Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 229

Volume 229

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 229

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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Contents

James Baldwin
1924-1987

(Full name James Arthur Baldwin) American novelist, essayist, playwright, and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Baldwin's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC,* Volumes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 13, 15, 17, 42, 50, 67, 90, and 127.

INTRODUCTION

Revered as one of the most influential writers of his generation, Baldwin addressed major social and political issues of the day in his works, which include numerous novels, essays, short stories, and poetry. His writing also reveals his personal struggle as an artist who strove to find a place in the Black intellectual community, within which Baldwin's homosexual orientation was viewed as a detrimental trait in the larger effort to establish a vigorous, successful Black community in America. The conflict between his sexuality and his racial background and spiritualism forms a major thematic thread in Baldwin's works. Despite this personal and intellectual schism, Baldwin achieved almost legendary status among thinkers of his time, and his novels and essays were universally praised for the nuanced and complex manner in which he addressed issues of race, equality, and democracy in his work.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Baldwin was born James Arthur Jones on August 2, 1924, in Harlem, New York, to Emma Berdis Jones, a single mother. A few years later Emma married David Baldwin, who adopted the boy, who then took his stepfather's surname. From an early age Baldwin was interested in reading and writing, and he cited such authors as Henry James, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Dickens among his major literary influences. Although he wanted to pursue writing full-time, Baldwin had to set aside his literary ambitions in order to help his parents support their ever-increasing family. He had a contentious relationship with his evangelical preacher father, and this, coupled with a burgeoning sense of his own sexuality, deeply affected Baldwin. Struggling to find acceptance for himself while attempting to reconcile his sexual preferences within the context of his religious background, Baldwin underwent a dramatic religious conversion at the age of fourteen. Eventually he turned away from religion, but the conflict between his sexual orientation and traditional spirituality, as well as his difficult relationship with his father, were themes that resonated in Baldwin's later work.

Although he could not devote himself to the effort fully, Baldwin did begin to write while he was still in school, viewing it as an escape from the burdens of his everyday life. In middle school Baldwin had the opportunity to meet Countee Cullen, a famous poet of the Harlem Renaissance, who encouraged him to apply for admission to DeWitt Clinton, a prestigious high school in the Bronx. Baldwin continued his literary efforts in high school, from which he graduated in 1942. Once again he was constrained by financial circumstances, and he could not attend college or contemplate a full-time career as a writer. Instead he continued to help support his family financially by working various jobs. Eventually, however, the strain of working, the conflict with his father, and the stress of not being able to pursue his writing dreams took its toll, and in 1943 Baldwin made the decision to move to Greenwich Village. Here, he continued to work a series of odd jobs, but also launched a determined effort to pursue a literary career. He began by writing book reviews for various magazines, and also started work on a novel.

During this time Baldwin was introduced to Richard Wright, a contemporary African American writer, who had published his novel *Native Son* to great success. Wright read a draft of what would become Baldwin's first book, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), and helped him obtain a grant that allowed him to pursue his writing more fully. In 1948 Baldwin published his first short story, "Previous Condition" in *Commentary* magazine. That same year Baldwin moved to Paris. He has explained in his essays that this move was in equal parts a response to the racial prejudice he encountered in America and the greater acceptance of homosexuality he found in France. Although he visited the United States following the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* for the most part Baldwin lived in France for the remainder of his life, continuing to write fiction and essays. Baldwin died on December 1, 1987, of cancer, in his home in St. Paul-de-Vence, France.

MAJOR WORKS

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was a professional and personal triumph, receiving great criti-

cal acclaim upon its publication. The book draws upon many events and situations from Baldwin's own life, including the protagonist, John Grimes', difficult relationship with his father, and the impact of religion on his life. Many critics view young John's struggle to gain acceptance in the eyes of his father as a reflection of Baldwin's own grappling with his own racial and sexual identity. Following the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin entered a highly productive period. He began work on his first play, *The Amen Corner,* finishing it, along with *Notes of a Native Son* and *Giovanni's Room,* between 1954 and 1955.

