DRAMA

CRITICISM

VOLUME

1

DRAMA

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Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 1

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor
Linda M. Ross, Assistant Editor

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ISBN 0-8103-7911-2
ISSN 1056-4349

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom
by Gale Research International Limited
(An affiliated company of Gale Research Inc.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Preface

Drama Criticism (*DC*) is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring popular appeal. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse and often bewildering body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not assume that the reader possesses a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism* (*SSC*) and *Poetry Criticism* (*PC*), which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *Drama Criticism* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literary history, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Each volume of *DC* presents:

- 12-15 entries per volume
- authors and works representing a wide range of nationalities and time periods
- a diversity of viewpoints and critical opinions.

Organization of an Author Entry

Each author entry consists of some or all of the following elements, depending on the scope and complexity of the criticism:

- The **author heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- A **portrait** of the author is included when available. Most entries also feature illustrations of people, places, and events pertinent to a study of the playwright and his or her works. When appropriate, photographs of the plays in performance are also presented.
- The **biographical and critical introduction** contains background information that familiarizes the reader with the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her works. When applicable, the introduction is followed by references to other Gale series that contain entries on the playwright.
- The list of **principal works** is divided into two sections, each of which is organized chronologi-

cally by date of first publication. If a play was written a significantly long time before it was published (a work by a writer of antiquity, for example), the composition date is used. The first section of the principal works list contains the author's dramatic pieces. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.

- Whenever available, **author commentary** is provided. This section consists of essays or interviews in which the dramatist discusses his or her own work or the art of playwriting in general.
- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism of individual plays** offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premiere of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. All entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety.
- As an additional aid to students, the critical essays and excerpts are prefaced by **explanatory annotations.** These notes provide several types of useful information, including the critic's reputation and approach to literary studies as well as the scope and significance of the criticism that follows.
- A complete **bibliographic citation,** designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, follows each piece of criticism.
- The **further reading** list at the end of each entry comprises additional studies of the dramatist. It is divided into sections that reflect the organization of the overall author entry and will help students quickly locate the specific information they need.

Other Features

- A **cumulative author index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *DC, CLC, TCLC, NCLC, LC, CMLC, SSC,* and *PC,* as well as cross-references to related titles published by Gale, including *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* A complete listing of the series included appears at the beginning of the index.
- A **cumulative nationality index** includes each author featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which the author appears.
- A **cumulative title index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC.* Each title is followed by the author's name and the corresponding volume and page number(s) where commentary on the work may be located. Translations and variant titles are cross-referenced to the title of the play in its original language so that all references to the work are combined in one listing.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

[1]Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *Partisan Review* XXXI, No. 3 (Summer 1964), 389-94; excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism,* Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 17-20.

[2]Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (Chatto & Windus, 1962); excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism,* Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 237-247.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes of *DC,* or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor.

