the creation of the devil ''flung into hell'' as punishment for acting against the ''commands of God'' (...) The story's worldview adopts white american supremacist notions that associate african american skin with wickedness and the devil. Echoing an old hymn that still reverberates in black churches across the country, Baldwin describes in an early essay how some black people boisterously sing "Wash me... and shall be whiter, whiter than snow!" (...).*[180]

For Clarence E. Hardy James Baldwin is making reference here to the fact that like John Grimes, many African American's identity has been influenced white American supremacist notions. Basically, John Grimes is fully expecting to see his face as a reflection of Satan, while looking up in the mirror, from his morning labors because according to that white ideology the African American skin is not beautiful, is dirty, sinful, devilish and then inferior to white body. The mirror then becomes then the symbol of the African American's identity reflection, perceived through the biased prism of the white American ideology. In fact, Clarence E. Hardy mentions that in the early 1950s, it seems that even Baldwin much like his white American liberal interlocutors, before he had even set foot on African land, closely associated african americanness with barbarism and an animalistic warlike primitism. This biased representation of the African American'identity was boisterously echoed by the Church. The Church then played an ambivalent role by making African Americans be proud of their african cultural root and at the same time giving them the feeling that their body was ugly and devilish. What about the sexual identity? Have the church also vehicled to african american a wrong sense of their sexual identity?

[180] Clarence E.HARDY, *James Baldwin's God Sex, Hope and Crisis in African american Holiness Culture*, USA : UTP, 2003, p.26.



THE QUEST FOR SEXUAL IDENTITY

The synecdoche "his face'' does not only makes reference to the outstanding part of the body that one can look at in a mirror. It is also the symbol of John Grimes' identity. Struggling with self-loathing representation of his identity, John becomes rebellious against a white american god that did not create like the white americans, in His image, but made him a satanic creature. He became also resentful against his stepfather, Gabriel Grimes who as a pastor in "Temple of the Fire Baptized", became in his eyes, the embodiment of a church that has not told him the truth, about his real African American identity. The quest for identity is crucial for John Grimes, as well as for the author who created him, because both do not know their real biological father. Faced with this issue John Grimes ask himself many questions that remain unanswered.The negative image of the father embodied by Gabriel Grimes makes it difficult for him to solve his Oedipus complex. John Grimes is more close to his mother than his stepfather father with whom he has conflicting relationships. Making reference to this almost incestuous love, the narrator contents that "he watched her [his mother's] face, his heart swollen with love for her and with anguish, not yet his own, that he did not understand and that frightened him*".*[181] In this contrasting image, the love that John Grimes feels for his mother is contrasted with anguish and fear, in order to suggest that this love is not natural, but incestuous. Overwhelmed by the Oedipus complex, John Grimes finds difficult to identify himself as a man like his father. This situation generates a sexual conflict that makes him develop some homosexual trends. Like John Grimes, the love that James Baldwin had for his mother, Emma Bedis Jones was more than the one he had, for David Baldwin, his stepfather. Consequently, he passed through period of sexual troubles that make him develop homosexual traits. About James Baldwin's sexual troubles, W.J. Weatherby reports Emile Capouya, one of James Baldwin friends' witness and his own:

> *Emile Capouya said that he had recognized from Delaney's manner that he was homosexual and therefore doubted he would have urged Jimmy Baldwin to visit him, knowing that Jimmy was having problems about his sexual identity (...) He was always in love with someone and he had sex on the side with all kinds of people (...) He [James Baldwin] acknowledges later: "By the time, of course, I was mad, as mad as my dead father. If I had not gone mad, I could not have left (...) I no longer felt I knew who I really was, whether I was really black or really white, really male or really*

[181] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p.32.



female, really talented or a fraud, really strong or really stubborn.
[182]

According to W.J. Weatherby, he was reported by Emile Capouya that James Baldwin was dealing with a homosexual because he was having problems about his sexual identity. At that time, according to him, James Baldwin himself admitted that by that period of his life, he was as mad as his dead father. Being confused about his own sexual identity, he no longer felt that he knew who he really was, whether he was really a male or a female.