In *The Amen Corner* Baldwin focuses on the Black church, telling the story of Sister Margaret, a preacher endowed with enormous charm and leadership abilities. Margaret is a forceful advocate for her church, but at the beginning of the play her leadership is challenged due to her heavy-handed methods. As the action unfolds it becomes clear that Margaret had immersed herself in the church as an escape from the tragedy in her own life rather than from a true sense of vocation. Produced in 1955, the play was received extremely well by audiences and critics. Baldwin's reputation as a noted Black commentator was established following the publication of his first anthology of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). The first half of this book focuses on representations of African Americans in literature and film, while the second half is devoted to relaying actual experiences of Black people in the United States, especially on the impact of racism in their lives.

Despite his success with *The Amen Corner* and the earlier acclaim he had received for *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin had great difficulty finding a publisher for his next novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), due to its overtly homosexual theme. When he did manage to get the book published, contemporary reviewers reacted negatively to the novel, which features a young protagonist's struggle to come to terms with his own sexuality. In the years since, critics have acknowledged *Giovanni's Room* as one of Baldwin's most finely crafted works.

Baldwin's next major work of fiction was *Another Country* (1962). Once again he used his writing to explore American racial and sexual attitudes. The novel contains several narrative threads, each featuring characters attempting to come to terms with their identity. The story begins with the tale of Rufus Scott, a Black jazz drummer who has been brutally punished because of his race. In fact Rufus's experiences have been so horrific that he can no longer distinguish between real and imagined assaults. Thus when he finally establishes a relationship with Leona, a Southern white girl, he is unable to accept her love or even imagine that he deserves such compassion. Devastated by his suffering, Rufus eventually drives Leona insane and commits suicide. Rufus's story and death serve as the catapult for the action in the remainder of the novel, which eventually concludes on an optimistic note—the title of the book alludes to the altered, more positive state of the character's lives at the end of the book.

In the 1960s Baldwin's literary focus changed. He became increasingly involved in the civil rights movement, directly addressing the issue of Black equality in America in several speeches. In 1963 he published *The Fire Next Time,* an anthology of essays in which he stated that the future of the United States was inextricably linked to the manner in which it treated its Black citizens. This book catapulted Baldwin to center stage for a whole new audience, one that was unfamiliar with his fiction. It was a difficult period in Baldwin's life: Surrounded by admirers and deluged with attention for his work, he struggled to maintain a balance between his position as a spokesperson for the Black community and his own artistic needs.

During this turmoil Baldwin released his next novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), to mixed reviews. Through the story of the protagonist, Leo Proudhammer, a Black actor, Baldwin attempts to deal with the civil rights movement in the context of Black artists. As Leo achieves professional success, he finds himself feeling alienated on two fronts—he is ostracized from the Black community because of his success, and he is excluded by the white community because of his race. Faced with this dichotomy Leo must make a choice either to take part in or sit out of the civil rights movement swirling around him. Many critics have viewed Leo's struggle as being reflective of the struggle Baldwin waged within himself, attempting to reconcile his role as an artist/writer/celebrity with his status as a civil rights spokesperson for his community.

Baldwin continued to write about and discuss issues of race during the 1970s, including a famous series of conversations with anthropologist Margaret Mead that were published as *A Rap on Race* in 1971, as well as a dialogue with poet-activist Nikki Giovanni in 1973. He also continued to write prose, including *No Name in the Street* (1972) and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Later novels by Baldwin include *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and *Just Above My Head* (1979). In recognition of his status as a major American literary figure, a two-volume edition of Baldwin's works, edited by Toni Morrison, was issued by the Library of America in 1998.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Early criticism of Baldwin's work focused heavily on the autobiographical nature of his writing, as well as his status as an important voice on Black issues in America. Although Baldwin did not view himself as a spokesper-