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Contents

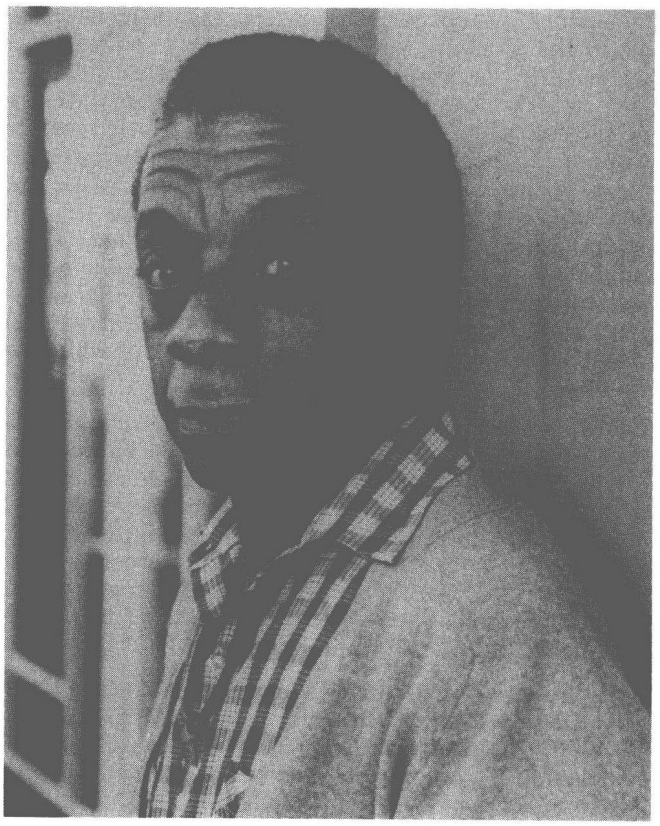
James Baldwin

1924-1987

A dramatist, novelist, essayist, poet, juvenile fiction writer and critic, Baldwin is considered one of the most prestigious writers in contemporary American literature. Although he is best known for his novels and essays, his plays, particularly *Blues for Mister Charlie,* had an important influence on American protest theater of the 1960s. Baldwin was considered by many during that period to be the leading literary spokesman for the civil rights movement. Through his works, he exposed the racial and sexual polarization of American society and consistently challenged his audience to confront and resolve these differences. His writings attest to his premise that the African American, as an object of suffering and abuse, represents a universal symbol of human conflict.

Much of Baldwin's work is loosely based on his childhood and adolescence. He was born into poverty in Harlem and raised in a strict religious household headed by his stepfather, a storefront preacher who had migrated from New Orleans. As a junior high school student, Baldwin participated in his school's literary club. The club's academic advisor was Countee Cullen, a renowned poet of the Harlem Renaissance, a major literary and artistic movement of black Americans during the 1920s. In 1938, Baldwin began to preach at the Fireside Pentecostal Church in Harlem, where his sermons emphasized the vision of the apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation. After graduating from high school in 1942, Baldwin renounced the ministry. Moving to New Jersey, he worked at several defense factories and witnessed violent confrontations between urban blacks and whites who had moved from the South in search of employment opportunities spawned by military-related industries. Baldwin returned to Harlem following his stepfather's death in 1943. Over the next five years, he held a succession of menial jobs and began to write book reviews for such periodicals as the *Nation* and the *New Leader.* In 1948, shortly after the publication of his first essay, "The Harlem Ghetto," in *Commentary,* Baldwin moved to Paris. His first and best known novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* was published in 1953. The author received nearly unanimous praise for his skillful evocation of the characters' squalid lives and for his powerful language, which some critics likened to a fire and brimstone oratory.

Despite this success, Baldwin decided to shift from writing novels to composing drama in what he would later call a "desperate and even irresponsible act." The desperation, he maintained, stemmed from the sudden realization that he was being trapped by the expectations of white American society into the position of a "Negro writer" who would not be allowed to progress beyond his initial work. To avoid this snare he wrote *The Amen Corner,* a play that drew on his recollections of the dilemma faced by his parents as they attempted to survive in a society that was bent on their destruction.



Although the drama was written in 1955 and performed by small theater companies throughout the United States, it was not published until its Broadway debut ten years later. Critics have argued that *The Amen Corner* is the more theatrically effective of Baldwin's two dramatic works because of the smooth flow of action and the degree to which it engages the audience in the plot. Yet the second play, *Blues for Mister Charlie,* has received significantly more critical attention. Darwin Turner contended that the reason for this discrepancy is that *Blues for Mister Charlie* is written for a white audience—the segment of society that exercises control over the theater. Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, however, argued that the difference in critical response occurs because *Blues for Mister Charlie* raises universal questions which continue to address the social concerns of successive generations.

