The search for identity in the works of James Baldwin

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THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF

JAMES BALDWIN

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BY

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PREFACE

Most critics of James Baldwin concede that he is concerned with the problem of being or the struggle for identity in all of his works. George Kent, a noted critic of Baldwin, in the March, 1964 issue of the GLA Journal believes that the question which enables one to understand Baldwin's works is simply, "How can one achieve, amid the dislocations and disintegrations of the modern world, true, functional being?" This paper will discuss identity as found in Baldwin's works and suggest answers to questions of this kind dealing with the problem of achieving identity.

Chapter I will examine identity at three different levels: sociological, personal or psychological, and religious. Chapter II will be concerned with the influences and treatment of the search as noted in Baldwin's works. Chapter III will examine Baldwin's essays and evaluate the premises on which his essays are based. Finally there is a summary of the conclusions reached by the writer.

The writer acknowledges her indebtedness to her two advisors, Dr. Richard K. Barksdale, Professor of English, and Dr. Thomas Jarrett, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Atlanta University, for their invaluable suggestions, readings, and guidance and to the late Dr. Nathaniel Tillman for his interest in her research. She wishes to extend appreciation to her family and friends for expressions of faith and encouragement which led to the realization of this goal.
CHAPTER I

JAMES BALDWIN AND THE MEANING OF IDENTITY

Interest in existentialism and the pre-occupation with the ego have been associated in recent years with the problem of identity, especially in American fiction. Much has been said about the importance of self, provoking such questions as "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "What is the importance of me--the 'ego'?" In other words, what is my identity? In most instances writers who use the term refer to identity as the position of the person in sociological terms: who the person is and where he is in his social relations with others.¹ "When one has identity he is situated—that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the knowledge of his participation or membership in social terms."² Stating it another way, the person associates himself with a group, taking on the qualities of social life of one particular group.³ This definition of identity may be further clarified by Warren Bennis' belief that the "movement from status to status as well as the frustrations of having to remain unwillingly in a status, sets conditions for the change and development of identities."⁴ Thus a group of individuals


²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 681.

who want to discard or change their identities cannot do so easily. In order to change their identities, they must initially be dissatisfied and frustrated with the qualities of their original group, and then the members eventually move in a direction to shape an identity more in line with them and their qualities.

Identity in sociological terms may be defined in another way. Alfred Adler, a noted psychologist, in his *Superiority and Social Interest* states that in one's social life identification with one group is absolutely necessary. We can understand one another as members of a group or society only if we identify. The ability to identify is not innate; it must be learned. The individual must grow up with others and feel himself a part of the group; he must feel the comforts of life with the discomforts, the advantages with the disadvantages. He must feel "at home." Thus he becomes a part of the community when he proves that he is corresponding with it and is of help to it.\(^5\)

Therefore Warren Bennis's views coupled with Alfred Adler's views indicate that to identify with a group one must feel a part of the group—"at home" with the group. However, if individuals within a group are not satisfied with their identities and want to change them, they could probably change them. Such a process is not an easy task. The groups have to re-learn, shape and find an identity in which they feel a part of a whole, a part of a unit.

Identity may be defined in psychological terms also. As Shoemaker, a well-known psychologist, said, "Personal identity implies persistance,

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that is, the existence of one and the same thing at different times."6

The individual behaves the same way consistently and develops eventually a distinct and unique behavior pattern. However, personal identity is not limited to this. One finds that personal identity is concerned with one's thinking--one's psyche--rather than one's body or behavioral patterns, although the latter is important in helping to define one's identity.

Of course, I am not only a person, I am also an American, a mammal, a vertebrate, and a male, to mention just a few of the things that I can truly be said to be. But the philosophy who asks, "Who am I?" is not looking for an answer of the sort, 'Well, you are a philosopher, a taxpayer, an amateur musician, and many other things!' He wants to know what things he happens to be, but what he is essentially.7

Thus identity consists of more than a person's behavioral patterns. It is what one remembers, thinks, and dreams about as well as what one does. In Shoemaker's words, "Personal identity is somehow defineable in terms of memory and that remembering something consists not in any fact about the body or behavior but in some non-physical fact to which only I have direct access."8 In other words, personal identity is what that psychologist Franz in his Fundamentals of Psychology calls those internalized activities which are carried on as a result of the memory and thoughts of previous experiences.