son for his race, his essays about race relations served to establish him as a major intellectual and political voice of his time. Thus, many of Baldwin's contemporaries reviewed his writing primarily through the filter of his position as an advocate for Black rights. When Baldwin revealed ambivalence towards prevailing Black rhetoric regarding Black liberation, he was accused of being inconsistent, and some Black critics even accused him of hating African Americans. As a result his stature declined in the late 1960s, especially when contrasted with the more militant writers of the civil rights movement. Recent critical evaluations of Baldwin's works have shifted their focus from evaluating his work in the context of his position vis-à-vis the civil rights movement; instead they study the complex nature of Baldwin's views on race and sexuality, recognizing that his writing was an evolving process, and was used to explore his complex feelings about race, sexuality, and the role of the artist.

In an essay detailing Baldwin's literary career, Terry Teachout has noted that Baldwin's rise and fall from fame resulted in part due to confusion regarding his role as a protestor versus his own view of himself as an author trying to express himself fully through his work. Both Teachout and Rosemary Bray have lauded Baldwin's work as a novelist, but concur that he was a truly gifted essayist, and it is in these writings that Baldwin is at his best, revealing complex ideas about race, culture, gender, and sexuality. Michelle Cliff has commented on the difficulty of writing about race in general, noting that Baldwin's views on the subject were particularly informed by his personal experiences.

Another important theme that critics have explored in Baldwin's works is that of alienation. According to Robert Tomlinson, Baldwin used his own expatriate experience in France as a paradigm for the Black experience in America, noting that the sense of loneliness and alienation felt by Baldwin's characters mirrors the isolation felt by Black people and homosexuals in America, who view themselves as social and sexual exiles. Similarly, David Wright also has discussed Baldwin's use of the alienation motif in his works, noting that, like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, Baldwin used language to create alternate landscapes in his short stories to convey imagined freedom for his characters.

In addition to evaluating Baldwin in the context of his social and political milieu, critics have studied his literary technique, use of allusion and symbolism, and the way in which he translated his personal experiences into his writing. In an essay analyzing "Sonny's Blues," Sandy Morey Norton has noted that Baldwin uses the social stigma attached to heroin addiction as a means to challenge mainstream values in 1950s America. According to Norton, Baldwin used drug addiction as a metaphor to create a discussion about other difficult issues in society, highlighting the importance of openly talking about difficult issues in order to overcome them. Similarly, Kemp Williams has re-examined *Giovanni's Room* as an excellent example of Baldwin's stylistic artistry, noting his use of physical objects to convey his characters' sense of confinement within social constrictions. Baldwin's work continues to be studied and praised for its eloquence and incisive writing style, and the nuanced complexity of Baldwin's ideas as well as his skillful use of language.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

"Previous Condition" (short story) 1948
Go Tell It on the Mountain (novel) 1952
The Amen Corner (play) 1955
Notes of a Native Son (essays) 1955
Giovanni's Room (novel) 1956
"Sonny's Blues" (short story) 1957
Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son (essays) 1961
Another Country (novel) 1962
The Fire Next Time (essays) 1963
Blues for Mister Charlie (play) 1964
Going to Meet the Man (short stories) 1965
This Morning, This Evening, So Soon (novella) 1967
Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (novel) 1968
A Rap on Race [with Margaret Mead] (conversation) 1971
No Name in the Street (essay) 1972
A Dialogue [with Nikki Giovanni] (conversation) 1973
If Beale Street Could Talk (novel) 1974
The Devil Finds Work (essays) 1976
Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood (novel) 1976
Just Above My Head (novel) 1979
Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems (poetry) 1983
The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction (nonfiction) 1985
Harlem Quartet (novel) 1987
James Baldwin: Early Novels and Stories [edited by Toni Morrison] (short stories and novels) 1998
James Baldwin: Collected Essays [edited by Toni Morrison] (essays) 1998

CRITICISM

Terry Teachout (essay date 9 February 1998)

SOURCE: Teachout, Terry. "Nobody Knows His Name." *National Review* 50, no. 1 (9 February 1998): 50, 52.