Blues for Mister Charlie was first produced on Broadway in 1964. The play was based on the murder of a young black man, Emmett Till. The accused murderer was a white man who was tried and acquitted of the charges but later proudly admitted to performing the deed. The drama received harshly negative reviews from most critics, many of whom agreed with Susan Sontag's assessment of

Baldwin's construction of the play; *Blues,* she claimed, "gets bogged down in repetitions, incoherence, and in all sorts of loose ends of plot and motive." Others attacked Baldwin for perpetuating racial misunderstanding through the use of stereotypes. In contrast to the castigation given by most critics, Tom Driver presented a systematic defense of the play. He asserted that Baldwin was misunderstood because, rather than depicting the racial struggle in the economic and political terms to which most white Americans were accustomed, he chose instead to define "racial strife as *racial* strife, warfare between the black people and white people that is rooted in their separate ways of experiencing life." As a result of this viewpoint, the periodical for which Driver was working refused to publish the review. The critic resigned from his position and published the article elsewhere. The play had a short run which, according to Calvin Hernton, was due not to the artistic failure of the play itself, but to Baldwin's "straightforward, realistic and secular" portrayal of racial issues, which made these problems difficult for whites to confront.

Baldwin's plays were written during the beginning of his participation in the civil rights movement. Throughout the 1960s, he became increasingly prominent in his role as a literary spokesperson for the movement. At the end of the decade, after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Baldwin returned to Paris fearing that his own life was in danger. He continued to write novels, essays, and poetry at his home in France until his death in 1987.

(For further information on Baldwin's life and career, see *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* Vols. 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 15, 17, 42, 50; *Contemporary Authors,* Vols. 1-4, rev. ed; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series,* Vol. 3; *Contemporary Authors Biographical Series,* Vol. 1; *Something about the Author,* Vol. 9; *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vols. 2, 7, 33; and *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography,* 1941-1968.)

PRINCIPAL WORKS

PLAYS

**The Amen Corner* 1955
Blues for Mister Charlie 1964

OTHER MAJOR WORKS

Go Tell It on the Mountain (novel) 1953
Notes of a Native Son (essays) 1955
Giovanni's Room (novel) 1956
Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son (essays) 1961
Another Country (novel) 1962
The Fire Next Time (essays) 1963
Going to Meet the Man (short stories) 1965
Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (novel) 1968
If Beale Street Could Talk (novel) 1974
The Devil Finds Work (criticism) 1976
Just above My Head (novel) 1979
The Evidence of Things Not Seen (nonfiction) 1985
Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems (poetry) 1985
The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985 (essays) 1985

*This work was written and first produced in 1955 but was not published until its production on Broadway in 1965.

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

Notes for *Blues* (1964)

[*In the following essay, Baldwin elucidates the conflicts surrounding the writing of* Blues for Mister Charlie. *He particularly concentrates on the difficulty in developing the murderer Lyle Britten as a sympathetic character. Baldwin observes that although he himself finds such a figure repellent, he wished to show in Lyle the belief that "no man is a villain in his own eyes."*]

This play [***Blues for Mister Charlie***] has been on my mind—has been bugging me—for several years. It is unlike anything else I've ever attempted in that I remember vividly the first time it occurred to me; for in fact, it did not occur to me, but to Elia Kazan. Kazan asked me at the end of 1958 if I would be interested in working in the Theatre. It was a generous offer, but I did not react with great enthusiasm because I did not then, and don't now, have much respect for what goes on in the American Theatre. I am not convinced that it *is* a Theatre; it seems to me a series, merely, of commercial speculations, stale, repetitious, and timid. I certainly didn't see much future for me in that frame-work, and I was profoundly unwilling to risk my morale and my talent—my life—in endeavors which could only increase a level of frustration already dangerously high.