Identity may be seen at still another level--the level of religious identity. One acquires identity on this level when one establishes a relationship with God and strives for a completeness which includes


7Ibid., p. 35.
man's "essential quest" or "desire" for union with the Other. Thus one readily sees that identity at the religious level concerns spiritual renewal or rebirth. Sometimes this affects one's behavior and therefore changes one's social identity. It is for this reason that Spinks, in his discussion on the two facets of religious identity, states that identity at the religious level is both external and internal--external when it concerns man and his relation with others and internal when it affects man and his relation with himself and God. When in ordinary life a man tries to establish a place for himself in society, the man has to come to terms with the external world. The nature and result of this struggle will to a large extent depend upon his particular psychological 'type' [this is the world of humans and mortals] but when he has received some degree of social 'establishment' he may become aware of aspects of his interior life which were suppressed or ignored in his earlier years. This inner life now demands his attention so that the individual is confronted with the difficult problem of resolving oppositions within his psyche and within the universe... problems of Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, Life and Death. [this is the world of God, man's inner thoughts of Him and life] If he is by habit or training a religious man he will find some symbolic tradition that will help him resolve these oppositions and is reborn a 'new man'...[Regions of depth or] Religion,... enables a man to reconcile aspects of his inner and outer life which he has so far failed to accomplish by his own efforts and thus to achieve... a balanced personality. To enjoy religious identity man must cope with his inner feelings which are based on his concept of newness and rebirth and with his outer activities which reveal him the 'new man'. Through religion man is able to acquire or achieve that 'balanced personality.' Thus identity and the problem of "Who am I," "What am I" or "What is my being?" have meaning on three levels: social identity, psychological

or personal identity, and religious identity. Another type of identity, racial or ethnic identity, may involve all three levels of identity; it may be classified under social identity, for it involves not just the relationship of one member with a group, but the relationship of one ethnic group with another. It may be classified under personal identity, for the way that individuals within a particular ethnic group may be treated by persons outside this group may affect their personal identity (whether most of the members individually feel secure or unequal or they as individuals identify themselves with persons on the bottom of the social scale.). It is also common for individuals to invent "mechanisms" in order to rationalize why they are at the bottom of the scale and thus strive for little in terms of success. Racial identity may also affect one's religious identity, for religious identity involves both one's inner feelings and reactions to a Supreme Being and also one's relationship with persons of his ethnic group and persons outside his ethnic group. This discussion, however, will be limited to the three levels of identity mentioned above—namely, social, personal and religious; for other levels of identity, such as racial, tend to stem from one of the three previously named or combinations of them.

Much of the work of James Baldwin is concerned with an interpretation and analysis of the meaning of identity. However, Baldwin's views on identity may not be interpreted as purely religious identity or social or personal. For Baldwin identity involves self-fulfillment. Born in Harkem some forty years ago, he states in his Notes of a Native Son that he had the usual life of a child reared in the Negro ghetto—a life of bleak fantasy. It is also highly probable that religion played
a small part in aiding him to learn about himself, since the theme of religion is seen in his works, particularly in his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. He, no doubt, had the usual upbringing in a Negro protestant church, although he states that he was a preacher at fourteen, probably as a result of the strong influence of his father. Yet religion did not satisfy Baldwin's thirst for learning his identity. At that time during his early life, he conceived of religion as many of the older Negroes do-- one learns one's new self through religion and thus identifies oneself with the American Christian. Eventually Baldwin came to believe that Christianity was the religion of whites; Christianity was an alabaster faith and therefore the Blacks (the Negroes) could not identify with the white God.

As he accepted the alabaster Christ and the bloody cross-- in the bearing of which he would find his redemption, as indeed, to our outraged astonishment, as he sometimes did-- he must, hence-forth, accept others and standing, moreover, in the danger of death should he fail to accept the dazzling light thus brought into such darkness. It is this quite simple dilemma that must be borne in mind if we wish to comprehend his psychology.10

Baldwin saw Christianity not as a religious togetherness of Blacks and whites or as a group of people with different colors sharing the common bond of faith-- a faith which established an identity among the men, a religious identity. Instead, he saw Christianity from the sociological point of view. The white man had taught the Negro a religion of love and brotherhood, but did not practice this religion himself. Man, especially a Black man, cannot have an inner union with a white God and him-

self, while he sees that the image of the white God (white men) oppressing him and certainly not accepting him as a man or brother.

Thus through religion the Negro, as well as Baldwin, is still frustrated in that the Christian faith does not erase the inferior nature of the Negro. As a Christian, the Negro's image remains, for he cannot truly identify as a Black in a white man's religion. To disassociate the Negro from his pagan past was an aim almost achieved by the white slave-owner; he deprived the slave of his past, and took away from the Negro part of his identity. In his Fire Next Time Baldwin writes:

Thus, the African exile, pagan, barred off the auction block and into the fields, fell on his knees before that God in whom he must now believe; who made him, but not in His image. This tableau, this impossibility is the heritage of the Negro in America! Wash 'em... and I shall be whiter, whiter than snow. For black is the color of evil; only the robes of the saved are white.  