[*In the following essay, Teachout explains that although Baldwin was a noted novelist in his time, his most en-*

during legacy is as an essayist. Teachout also provides an overview of Baldwin's writing career, commenting on his rise and fall in popularity, and attributing some of it to the confusion engendered by Baldwin's role as a protestor versus his struggle as an artist interested in expressing his personal point of view.]

Who now reads James Baldwin? Nobody I know, although his books must be selling: all of them are available in massmarket paperback editions, even the later, truly wretched ones. Yet he has long been a point of reference rather than a continuing presence, and younger readers may be surprised to learn that he was at one time the most admired black writer in America, a man whose opinions were ritually solicited by earnest whites eager to know why blacks hated them so much. Then the caravan moved on, and suddenly the author of ***The Fire Next Time*** was forgotten but not gone, doomed to spend his later years giving endless interviews (the last resort of the burned-out novelist) and attending meaningless conferences, pretending the world still hung on his every word.

The Library of America has charted the course of Baldwin's long decline in a pair of volumes devoted to his fiction and essays, and one thing they make abundantly clear is that he was always too self-absorbed to be a good novelist. Each of the three novels included in ***Early Novels and Stories*** fails in a different way—***Go Tell It on the Mountain*** (1953) is promising but stiff, ***Giovanni's Room*** (1956) weepy and implausible, ***Another Country*** (1962) noisily hysterical—but all have in common their author's inability to write convincingly about anyone but himself, thinly disguised. It was only when he ripped off the ill-fitting novelist's mask and spoke his mind in his own tart voice that readers sat up and took notice.

Baldwin began publishing essays in *The Nation, The New Leader,* and *Commentary* shortly after World War II. These pieces, collected in ***Notes of a Native Son*** (1955) and ***Nobody Knows My Name*** (1961), and reprinted in ***Collected Essays,*** have retained the power to startle, both because they are so fabulously well written and because their author, for all his rage at the plight of blacks in postwar America, rejected the constricting ideology of protest, refusing to play anybody's game but his own:

> The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation. . . . I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them.

But in the Sixties, Baldwin shed his hard-won detachment and plunged head first into the whirlpool of radicalism. ***The Fire Next Time*** (1963), his most famous book, is a preposterous farrago of scare-whitey posturing ("A bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay") and gassy generalizations ("But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them"). The resulting cocktail briefly intoxicated guilty liberals, but, once the buzz wore off, Baldwin found it impossible to hold the attention of a fickle public drawn to the stronger wine and madder music of such tough guys as Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver. His prose grew shriller and slacker, all to no avail; by 1973, his stock had fallen so low that an editor at *Time,* calling Baldwin "passé," declined to print a story about him.

Had Baldwin lived longer (he died in 1987), his homosexuality might well have made him fashionable again, but it carried no cachet with the Baptist ministers of the civil-rights movement—Martin Luther King Jr. kept him at arm's length—and was no less objectionable to the Black Muslims and Black Panthers with whom he subsequently sought to curry favor. (There is no puritan like a political puritan.) It may well be that the Can-you-top-this? rhetoric of his later years was motivated in part by a need to prove himself to those who, like Cleaver, explicitly challenged his manhood.

But the source of Baldwin's frenzy can just as easily be found in his early essays, in which he is forever arguing that Americans are out of touch with their sexuality, a stock routine beloved of Eisenhower-era homosexual novelists (and one to which his Pentecostal background added extra zip). Just as revealing is the way the young Baldwin, notwithstanding his avowed determination to be more than just "a Negro writer," contrives to foreshadow the wildest excesses of present-day identity politics:

> I know . . . that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history . . . I was an interloper; this was not my heritage.

Moreover, Baldwin's self-absorption—his obsession with the essayist's "I"—blinded him to the fact that the world was turning before his unseeing eyes. "There is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure," he wrote in ***The Fire Next Time***; in fact, the situation of blacks in America had already changed drastically by 1963, and soon would be transformed almost beyond recognition.