Nevertheless, the germ of the play persisted. It is based, very distantly indeed, on the case of Emmett Till—the Negro youth who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. The murderer in this case was acquitted. (His brother, who helped him do the deed, is now a deputy sheriff in Rulesville, Mississippi.) After his acquittal, he recounted the facts of the murder—for one cannot refer to his performance as a confession—to William Bradford Huie, who wrote it all down in an article called "Wolf Whistle." I do not know why the case pressed on my mind so hard—but it would not let me go. I absolutely dreaded committing myself to writing a play—there were enough people around already telling me that I couldn't write novels—but I began to see that my fear of the form masked a much deeper fear. That fear was that I would never be able to draw a valid portrait of the murderer. In life, obviously, such people baffle and terrify me and, with one part of my mind at least, I hate them and would be willing to kill

them. Yet, with another part of my mind, I am aware that no man is a villain in his own eyes. Something in the man knows—*must* know—that what he is doing is evil; but in order to accept the knowledge the man would have to change. What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe.

But if it is true, and I believe it is, that all men are brothers, then we have the duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we probably cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children. For we, the American people, have created him, he is our servant; it is we who put the cattleprodder in his hands, and we are responsible for the crimes that he commits. It is we who have locked him in the prison of his color. It is we who have persuaded him that Negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty, as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe. It is we who have forbidden him, on pain of exclusion from the tribe, to accept his beginnings, when he and black people loved each other, and rejoice in them, and use them; it is we who have made it mandatory—honorable—that white father should deny black son. These are grave crimes indeed, and we have committed them and continue to commit them in order to make money.

The play then, for me, takes place in Plaguetown, U. S. A., now. The plague is race, the plague is our concept of Christianity: and this raging plague has the power to destroy every human relationship. I once took a short trip with Medgar Evers to the back-woods of Mississippi. He was investigating the murder of a Negro man by a white storekeeper which had taken place months before. Many people talked to Medgar that night, in dark cabins, with their lights out, in whispers; and we had been followed for many miles out of Jackson, Mississippi, not by a lunatic with a gun, but by state troopers. I will never forget that night, as I will never forget Medgar—who took me to the plane the next day. We promised to see each other soon. When he died, something entered into me which I cannot describe, but it was then that I resolved that nothing under heaven would prevent me from getting this play done. We are walking in terrible darkness here, and this is one man's attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light. (pp. xiii-xv)

James Baldwin, "Notes for Blues," in his Blues for Mister Charlie, *Dial Press, 1964, pp. xiii-xv.*

Notes for *The Amen Corner* (1968)

[*In the excerpt below, Baldwin relates the circumstances that precipitated his shift from writing novels to composing drama, noting in particular his desire to break away from what he felt were societal boundaries that trapped him as a "Negro writer." He also likens the relationship between playwright and audience to that of preacher and congregation, in which the evangelist attempts to "involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them."*]

Writing ***The Amen Corner*** I remember as a desperate and even rather irresponsible act—it was certainly considered irresponsible by my agent at that time. She did not wish to discourage me, but it was her duty to let me know that the American theatre was not exactly clamoring for plays on obscure aspects of Negro life, especially one written by a virtually unknown author whose principal effort until that time had been one novel [*Go Tell It on the Mountain*]. She may sincerely have believed that I had gotten my signals mixed and earnestly explained to me that, with one novel under my belt, it was the *magazine* world that was open to me, *not* the world of the theatre; I sensibly ought to be pursuing the avenue that was open, especially since I had no money at all. I couldn't explain to her or to myself why I wasted so much time on a play. I knew, for one thing, that very few novelists are able to write plays and I really had no reason to suppose that I could be an exception to this age-old, iron rule. I was perfectly aware that it would probably never be produced, and, furthermore, I didn't even have any ambition to conquer the theatre. To this last point we shall return, for I was being very dishonest, or perhaps merely very cunning, with myself concerning the extent of my ambition. (p. xi)