Although this concept of black (evil) and white (pure) was deeply ingrained in the minds of the slaves, this concept went back much further and was, is, and shall be in times to come a part of our existence, though in varied forms. As Harold Issacs indicates in his book, The New World of Negro Americans, this equation of black and white with evilness and goodness and the concepts of beautiful fairness and ugly blackness go as far back as the Bible; they are seen in the works of Milton and Shakespeare and enter practically every "strand" of the writings of our times and history. Some of the examples cited by Issacs which indicate the preceding concepts of black and white may be found in the Bible, especially in the words of Moses in the first book of the Bible; then

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in another book Job "in his great self-arrangement, using this figure to show how heavy his burden of sin" cries out, "My skin is black."
Issacs cites similar examples of white raiments of the elders in Judges." One can readily see that Baldwin, too, is aware of this juxtaposition of black and white and believes that this juxtaposition is a paradox on which the Christian faith is based, for the idea of these concepts of black and white go further than colors and meanings, but penetrate an entire race.
For instance, black evilness, dark sins, ignorance, wickedness also stand for the black race. Thus Baldwin could not find an identity in the alabaster Christ of the white man. As Isaacs stated, "This raising of 'white' person has more or less unconsciously imbibed it as nourishment for his self-esteem." In other words, the white man has used the concept of black evilness to shame the Negro out of his identity with his past--with the dark continent of Africa.

Baldwin, perceiving this paradox in the Christian faith, has disassociated himself from the Christian religion. At first he was able to establish a union with God, but then he forsook that union when the white men in their images of superiority would not accept Baldwin or Negroes as their brothers.

In his dilemma Baldwin even came to believe that the Negro could identify with the Black Muslins, a group that preaches that black is superior to white. In Fire Next Time he writes:

Yet I could have hoped that the Muslin movement had been able to inculcate in the demoralized Negro population a truer and more individual sense of its worth, so that Negroes in the Northern ghettos could begin, in the concrete terms, and

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13 Ibid., p. 79.
However, Baldwin notes that the philosophy advocated by the Black Muslims will not effect the true redemption of the Negro. For one thing, the American Negro does not belong to Africa or to Islam, but to America. He must accept the past that he has in America—the past of slavery—which helped to form him. When one accepts one's history, then he is learning how to use it, and this applies to the Negro in particular.

Baldwin, therefore, does not seem to be satisfied with religion as a means of finding oneself or one's identity. Yet the knowledge of one's past, including religion, is necessary in learning oneself. Hence, for Baldwin religion is the first step in endeavoring to discover an identity. Christianity, so Baldwin thought, should be internal and external—giving satisfaction within and a sense of identity with one's brothers and other members of the faith. Because he found Christianity to be otherwise, he left the church.

To become socially accepted as equal men and women has been particularly re-enforced in the Negro's life since the Supreme Court's decision on the integration of schools and public facilities. Baldwin and the present generation (often referred to as the third and fourth generations of the Negro) wish to cast off the identity bestowed on them by their predecessors. They wish to disregard the identity of the Negro as a stereotype of the poor, illiterate, darkie, ignorant of the trends of society and life.

Since religion could not provide an acceptable identity, Baldwin has


15Ibid., p. 96.
continued to search. In seeking an identity which applies to the Negro as a race, Baldwin observed the Negroes in New York: in the congested Harlem ghetto, in the Uptown portion of New York City, or even in Greenwich Village; wherever he visited or observed, he found that the Negro had no true identity. This is one of the main themes of his essays. Baldwin says in Nobody Knows My Name that many of the Harlemites are dead, not in the literal sense of the word, but spiritually so (as are many Negroes in various parts of the country). They are dead because of the fixed position of the Negro in the ghetto and in America; manipulated by the white man, the Negro lives in his ghetto only "because the white people do not consider them good enough to live anywhere else."\(^{16}\) Instead of being thought of as a human, the Negro, in Baldwin's opinion, is considered a subordinate animal, unfit to dwell among humans.

And the others who have avoided all of these deaths, get up in the morning and go downtown to meet 'the man'. They work in the white man's world all day and come home in the evening to this fetid block. They struggle, stolidly, incessantly, to keep this sense alive in themselves, in spite of the insults.... They patiently brow-beat the landlord into fixing the heat, the plaster, the plumbing.... Such frustration, so long endured, is driving many strong, admirable men and women whose only crime is color, to the very gates of paranoia.\(^{17}\)

Thus the Negro's real problem of identity stems from the Negro's dissatisfaction with his status as he is now. "Negroes want to be treated like men."\(^{18}\) Once this desire is fulfilled, the frustrations of having to remain unwillingly in a status are eliminated. By being treated as


\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 57.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., p. 63.
a man, the Negro begins to develop a feeling of belonging, of having an identity as a man in America.