It was Baldwin's inability (or unwillingness) to acknowledge the significance of this epochal transformation which rendered so many of his books as unreadable as the leaden protest novels of the Thirties he once attacked so eloquently. The fierce young man who in his best essays sought only to write honestly and well about "the specialness of my experience" has a claim on our attention; the middle-aged hysteric who confused his private anguish with the common lot of ordinary blacks does not. Such is ever and always the fate of the artist who undertakes to speak for his people, instead of for himself.

Michelle Cliff (review date 11 May 1998)

SOURCE: Cliff, Michelle. "Telling It on the Mountain." *Nation* 266 (11 May 1998): 24, 26-8, 30.

[*In the following review of a collection of Baldwin's essays and early fiction, Cliff outlines Baldwin's ideas on race as expressed in his prose, noting the difficulty he faced in writing about the subject while attempting to establish his role as an artist.*]

His extraordinary face appears on each of these volumes [***Collected Essays*** and ***Early Novels and Stories***], with their red, white and blue stripes festooning the cover like bunting, tendentious series titles blessing the volumes. Quasi-patriotic iconography aside, the overwhelming shade on the jacket is black, signifying this country's obsession, the thing that is its basis, this thing it can't let go—which James Baldwin knew above all else, as he recognized the falsity of whiteness as a category, and the desperateness with which white Americans hold fast to their classifications.

Speaking in a very early essay, **"Everybody's Protest Novel,"** i.e., *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Baldwin asked the question that lies at the core of white American racism, one unasked, unanswered, by Harriet Beecher Stowe: "the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds." Meaning the "violent inhumanity," as Baldwin puts it, of the system Mrs. Stowe describes, and that she protests. Where does it come from? What sustains it?

"In the context of the Negro problem," says Baldwin in the phrase fashionable well into the sixties to describe the tragedy of racism in the United States, "neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly."

So much of the past is unavailable to us. I remember hearing an interview with Toni Morrison, a writer in whom one hears whispers and shouts of Baldwin, in which she spoke of the difficulty of doing research for *Beloved,* particularly the scarcity of detail, oral or written, about the Middle Passage—"This is not a story to pass on." The African-American may have to forget as a matter of survival. "One is mysteriously shipwrecked forever, in the Great New World," Baldwin wrote (**"The Price of the Ticket"**). I am reminded of the ending of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe,* his recasting of *Robinson Crusoe,* of the silent descent of Friday into the wreck of a slave ship from which he had once emerged, on which his fellows drowned.

To excavate the past means something else for the white American, and that sort of excavation white America has been loath to undertake. Baldwin knew this, and he knew why. I thought of him when I read the disclosure in *The New York Times* about the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and its campaign against civil rights workers. Is this the beginning of an honest assessment of the past? Or will this information, and the admission that other states committed to maintaining white supremacy had similar state-supported organizations, be filed away wherever U.S. history stores unwanted information?

Baldwin spoke of the death of Malcolm X, a murder that shook him badly, "whatever hand pulled the trigger did not buy the bullet. That bullet was forged in the crucible of the West, that death was dictated by the most successful conspiracy in the history of the world, and its name is white supremacy" (**"No Name in the Street"**). Baldwin talks, among other things, about the effect of this faith of white supremacy, racism:

> If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would never have needed to invent and could never have become so dependent on what they still call "the Negro Problem." This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the blacks.

Excavating his past means also excavating the white self, assessing the self-inflicted damage, and in this country of revivals and Promise Keepers and the Klan and the church and jingoism and Vietnam and denial and he said/she said and euphemism and Disney World as afterlife and Gulf War Syndrome and denial and the bit and the revival of chain gangs and the Sand Creek Massacre and so on, such excavation is not likely, and in the event terrifying.

Toward the end of his life Baldwin wrote: "My black burden has not . . . been made lighter in the sixty years since my birth . . . and my joy, therefore, as concerns the immense strides made by white people is, to say the least, restrained" (**"The Price of the Ticket"**).