I had no idea whether or not I could write a play, but I was absolutely determined that I would not, not at that moment in my career, not at that moment in my life, attempt another novel. I did not trust myself to do it. I was really terrified that I would, without even knowing that I was doing it, try to repeat my first success and begin to imitate myself. I knew that I had more to say and much, much more to discover than I had been able to indicate in *Mountain*. . . . [So I] began what I told myself was a "writing exercise": by which I meant I'm still a young man, my family now knows that I really am a writer—that was very important to me—let us now see if I am equipped to go the distance, and let's try something we've never tried before. The first line written in ***The Amen Corner*** is now Margaret's line in the Third Act: "It's a awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!" That line, of course, says a great deal about me—the play says a great deal about me—but I was thinking not only, not merely, about the terrifying desolation of my private life but about the great burdens carried by my father. I was old enough by now, at last, to recognize the nature of the dues he had paid, old enough to wonder if I could possibly have paid them, old enough, at last, at last, to know that I had loved him and had wanted him to love me. I could see that the nature of the battle we had fought had been dictated by the fact that our temperaments were so fatally the same: neither of us could bend. And when I began to think about what had happened to him, I began to see why he was so terrified of what was surely going to happen to me.

The Amen Corner comes somewhere out of that. For to think about my father meant that I had also to think about my mother and the stratagems she was forced to use to save her children from the destruction awaiting them just outside her door. It is because I know what Sister Margaret goes through, and what her male child is menaced by,

that I become so unmanageable when people ask me to confirm their hope that there has been *progress*—what a word!—in white-black relations. There has certainly not been enough progress to solve Sister Margaret's dilemma: how to treat her husband and her son as men and at the same time to protect them from the bloody consequences of trying to be a man in this society. No one yet knows, or is in the least prepared to speculate on, how high a bill we will yet have to pay for what we have done to Negro men and women. She is in the church because her society has left her no other place to go. Her sense of reality is dictated by the society's assumption, which also becomes her own, of her inferiority. Her need for human affirmation, and also for vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety; and her love, which is real but which is also at the mercy of her genuine and absolutely justifiable terror, turns her into a tyrannical matriarch. In all of this, of course, she loses her old self—the fiery, fast-talking little black woman whom Luke loved. Her triumph, which is also, if I may say so, the historical triumph of the Negro people in this country, is that she sees this finally and accepts it, and, although she has lost everything, also gains the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself.

One last thing: concerning my theatrical ambitions, and my cunning or dishonesty—I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write the play, by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the *communion* which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them. I knew that an unknown black writer could not possibly hope to achieve this forum. I did not want to enter the theatre on the theatre's terms, but on mine. And so I waited. And the fact that ***The Amen Corner*** took ten years to reach the professional stage says a great deal more about the American theatre than it says about this author. The American Negro really is a part of this country, and on the day we face this fact, and not before that day, we will become a nation and possibly a great one. (pp. xv-xvii)

James Baldwin, "Notes for 'The Amen Corner'," in The Amen Corner, *Dial Press, 1968, pp. xi-xvii.*

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

Carlton W. Molette (essay date 1977)

[*In the following essay, Molette assesses Baldwin's plays based on theatrical rather than literary criteria. He concludes that the smooth flow of action and audience engagement with the events on stage make* The Amen Corner *more effective theatrically than* Blues for Mister Charlie.]

At first glance, the whole subject of Baldwin as a playwright seems destined to be rather uncomplicated. After all, he has had only two plays professionally produced, and subsequently published. But the depth of Baldwin's characters simply does not permit uncomplicated answers to questions of some substance. Baldwin's characters—those in his plays—have the same kind of depth and complexity with which the characters in his novels are endowed. After all, he is a novelist; and novelists—the good ones—are supposed to be able to do that: create characters of great depth and complexity. But novels provide ways of delving into character that plays do not have at their disposal. And the concern here is with plays.

I will leave it to the literary critics to examine Baldwin's literature—to examine Baldwin as a writer. I am a theater worker, and I will confine my concern to Baldwin as a playwright, and to the plays that he has wrought. I would further like to emphasize that plays are *wrought,* not written. This is an important concept to reckon with. Writers work wherever and whenever they will. Playwrights must work with and for the other theater workers, or theaterwrights. Plays are events that occur, not words that are written. So, to examine James Baldwin as a playwright is to examine something that only seldom, and quite inadvertently, has to do with things literary. My concerns with any script have largely to do with such questions as: Does it come alive on the stage? Does the action of the play flow smoothly and continuously? Will it hold the attention of the audience? Will it have meaning and worth for the audience? There have been many great writers throughout history who have not been able to *wright* a play that is successful, according to the above criteria.