The Negro is not the only one who will profit in learning who he is; the white man will also become aware of his identity. Baldwin implies that the true identity for America—an identity which includes the white man, the black man, the yellow man—is seen in the development of the identity for the Negro, "for from the face of one's victim, one sees himself," and learns the meaning of identity. As a great country, America, preaches equality for all men and praises herself on her doctrine that all men are created equal and are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights"; consequently, the great country must learn to live by that doctrine so that all citizens are identified with the country and its beliefs. Once the Negro citizen feels equal and the white man accepts him as equal, then the true identity of the Negro as a full-fledged citizen in a great country will emerge.

The problem of identity cannot be limited just to the Negro, however. While in Europe several years ago Baldwin discovered that both the Negro and the white from the North American soil were seeking their separate identities. Both rejected the traditional identities given them by the American society. After a couple of years in Paris, Baldwin became aware of the meaning of identity. He discovered a personal identity which could later be applied to other Negroes. He realized that to quench his thirst for finding himself and his own personal identity, he must accept his heritage and his past.

There in that absolutely alabaster landscape [of Switzerland/
armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight. Thus examining and remembering the traditional concepts of today's folkways and his hatred for America because of his fixed role in her society, he not only learned who he was but learned who the Negro is. Thus citing again Shoemaker's views on personal identity, one recalls that personal identity is seen in terms of the activities which are carried on through the memory and the thoughts of previous experiences. To discover his personal identity, Baldwin examined his activities and thoughts of the past, which he had tried to hide, because they reminded him of the stereotyped Negro whom he had abhorred. He writes:

It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and cadence who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaniny and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same ways that, for years, I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a 'nigger'.

For Baldwin, then, identity is knowing really who you are; and to know who you are, especially the Negro, one must delve into his past and must never apologize for his heritage. He must conciliate his past with his present, letting his past serve as a stepping stone for the strength to learn who he is. Now, like Baldwin, the Negro can answer the questions "Who am I?" "What am I doing?" "Where am I going?" and conclude that he is a man, a writer, a teacher, and not a Negro man, not a Negro writer, not a Negro teacher. He is an individual who has the rights and free-

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20 James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name, op. cit., p. 18.
21 Ibid., p. 19.
doms of any American, without a stigma of inferiority or color or as a
member of an uncivilized group or tribe; nevertheless, he wears what Harold
Isaacs at the Center for International Studies at Massachusetts Institute
of Technology calls the "identifying badge of his origin" in the same light
as other men noted for their achievement.\textsuperscript{22} This means that the Negro, as
have the Irish, the Italian, and other racial groups, has found pride in
his past.

\textsuperscript{22} Isaacs, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 348.
CHAPTER II

EVIDENCES OF THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN BALDWIN'S WORKS

In James Baldwin's works, primarily in Go Tell It on the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, and Another Country, there is definite emphasis on the search for identity. In many instances even his titles reflect a concern with the theme of identity.

Although Nobody Knows My Name is non-fictional, the title suggests the theme, for the identity of the person is unknown. James Finn in his article in Commonweal says, "that by which we name a thing is that by which we give it identity in our eyes."1 The title of Go Tell It on the Mountain establishes the concept of a heralding of some important news. The main character is announcing, in other words, to the world that he is ready to declare his identity. The idea of the title setting the theme of the book is also particularly noted in Another Country. Although the book involves characters who are primarily Americans, underneath the surface is the implication that the characters are not identified with their native country but with another; they are living outside the realm of the American mores, folkways, and morality.

Closely allied with the titles that set the theme of the book are the basic ideas or regular themes that are found throughout the plot. In each of Baldwin's novels is evident the search for a character or some characters for themselves. In contrast to Baldwin's essays, which

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1 James Finn, "Identity of James Baldwin," Commonweal 77 (October 26, 1962), 113.
State more explicitly that Baldwin is concerned with the Negro's problem of identity, his fictional works present the characters involved in conflict, looking for identity in the divergent ways of living. One might associate the different paths of the search by the various characters with Baldwin himself. Usually one seeks identity in different contexts and among different people to find that identity which best suits him. The same idea is found in Baldwin's writings, for he utilizes the idea of searching for identity in different contexts in his three novels.

Themes of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Baldwin's initial work of fiction, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is concerned with the theme of a boy of fourteen finding himself. The plot takes place within the time-span of twenty-four hours, beginning with John's awakening on his fourteenth birthday to his religious conversion that evening. Baldwin's first character and hero is concerned with the discovery of identity through religion. Baldwin commences his first chapter with "I looked and I wondered,"\(^2\) which establishes the idea of one seeking or looking for something, and yet not completely satisfied. Throughout Part I John Grimes is seeking--though he does not know for what initially.

It was felt by everyone that John would be a preacher. However, he had not even given this idea any thought until he awakened that morn in May. He had attended the service, but the glorious feeling and actual belief were not there. His bodily existence was there, but he had not achieved an identity.