James Baldwin's authobiograhical character in *Go Tell It on the Montain*, John Grimes, also has problems about his sexual identity. He is a teenager of only fourteen years old. The transformations of his body that mark his transition from the childhood to the adulthood disturb him so much and lead him to worry about his sexual identity. The narrator describes what John Grimes felt when he saw his school mates exhibiting their sexes in the school lavatory : "In the school lavatory, alone thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak."[183] The word "sin" is an allusion to the fact that, the same-sex exhibitions that took place, inside the school lavatory, is viewed; the society dominated by the Church, where these boys lived, as homosexual acts, perversity. But John Grimes and his friends don't mind. Using the series of comparatives "alone thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher" , the narrator suggests that John Grimes identifies himself with his school mates. He even feels a kind of admiration for his school mates who have the courage to break all the taboos about sexuality so prevalent in their puritan community. One can notice in John Grimes the development of some homosexual trends, in the account where, he finds himself alone, with his naked father, in a bathroom:

> *Yes, he had sinned: one morning, alone, in the dirty bathroom in the square, dirty-gray*
> *Cupboard room that was filled with the stink of his father. Sometimes, leaning over the*
> *Cracked, "tattle-tale gray" bathtub, he scrubbed his father's back; and looked, as the*
> *accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father's hideous nakedness. It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and*

[182] W.J WEATHERBY, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire, Portrait By W.J. Weatherby*, USA: Laurel, 1989, p.30, 32.

[183] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p.19.



heavy, like the rod. Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down. [184]

This account is a parody of the Bible account where, Ham of Noah's son was cursed because he looked at his father nakedness. John Grimes pictures here Ham and Gabriel Grimes pictures Noah. But unlike the Bible account, Noah was not washing himself in a bathroom when he uncovered his nakedness. He got rather intoxicated with wine and was found accidently naked by Ham. The narrator uses this parody to mock at the so-called Hamitic curse which is said to have made African American people cursed forever, doomed to suffer mistreatment and injustice.

In the ironic expression "Yes , he had sinned", the narrator makes fun of the Church credo on which basis the pleasure felt by John Grimes as he looks at his father's sex, is viewed as sin. The metaphor of the serpent, in simile ''It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod." is an allusion to the Genesis account , according to which, the devil used a serpent to make the first man eat the forbidden fruit and then sin against God. This forbidden fruit is being refered to by the Church, as sexual intercourse. John Grimes is against such fallacious puritan conception of sexuality because it is based on a wrong interpretation of the Bible and, by making him view as sin sexual intercourse, it prevents him from experimenting all the pleasures that sex can give him. As a result, John Grimes thinks that, if having sex is sinful, then all the members of his family are sinful and also unworthy to attain to the holiness of the white american god. He has the feeling that his father who is a preacher and even the whole house where his family lives in is full of the same sin which is pictured by dirt. The narrator emphasizes this idea by using imagery or sensory description in expressions like "stink of his father, dirty bathroom, dirty-gray cupboard room, tattle-tale gray" bathtub, hideous nakedness". This colorful description of the dirty bathroom allows the reader to feel with his touch, smell with his nose, see with his eyes that filthiness. In that way, "the dirty bathroom, dirty-gray cupboard room" refer to all the dirt that the eyes can see, while the " stink of his father" refers to what the nose can smell and the expression "he scrubbed his father's back ", to the dirt that the hands can touch. Neverthess, dirt as the symbol of sin is not only present in the bathroom. The narrator describes a dirt which, from the bathroom, spreads to the kitchen, in the personification, "dirt was in the walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where crocroaches spawned (...) Dirt was in

[184] Op.cit, p.197.



every corner, angle, crevice of the monstrous stove, and lived behind it in delirious communion with the corrupted wall."[185] In this personification, the narrator compares dirt to a human fighter, that has invaded and conquered every corner and angle of the the kitchen, triumphing over any attempt made by each member of the family Grimes, in order to defeat it, by getting rid of it. This figure of speech highlights how entrenched is, in the African Americans' mind, the idea that, having a black color skin is being dirty, ugly. James Baldwin makes fun of the white supremacist ideology here, by stressing its unreasonableness by the means of sarcasm.