Remarkably enough, James Baldwin's very first play, ***The Amen Corner,*** is one of the most successful Afro-American plays that I have seen. The play was first presented at Howard University, and directed by Owen Dodson. At its best, the collaboration of playwright and director causes the work of both to be better than it would have been otherwise. Baldwin's influence upon Dodson and Dodson's influence upon Baldwin have, undoubtedly, made a better theatrical event than either would have been able to produce without the collaborative interchange that took place while the premiere production of ***The Amen Corner*** was in rehearsal. ***The Amen Corner*** is built upon the rhythms of the Afro-American church. The action of the play flows smoothly and effortlessly to the rhythms of the language and of the music of the play. This flow of the action includes the transitions back and forth between the three locales of the play. The dominant force in the play is the rhythm. The congregation is swept up in this rhythm. The congregation is compelled to participate. I say "the congregation" because this play is more of a black church ritual than it is a play in the sense that modern Western culture defines a play. So one of the major goals in this particular collaborative effort between playwright and director must be to affect the congregation in a way very similar to that of the black church ritual. This effect might be called a purgation of the emotions. Two of the most important means of creating this purgation of the emotions have already been suggested. First, there is the rhythmic response from the congregation to the events on

stage. Secondly, the very response of those who are gathered together reinforces the rhythm and the sense of belonging, of community, of togetherness within the congregation. Both of these are important elements in the traditional black church ritual.

The Amen Corner is also more a black church ritual because of its content. ***The Amen Corner*** is about love—about the enduring strength that love gives—about the love between (not among) four people who comprise a particular black family. In addition to family love, there is an extended-family love that surrounds the congregation on the stage (the actors) and the congregation in the auditorium (the audience). There is a love that transcends all the petty bickering, the jealousies, the family fights. And this love is made to come alive in the theater via the same ritual techniques that the black church uses. As a black ritual event, ***The Amen Corner*** works. The first professional production was moving as theater ought to be but seldom is. But was it moving because of something contained in James Baldwin's script? The professional premiere was produced and directed by Frank Silvera, designed by Vantile Whitfield, and performed by a phenomenally impressive cast, headed by Bea Richards. The cast also included Maidie Norman, Juanita Moore, Robert DeCoy, Isabelle Sanford, Whitman Mays, and Gloria Foster. It is highly doubtful that such a cast could have been put together—even by Frank Silvera—if there had been some other meaningful work available to black actors in Los Angeles at the time. But, the point I want to make is this: With a cast like that one, one might be moved by a play that is only mediocre to fairly good. It has happened before. But there have been other productions of this play. The range in production quality has been rather wide. I have seen audiences moved by this play even when it was not particularly well produced. Now, that is something special.

On the other hand, the play is not perfect. And people do expect critics to find fault with things. Ironically enough, ***The Amen Corner*** is at its worst as a play precisely when it is at its best as literature. There are several two-character scenes between the members of the Alexander family that are true literary gems. They are also the scenes of greatest character revelation. They actually tell us too much about the characters. Now, all that is told needs to be told; but some of it ought to be told through means other than words. That is what actors are supposed to use their "instruments" to do. The emotional tonality of these scenes makes it mandatory that the tempo be slowed; thus, the rhythm becomes less pronounced. On these few occasions, in act two of a three-act play, the action slows down, and the word becomes far more important than the deed. In the theater, that usually means trouble. This is especially a problem with the scenes that involve the father (Luke), because he is confined to his sickbed, making visual interest through movement very difficult to achieve, as well.