They sang with all the strength that was in them and clapped their hands for joy. There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart and wonder. Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed it was no longer a question of belief because they made that presence real. He did not feel it himself, the joy they felt, yet he could not doubt that it was, for them, the very bread of life--could not doubt it, that is, until it was too late to doubt.³

Here one clearly identifies Baldwin with John Grimes in that Baldwin became a preacher at fourteen, no doubt feeling that he had found himself, thus transforming his fears and doubts into joyful satisfaction. John sees the presence of the saint's belief through their fervent, pious looks. However, he does not experience that feeling yet and thus cannot accept it. John is always watching and looking and seeking for that means to identify himself.

John watched, watched the faces, and the weightless bodies and listened to the timeless cries. One day, so everyone said, this Power would possess him; he would sing and cry as they did now. He watched....⁴

Yet John continues to watch and search in the eyes of the saints for the hour when the prophecy of the church members would be realized. Baldwin emphasizes John's watchings to show that John is in the stage of aspiring, for through aspiring, one eventually achieves.

Related to John's search for himself is the idea of John's accepting an identity different from his father's. "For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's father. He would have another life,"⁵ a world not of the darkness and ignorance of his father's

⁴ Ibid., p. 15.
⁵ Ibid., p. 18.
with so many prohibitions and dirt and fear. He wanted a different life, a different identity from predecessors.

With his awareness of a need for knowing himself, John in a flood of tears cries to himself, "What shall I do? What shall I do?" He wants to escape from the usual aspect of his day, to be identified as someone different—to do things differently and to be a person other than the John Grimes in the dirty streets of Harlem.

With the monetary birthday gift from his mother, John tries to escape from the ghetto of Harlem to the downtown area of New York. He notices the tall, straight skyscrapers, towering into the sky and tries to relate himself to the tall and exuberant buildings.

Before him, then the slope stretched upward, and above it the brilliant sky, and beyond it, cloudy and far away, he saw the skyline of New York. He did not know why, but there arose in him exultation and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or like a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him... Then he, John, felt like a giant who might crumble this city with his anger: he felt like a tyrant who might crush this city beneath his heel; he felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn... /n

The youth of fourteen is idealizing a world of power in which he is accepted without question. He is the hero and the mighty. Yet his imaginary ideas soon return to reality and to that "narrow" way which he must accept in Harlem. While at the top of the hill John wants to identify himself with something massive, great, adverse to his surrounding and his life in which he is so often belittled by his father. He realizes that he wants to associate himself and identify himself with something more powerful than he, but he does not actually know what.

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6 Ibid., p. 78.

7 Ibid., p. 30.
Throughout the frustrations and dissatisfactions of John's life come more discontents caused by his family's unrest and constant quarreling. Gabriel Grimes, John's father, cannot totally accept the bastard John as his son, thus augmenting John's desire to really know himself—to have an identity with someone or something. Discontent is also prevalent in other members of the family; dissension exists between Florence, Gabriel's sister who lives with his family, and John; there is dissension between Gabriel and his wife, Elizabeth; there is dissension between Gabriel and his children, particularly John, who is not actually his child, and Gabriel. The basis for many of the arguments result from Gabriel's biased and impatient feelings toward and ill treatment of John. Yet through all of these disagreements and dissensions within this family, subtle and overt criticism of his family or himself emerges in the end John's acknowledgement of who he is. Dr. Wallace Groves of San Fernando Valley State College argues that religious conversion stands for Baldwin's feeling of moral energy as an artist which will give him the power to go tell his story on a mountain. Thus at the end of the book John is able to accept his life and identity and thus go his way. John had found himself and prepared himself to aid others in finding themselves, fulfilling the ideals of some of the persons—-at church and school—-that John would be a leader of his people. Although John receives only his religious identity by the end of the book, it is implied that John will be a leader in his church to counteract the hypocritical actions of his father.

Noel Heermance, author of The Modern Negro Novel, states that John Grimes' search is a personal one, evolving out of the bitterness and

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tyrannies in his home. During the night of his struggling with pain and suffering John "chooses the personal religious answers rather than social or political ones. He becomes converted to Jesus, not to Ellison's Brotherhood or to the N. A. A. C. P. The answer is religious because the problem is seen in such personal terms."  

Yet the reader of Baldwin is not fully satisfied with religion serving as the basis for the Negro's identity even in the life of John Grimes. The writer gets the idea that Baldwin is not satisfied with one seeking identity through religion. After several years of experiencing life's difficulties as a result of one's color, Baldwin and other Negroes have found that religion is not the answer. Baldwin also did not acknowledge religion as the way to find one's self or identify one's self racially. However, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin enables the hero, John Grimes, to achieve an identity (religious), and he ends the novel before John comes into contact with other members of the Christian faith outside of his environment. Although Baldwin does not recognize religion as the way of identifying himself, he clearly shows that one might identify one's self and appear to learn one's self through religion as does John Grimes. But as previously stated, Baldwin stops the novel before John has begun to see himself as a member of a larger Christian body, larger than the small church with which he had become associated, larger than Harlem, larger than New York City.