As long as John Grimes and his family are subconsciously conditionned by such religious self-loathing ideology, they don't know really who they are and they view white American as their enemy. To find out really who he is, John Grimes strives in order to "come to terms with his father's rejection and transcend that rejection by surrending himself to the redemptive power of love.".[186] In his subconscience, John Grimes needs to separate the image of his religiously rigid and authoritarian father from the one of God and stops viewing himself as creature of Satan as his father told him. So, John Grimes moves to a step further in his quest for his true identity, when he puts to question the white supremacist ideology, by asking himself: "All niggers had been cursed, the ironic voice reminded him; all niggers had come from this most undutiful of Noah's sons. (…). Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time or in the moment?" [187]In this monologue, as John Grimes is talking to himself, the ironic voice echoes his scepticism about the truthfulness of the religious teaching according to which African Americans are cursed and ugly people. The series of rhetorical questions "Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time or in the moment?" reflect his doubt that what happened far back, centuries ago, when so many African Americans living today were not yet born, could make them a cursed people. He finds this idea too hard to accept. For him, it is unfair that he should pay for someone's wrongdoing, committed centuries back, before his own birth. These thought-provoking questions allow also the reader to make a pause in the story account, in order to reflect over the authenticity of such a self-loathing religious belief. Moreover, such a pause gives time for John Grimes to ponder over the issue objectively in order to come finally to the conclusion that God have not cursed forever the African American people. Gradually,

[185] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p.21-22.
[186] Dolan HUBBARD, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, USA: UMP, 1994.p.105.
[187] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p 197.



John Grimes came as a result, to realize that White American are not be prejudiced and viewed as enemies as his father forced him to believe:

> *His [John's stepfather] father said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He said that white american people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had ever loved a nigger. He, John, was a nigger, and he would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how evil white american people could be.*[188]

By the hyperbole ''His [John's stepfather] father said that all white people were wicked. He said that white american people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had ever loved a nigger. '', the narrator highlights the irrelevance of the racial prejudice harbored by Gabriel Grimes against White American people. The exaggeration is purposely made in order to prove that, all the White American people cannot be at the same time, wicked, untrustworthy, liars and full of hatred as African American people view them. In the sarcasm, "He, John, was a nigger, and he would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how evil white people could be", John Grimes expresses his disagreement and refusal to believe, without further proof, in all those racial prejudices. As he rediscovers he identity, John Grimes regains a sense of dignity that boosts his ego and assures him that, he can love and be loved by the white man and the white woman that, the Church embodied by his stepfather taught him to hate.

THE REDISCOVERY OF BLACK IDENTITY

What sense should we give to John Grimes' quest for identity? Simon Njami answers: ''Baldwin ne fait rien d'autre, dans ce livre, que de raconter au jour le jour la vie qui fut la sienne, ou du moins l'adolescene qui fut la sienne (…).Mais le personage principal de ce roman [John Grimes], est comme Jimmy, un enfant illégitime (…). Le roman s'étend sur les quatorze premières années de la vie de l'écrivain".[189] So, for Njami Simon, *Go Tell It on the Montain* is an autobiographical novel, in which James Baldwin is telling us about his own quest for identity. At fourteen years old, James Baldwin was worrying about his identity because he was left without any

[188] Op.cit, p.36.

[189] All what Baldwin is doing in this novel [*Go Tell It on the Montain*] is to tell us day by day his life story, or at least his teenage (…). But the main character [John Grimes], is like Jimmy a bastard child (…). The novel covers the writer's first forteen years of life. Simon NJAMI, *James Baldwin ou le devoir de violence*, Paris:biographie Seghers, p.116. (The translation is ours).



information about his father and was treated as a bastard child by the man who married later his mother. Another similarity that exists between John Grimes and his author is that, like the former, James Baldwin's stepfather was a pastor who hated him and gave him a bad perception of his identity, as he often told him that he was ugly.