Of course, the Frank Silvera production was able to mask this flaw in play construction quite effectively. As the mother (Margaret), Bea Richards was capable of maintaining interest with her voice alone. And the language in these scenes is beautiful and powerful in and of itself. On the other hand, we are frequently told essentially the same thing for several speeches in a row. The use of repetition can work very well when the goal is to create a rhythmic response from the congregation. But in these quiet, introspective, two-character scenes, repetition primarily serves to increase the playing time of the scene. Having pointed out what I consider to be the major flaw of the play, I must add that, when I directed a production of ***The Amen Corner,*** I was not willing to cut a single one of those words.

I have never directed Baldwin's other play, but I think I would have virtually the same reaction to the words in ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** if I were placed in a position of deciding on some specific words that could just as well be omitted. I seriously doubt that there are any. One of the most illuminating moments that I have spent in a theater was spent in watching a particular scene in ***Blues for Mister Charlie.*** This particular scene is a soliloquy. I am sure that, if I had read the scene prior to seeing it performed, I would have said, "It will not work on the stage. It is too long. And besides, soliloquies are no longer acceptable as a principal means of character revelation." Fortunately, I was privileged to witness a truly gifted actress, Miss Diana Sands, perform the soliloquy before I had an opportunity to say all of those incorrect things. But again the question arises, Is it the play? Or did Miss Sands make it work in spite of the script rather than because of it? After all Diana Sands could transform even *The Owl and the Pussycat* into an arresting evening of theater. I am afraid that, in the hands of a lesser artist than Miss Sands, that soliloquy could be transformed from the highpoint to the lowpoint of the play. On the other hand, this soliloquy does not stand out as a readily perceived flaw. The play is too complex, really, for anything to stand out as a readily perceived anything. Again Baldwin has wrought a play in which its worst theatrical characteristics are its best literary characteristics. As a piece of literature, the complexity of ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** is an admirable trait; as a theatrical event, that same complexity is its major flaw.

But, before we get into the details of the above assertion, let us look for a moment at both of these plays, and the times out of which they grew. ***The Amen Corner*** is a play of the 1950s. It tells a story of love and hope for a better tomorrow. The story is told in an uncomplicated, straightforward manner. It grew out of the years just before college students were marching, arm in arm, to the strains of "We Shall Overcome." On the other hand, ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** grew out of the years just before Watts, and the others, burned. ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** is a "protest" play. It is a complicated, angry play. It is a play that is self-consciously black. When blacks do protest plays, to whom do they protest? To whites, of course. So ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** is largely aimed at a white audience. This is not intended to imply that the play says nothing to blacks. On the other hand, ***The Amen Corner*** does not protest to whites; it informs, educates, illuminates blacks. The play was first staged on the campus of a black university. It is not self-consciously black. The play assumes that there are some elementary aspects of black culture that do not require explanation within the body of the play. It assumes, in effect, a black audience. It is not an anti-white play, it is an a-white play.

Blues for Mister Charlie tries to be all things to all people. It tries to explain whites to blacks and blacks to whites. That probably requires two different plays. That is certainly one major reason for the complexity of the play. And, since plays must be absorbed in the span of time it takes to perform them, complexity can be a liability. Conversations among average white audience members in the theater lobby during intermission and following ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** all seemed to revolve around the fact that there was content that the blacks understood that the whites did not. "What are *they* laughing at?"—meaning the blacks in the audience—the whites kept asking each other. But the reverse situation applied as well. The white characters were frequently not understood, or not accepted as valid, by the black audience members. Actually, blacks did not want to face an essential truth in the character of Lyle Britten. That truth is that Lyle is not some kind of a demonic redneck character. Lyle is *not* a bad guy—just ask Lyle, he'll tell you. Baldwin says, "No man is a villain in his own eyes." [see Author Commentary dated 1964]. So most blacks in the audience were presented with a character that they either refused to admit was there, or refused to admit was true. What they wanted was some kind of wild-eyed, nigger-hating, stereotyped redneck villain. Instead they got a real man who was backed into a corner, not by Richard Henry but by the system.