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The Themes of Giovanni's Room

The theme of learning oneself and establishing identity is continued in Baldwin's second novel, although it is expressed on a different level. Although both works, Go Tell It on the Mountain and Giovanni's Room, are concerned with a personal dilemma, the former is religious in nature, whereas the latter is more social—that is, concerned with a social problem of the day. The theme of Giovanni's Room is that a male homosexual male in our society encounters quite a problem in achieving identity. The story is built around the life of David, an American living in Paris, and his search for himself and his identity. This is Baldwin's only work which does not have a racial theme. Yet this work, as with Baldwin's other works, concerns the search for one's self, that is, learning oneself.

In his article in the Commonweal, which has been cited above, James Finn states David's position in Europe lucidly when he says that "David, Baldwin's version of the Anglo-American innocent abroad, approaches some recognition of his identity as a person by being forced to face questions about what it means to be an American and more particularly an American male."10 This character is fearful of learning his true identity and wishes not to really see who he is, for fear he will not be the male which society wishes him to be.

Again, a character in one of Baldwin's novels can be related to Baldwin's own life. David's search can be equated with Baldwin's search. Both Baldwin and David used their previous American experiences as a basis for learning themselves. Baldwin had to adjust to "being a

10 James Finn, op. cit., p. 113.
a nigger" by accepting the very things he had tried to hide. As mentioned in Chapter I of *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin learned himself through reconciling his past with his present. Those things that Baldwin had tried to hide had to come to light; he had to accept the deeply-felt blues, the watermelon and other activities associated with the Negro's life in the past.

David too learns himself through re-discovering his past. From his first homosexual experiences at seventeen with his teen-age pal, Joey, David learns that he has an attraction for men. Yet he tries to hide that very feeling--he tries to forget, for he realizes that homosexuality and its tendencies are condemned by society and especially his own parents. Thus eventually, like Baldwin, David flees to the other continent to learn who he is--the former, Baldwin, to learn to "be a nigger" and the latter, David, to learn if homosexual tendencies were a part of him partially or completely.

David had gone to Paris in order to escape the identity of homosexuality at home, only to be faced with the problem away from home. In France while his girl friend, Hella, is in Spain trying to decide whether she wants to marry him, David is attracted to the beautiful Giovanni, who served as a waiter in a bistro David visited. As David and Giovanni engage in a homosexual relationship, the tall, statuesque Hella returns and competes with Giovanni for David's attention. However, David, unsure of which road to take, is the loser, for both Giovanni and Hella leave him--the former to be killed for murdering a "fairy", or male homosexual who pestered him, and the latter, realizing that David still preferred a homosexual relationship, returns to America.
David had previously subordinated his tendencies toward homosexuality through his relationship with the tall, elegant Hella and had even proposed to her. However, Hella dashes off to Spain to find herself and to decide on this moving question of life and marriage to David. No doubt she could have helped David, had she been willing to give more encouragement to him to accept a heterosexual life. However, it was during her absence in Spain that David had floated back into that life which he had tried to hide.

David had tried many times to be masculine, but his subconscious mind does not allow him to forget completely his homosexuality; especially the episode with Joey or even the later incident while in the service. However, David is self-deceptive and fools his father and to an extent, himself.

Once I was out of the house of course, it became much easier to deal with him [his father] and he never had any reason to feel shut out of my life for I was always able, when talking about it, to tell him what he wished to hear..., for the vision I gave my father of my life was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe...11

David strives to adjust to society's world but not to his own world of homosexuality.

For I am--or I was--one of those people who pride themselves on their will power... People who believe that they are strong willed and masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions--but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not. This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago in Joey's bed, came to. I had decided to allow no room for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion.12

12 Ibid., p. 31.
David tries to eliminate this feeling for too often he has seen the results of society's disapproval of a person having romantic ties with a person of one's own sex. Disillusioned he seeks Europe as a place for finding himself.

Perhaps as we say in America, I wanted to find myself. . . . I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home. But, again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat for France.13

David, like Baldwin himself, takes refuge in Europe; he flees there to really find himself, as many other young Americans have done. But in this passage, written in flashback, David is already in Europe, think back on why he initially went to Europe. But the self, from which he tried to escape, is the very self he found. Baldwin too tried to escape: in his case, the watermelon eating, blues-singing Negro was a vital part of him and a part from which he could hardly escape.

During the interval that Hella was in Spain, David meets Giovanni, and this results in an open exhibition of his homosexuality. However, David endeavors again to live a normal male's life, rejecting his other life; but his true self, though not accepted by his family or possibly the Americans, eventually comes through. Each of the other two characters realizes that David is in search of himself and each hopes that through David each can find himself.