The next step in John's Grimes quest for identity led him to his conversion, in the last part of the novel entitled: «The threshing-Floor ». During that crucial part of his quest for identity, the narrator compares what happened to a resurrection from the dead and freedom from a dungeon, in the metaphor "It was sound of rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity, rage that had no language, weeping with no voice- which yet smoke now to John's startled soul of boundless melancholy (…) the dungeon most absolute". The conversion, then, becomes the symbol of John's rite of passage or his transition, from the alienation or the condition of emprisonment pictured by the confusion about his identity, to life or freedom, pictured by, the rediscovery of his identity. But one can easily notice also in this conversion, the presence of weeping which suggests to the reader that the rediscovery of one's identity is a painful and long process. It is an allusion to all the weepings, beatings, frustrations, sufferings and humiliation that African Amerians experienced, from the slavery to the full recognition of their identity, and human civil rights.

During the conversion, the presence of the ironic voice made also difficult John's crimes conversion:

> *And something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed. This power had struck John in the head or in the heart, and, in a moment, wholly, filling him with an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; (...) He [John Grimes] wanted to rise- a malicious, ironic voice insisted that he rise-and, at once, to leave this temple and go out into the world.* [190]

In the euphemism ''and something moved in John's body which was not John'', the narrator refers to the ironic voice. It is compared in the metaphor, «He was invaded, set at naught, possessed" as a powerful wicked spirit that by being difficult to expel, delays his conversion. In the personification, "this power had struck John in the head or in the heart" the ironic voice his compared to a human being , who as he is wrestling with his fellow human

[190] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p 193.



being, gives him a blow at his head or at his chest where the heart is. The image suggests that, in trying to rediscover their real identity, african americans should be able to overlook deeply entrenched powerful influences, beliefs, ideologies that are intended to prevent them from being converted that is to say, from knowing really, who they are should be able to overlook. Grimes becomes weak, overpowered for some time. About the technical reason that prompts James Baldwin to introduce in this account the ironic voice, in the plot, Therman B. O'Daniel notices:

> *The ironic voice that speaks occasionally through the narrator's diction merely reminds us that there are other points of view from which 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.*[191]

According to Therman B. O'Daniel, James Baldwin uses the ironic voice, in his narrator's diction, as a technical device intended to introduce to the reader, as the plot unfolds, other points of views about the African American's identity and from which John Grimes ' ideas and actions might be regared. John Grimes' conversion account is the major action of the novel, and it pictures his struggle to leave childhood and achieve maturity with a sense of his own identity. The conversion is the last step toward the rediscovery of John Grimes' identity. When he passes it, the narrator describes what John Grimes felt:

> *But now he [John Grimes] knew for irony had left him, that he was searching something, hidden in the darkness that must be found (...). Then he [John Grimes] stood before his father. In the moment that he forced himself to raise his eyes and look into his father's face, he felt in himself stiffening, and a panic, and a blind rebellion, and a hope for peace. The tears still on his face, and smiling still, he said:"Praise the Lord." "Praise the Lord", said his father. He did not move to touch him, did not kiss him, and did not smile. (...) It came to him that he must testify; his tongue only could bear witness to the wonders he had seen (...). And he opened his mouth, feeling, as he watched his father, the darkness roar behind him, and the very earth beneath him seem to shake; yet he gave to his father their common testimony.(...) "I'm saved," he said, "and I know I'm saved.".*[192]

After his conversion, John Grimes, now sees himself, as a mature man equal in right to a White American man. He could achieve this rediscovery of his identity with Elisha's helpful hand. Elisha serves as a father, a guide and

[191] Therman B. O'DANIEL, *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation* , USA: HUP, nd, p.33.
[192] Op.cit, p.206-207.



a friend accompanying at each step of his quest for identity. When John Grimes is fearful about assuming his new identity, it is Elisha, who in the apostrophe, ‘‘Rise up, Johnny’’, reassures him. He lovingly calls him ‘‘Johnny’’ to express to him all his sympathy. The rhetorical question ‘‘Are you saved, boy?’’ that, Elisha asks provides the expected answer and is meant to invite John Grimes to rejoice over the fact that he now knows who he is really.The blinded condition in which John Grimes was as far his identity was concerned, before the conversion, is compared to being in world of darkness, ruled by Satan. The narrator insinuates, quiet well also that all the attempts made to maintain African Americans in ignorance about who they are should be considered as satanic. John Grimes responds back joyfully by the exclamation: “oh, yes!”. In the hyperbole ‘‘And the words came upward, it seemed, of themselves, in the new voice God had given him’’, the narrator suggests that since after his conversion, John Girmes realizes that, as an African American, he ressembles more God than the ugly Satan, he feels now, closer to God from who he was alienated before. This detail also highlights the miraculous aspect of his conversion. About the meaning of the new voice that is given to John Gimes during that conversion, Therman B.O’Daniel notices:

> *When he has rid himself of malice, he is free to search the subconscious depths of his mind until he graps the true relationship of father and son- the oedipal situation common to all human experience or, in Baldwin’s interpretation, original sin. (…) 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 (…) 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”.* [193]

For Therman B.O’Daniel, John Grimes is given a new voice because he has rid himself of the ironic and malicious White American ideology and he is free to search the subconscious depths of his mind , until he graps the true relationship that should exist between Gabriel Grimes, his stepfather and him. That new voice makes instill into him, faith, humility, and help him to live up to his new identity. In the metaphor ‘‘in the silence something died in John, and something came alive. It came to him that he must testify’’[194] the narrator compares the changes that John Grimes underwent to the ones that a

[193] Therman B. O’DANIEL, *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation* , USA: HUP, nd, p.37.

[194] James BALDWIN, *Go Tell It On the Montain*, USA: ed Laurel, nd, p.207.



grain, buried in the ground experiences, before giving birth to a plant. The expression ‘‘something died’’ is, an euphemism that refers to the insecure and childish John Grimes that died, during his conversion, whereas ‘‘Something came alive’’ refers to the birth of a mature John Grimes, more sure of his identity. Fred of the prejudices that his father was emprinonned in and rid of the fear he felt for his father before his conversion, John Grimes, in the apostrophe, “Praise the Lord”, invites even his father to do the same like him.

CONCLUSION »»»

Finally, we can say that in Go *Tell It on the Mountain*, John Grimes’ quest for identity, serves as a pretext used by James Baldwin in order to tell us the story of his own quest for identity. This quest for identity starts with John Grimes’ questioning he Church credos that paint African American people as ugly, sinful and alienated from God. Then he moves to a step further; by realizing in front the mirror that African American is beautiful. Then the last step during his conversion is the rediscovery of his identity which is described as a conversion or rite of passage, through which he gets rid of all the wrong ideologies that emprisonned him, of his Oedipus complex and finally draw closer to a god that he used to view as white. In this quest for identity, John Grimes had to overcome obstacles like his own fear, guilt that were generated by the Church teachings and the white supremacist ideology that conveyed to him a biased perception of his identity. In this quest for identity, his allies are Elisha and his mother.

Go tell it on the mountain, is a coming-of-age novel that by telling us John Grimes as well as James Baldwin’s quest for identity tells us the one made by millions other African Americans over generations, that hasd lived from the slavery period to James Baldwin’s epoch. In his autobiographical novel, James Baldwin goes back to his history and the one of the African American community in order to rediscover who really he is and kill in him any complex of the White American man. He invites each one of us to do the same, when he says:

> »»» *When I was born, blacks generally were born trapped into a white man’s fantasy. … I feel a great wheel turning. This has never been a white American country and the truth is coming out. Blacks have always been a part of this country but the country was never able to accept that. But we are flesh of the flesh, bone of the bone. And we will triumph. The inability to force one’s history, as people or as a person, means a lack of identity, of maturity. I believe there is something sleeping beneath the chaos that is of extraordinary value, if only we have the courage to go down and bring it up (…).*



We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. [195]

In this twenty-frirst century, the wind of globalization is blowing. It is also bringing with it, tremendous changes in the world. African economies, political, educational, cultural systems as well as religious habits are changing. There is still that need to ask oneself, in the midst of these tremendous changes: Who I am? Who will I become?

As James Baldwin puts it, we must never forget that "the inability to force one's history, as people or as a person, means a lack of identity, of maturity". We must avoid alienation, confusion about our true identity in order to face the challenges of the future for in fact "whoever cannot tell him the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in it".

[195]James BALDWIN, "Autobiographical notes" in Wedin Carolyn SYLVANDER , *James Baldwin*, USA: FUP, 1980, p.36.



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