But that is only one of a number of paradoxes. Richard Henry thinks he must destroy "Mr. Charlie" in order to achieve his own salvation. On the other hand, he knows that the system is programmed to destroy him if he attempts to destroy the man. He knows that he cannot realistically expect to beat the whole system singlehandedly. So he knows that his act of destruction perpetrated against "Mr. Charlie" will inevitably result in his own destruction. Yet he wants to live. He is not suicidal. Still a third paradox. And this one clearly marks this as a statement of 1960s point of view. The leader of the white community and the leader of the black community get together to tell each other how much progress they are making within the system. But even they know that it is a lie.

In addition to these, and other, paradoxes, ***Blues for Mister Charlie*** is made even more complicated by a number of fluctuations. There are fluctuations in at least three major aspects of the production: time, locale, and acting style. Time fluctuates between time present and time past. The locale of the play also fluctuates between two distinctly different atmospheres. There are black locales and white locales. There is a fluctuation between two distinct acting styles. Most of the performance requires an illusionistic, representational style of acting—one in which the action of the play revolves around relationships between the actors. But there is some fluctuation into the realm of soliloquy that requires quite a different approach, or style, for the actors. When the play moves into the realm of soliloquy, a less illusionistic style is necessitated—one that requires the actor to relate more inwardly to his own character; and at the same time, more outwardly to the audience, but not to the other characters.

Blues for Mister Charlie fluctuates among eight different combinations of these six elements: black atmosphere, white atmosphere, time present, time past, representational style, soliloquy style. If the play is to have its optimum effect upon the audience, the audience must be able to keep up with these fluctuations. Further, the audience must manage this without devoting a great deal of concentration to the effort. After all, primary attention must be devoted to receiving the message, not to determining the where, the when, and the how of the transmission of the message. In spite of all these complexities, the play can work as a play. The inherent complexities do create production problems. Actually, the script would work better as a film than it does as a play. But Baldwin has achieved one very important requisite for *wrighting* a play. Further, this achievement is undoubtedly why the play works, despite its complexity. Baldwin has not attempted to provide complete verbal transitions for all of these fluctuations and paradoxes.

I am sure that such restraint must be difficult for a novelist to achieve. Such restraint must be particularly difficult for a novelist to achieve because it requires that one artist turn his creative efforts over to someone else before it can be completed. So the transitions are achieved through the use of music, lighting, scenery, costume, and, of course, acting. That requires from the playwright a trust of and a reliance upon many other artists. The ability to accomplish that collaborative working relationship may very well be the reason for Baldwin's success as a playwright where so many other novelists have failed.

Certainly, Baldwin would be an even better playwright if he would gain more experience in the theater. But who can blame him for not doing so? After all, his first obligation is the physical and artistic survival of James Baldwin. Given the present system of producing plays professionally in the United States, we are lucky indeed to get one play per decade from the likes of James Baldwin. (pp. 183-88)

Carlton W. Molette, "James Baldwin as a Playwright," in James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation, *edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, Howard University Press, 1977, pp. 183-88.*

Darwin T. Turner (essay date 1977)

[*In the essay below, Turner argues that although* The Amen Corner *is the better of Baldwin's two plays,* Blues for Mister Charlie *has met with greater public success because it is written for a white audience. Turner further contends that this is an indication of the difficulty encountered by the black artist who desires to address his own culture through a medium over which white society exercises complete control.*]

In his two dramas—***Blues for Mister Charlie*** (1964) and ***The Amen Corner,*** produced professionally in 1965 but written during the 1950s—James Baldwin reflects two divergent positions of contemporary black dramatists. Ironically, in the earlier of the two—***The Amen Corner***—he more closely resembles Afro-American dramatists of the 1970s than in ***Blues for Mister Charlie,*** even though the latter play not only aroused sensation among theatergoers in general but also evoked admiration from many blacks.

The issue that distinguishes one group of contemporary