I understand why Giovanni had wanted me and brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own which, in order to transform Giovanni's [Life], must first become a part of Giovanni's room . . . .

Each day he invited me to witness how he had changed, how love had changed him, how he worked and sang and cherished me. I was in a terrible confusion. Sometimes I thought, but this is your life. Stop fighting it . . .

13Ibid., p. 32.
I am safe.\(^1\)

The little Italian had fled from his native land, for he had witnessed several disappointments in life. He had tried to lose his identity which related to his country: he possessed no feeling for Italy to which he could not return, and he was desperately seeking an identity, which he saw in the fulfillment of his love for the American, David.

Hella too was an American expatriate, similar to David in trying to find herself. J. Noel Heermance says of Hella that "she is a traveling woman, off to Spain to unknown finds like a Hemingway heroine, in order to decide if she loves David."\(^{15}\) However, on return to Paris, Hella is cognizant that she needs to learn her identity. Though she had decided in favor of David and marriage on returning, she finds David changed in their relationship, and she accepts the fact in losing David she finds herself.

'Well,' said Hella, 'I'm going home. I wish I'd never left it. If I stay here much longer,' she said, later that same morning, as she packed her bag, 'I'll forget what it's like to be a woman.'

...I want to get married. I want to start having kids... I'm getting out of this house, away from you just as fast as taxis, trains, and boats will carry me...

'Well,' she said, 'you're out. And now I'm getting out. It's only poor Giovanni who's lost his head.'\(^{16}\)

Though on the surface she alleges that she is returning to America to get away from the disappointments of Europe, she implies that she wants to return to solid ground, for she understands America more and thus

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 113.

\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 116f.
desires to be in America again. Hella realizes that she has lost her lover to another man or men. But, at least, she knows who she is and what she wants.

One of her statements in her final conversation with David summarizes her philosophy: "What's good is an American isn't happy? Happiness was all we had." Europe had turned this simple-voiced Nebraska woman into a bitter, hapless woman. She now begins to develop a true identity or to accept the fact that she is a normal American woman.

Although still a youth, David is unsure of his identity; he is caught between two worlds but finally finds himself. A key to David's development and acceptance of himself is Giovanni's room. In this room he encounters his heterosexual and homosexual identity, but realizes that he is most happy with Giovanni than with Hella. David Karp of the Saturday Review says of the room,

To David the room seems like the act, squalid, mean, dirty, alien. And to David, in time, the room seems to contain all of life and living. When in the end he feels he must leave the room or die he is seeking desperately to leave his homosexuality behind. /Then Hella, David's girl friend, enters his life again. David goes back to Hella, who has been away ... anxious to prove his manhood ... David, however, fails and the limits of Giovanni's room suddenly thrust themselves outward, covering the world, trapping David, and excluding Hella and all women forever ... 18

17Ibid., p. 218.

Thus David is forever thrust into the land of homosexuality. In theorizing, it could be said of Baldwin that he is setting forth an identity for all males, for again David Karp in the same article concedes that:

it is possible that Mr. Baldwin is referring to the general erosion of personal identity which has been working on modern man since the emergence of machines and the big state. In that larger sense we are all victims and may be forced into other rooms to shut out a world in which we have become merely counters for manipulation by forces which we have created but can no longer control. 19

As this passage indicated, Karp has applied the identity problem to modern man, in general, whose sense of personal identity is lessened because of technological advances and similar outside forces. In any event, David emerges with a saving power in his belief that the grace of God will see him through his troubles. It appears that Baldwin cannot escape using some religious note somewhere in his novel. As a matter of fact, this tacking-on of the religious concept is quite incongruent with the rest of the novel. Yet in the final paragraphs as David departs knowing himself, he tears up the letter which Jacque--a Paris friend of his and Giovanni's--had sent him. As David tears the letter to shreds, he slowly watches the pieces dance in the morning breeze, "watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me." 20 Here Baldwin implies symbolically that David, though he goes from the place he had shared with Giovanni,

19 Ibid., p. 35.

20 Baldwin, Giovanni's Room, p. 224.
will forever be caught in the web of homosexuality, for the remnants of the letter from the homosexual, Jacque, are blown back to him.

Themes of Another Country

As previously mentioned, in the third novel Baldwin establishes almost immediately the theme through the title; the title reflects the theme of characters living in another country. As one critic states:

The 'Country' of the title, on the literal sense, is New York City, specifically Greenwich Village and Harlem, where much of the action takes place; metaphorically the country is that misty region in the nether side of society where alienated men and women act out the racial and sexual—and improbably, international——existence. The characters, black and white, beat and square, irresolutely straight and avowedly homosexual, are in their variety, meant to describe the topography of that other country, and to dramatize the way of life as lived there.

In this way Maloff explains the "other country" on which the novel is based. Inherent in his comments is the concept that the theme of the book centers on characters who live in this other country within our country and the way they are able to receive an identity. Thus, even though all the characters in the book are totally American living in a totally American environment, Baldwin is saying that within these walls of the great democratic America certain people are exiled, either by their won will or by society, into a land within a land. David in Giovanni's Room would be just such another character in another country because of society's condemnation of possible acceptance of his own identity. So it is with the characters in Baldwin's latest novel.

Many of the characters can ask initially the question, "Who am I?" only to find themselves with the negative answer of, "I don't really know, and for now I do not care."

The novel is built around the character, Rufus, who dies early in the novel--on page 78 of 366 pages--with not even one-fourth of the novel completed. Yet Rufus involves practically every character in the novel. Rufus is a good musician in Harlem who loves a white Southern woman; yet he takes the frustrations and anger he feels for all whites out on the poor Southern girl. Eventually, the frustrations of living in the other world of the Negro and his unhappiness in his relationship with Leona drive him to suicide. Ida, Rufus' sister, to a great extent blames the white "trash," Leona, for her brother's death. Yet Ida in her hatred for the Southern girl and for all whites, becomes involved sexually with several whites and eventually falls in love with one of Rufus' heterosexual friends, Vivaldo. Vivaldo, meanwhile, has been involved sexually with several people, particularly with Cass, a frustrated wife of a writer, and Eric, a young Southern male, who enables Vivaldo to think more clearly, as a result of their association. Eventually Vivaldo and Ida return to each other, as Eric imports a French lad for his companionship. Cass and her husband also return to each other after a bitter fight.

All of the action in the other country is centered on the characters trying to find themselves. Although they are not actually members of a segregated racial society in America, they are yet trying to associate themselves with each other and serve as members of the other country. Yet, each eventually tries to re-adjust himself to become a part of the regular American realm of living and become identified as members of
America. Cass and her husband will, no doubt, become members again. Yet Eric cares little about being accepted as a member of American society but prefers to remain a member of the other country of homosexuality.

Closely related to the theme of identity is the idea of hate. Rufus is certainly one character who does not know himself and cannot really find himself because of the ferment within him. In the initial pages of the novel Rufus reflects that he has fallen so low, and this falling is due primarily to his hatred for whites, for he says that the white policemen taught him how to hate. One of the key witnesses to his bitter hatred is his white Southern-born lover. In trying to rid himself of this hatred for whites, Rufus treats Leona quite unjustly, beating her severely whenever it pleases him. Yet by destroying her, he destroys himself. Even when he appears to be finding himself, Rufus kills himself, for he is unable to face the man he actually is.

On the night that he performs his fatal act, Rufus realizes that he is learning himself.

Then something began to awaken in him, something new; it increased his distance; it increased his pain. They were rushing—to the playform, to the tracks. Something he had not thought of for many years, something he had never ceased to think of, came back to him as he walked behind the crowd . . . Suppose these beams fell down? He saw the train in the tunnel, rushing under water, the motorman gone mad, gone blind, unable to decipher the lights, and the tracks gleaming and snarling senselessly upward forever, the train never stopping and the people screaming at windows and doors turning on each other with all the accumulated fury of their blasphemed lives, everything gone out of them but murder, breaking limb from limb and splashing in blood, with joy—for the first time, joy, joy, after such a long sentence in chains, leaping out to astound the world, to astound the world again.22

Rufus is seeking a personal identity but is too concerned with an identity in sociological terms, that is, a relationship with others, and he fails in trying actually to discover both. Thus Rufus sees death as his only solution. The idea of his end, of a tragedy, brings joy to this desolate creature who finally ends it all in the Hudson River. The idea of Rufus' isolation and need to belong to someone, to have someone with whom to identify, is further established in the song that was sung at Rufus' funeral: "I'm a stranger, don't drive me away. If you drive me away, you may need me some day, I'm a stranger, don't drive me away." This quotation, though given as Rufus' philosophy, is applicable to the Negro also. In a society dominated by whites, a Negro is a stranger to himself and to the white man. As with Rufus, the Negro is caught up in an ambivalence: he wants to love his white "brother" yet the discriminatory activities of the white "brother" create in the Negro a hostility so profoundly imbedded that there is no room for admiration and understanding of his white "brother."

The reader's brief encounter with Rufus is not sufficient; Rufus, the unheroic hero, is not tremendous or intense enough in stature or behavior to be the link in the novel throughout. He does possess a tragic flaw, but it too is not given to him with such vehemence that it remains in the novel long after his death. His hatred for the white man is his tragic flaw, for his hatred is so excessively intense that love, the quality which usually conquers all, does not destroy or even stifle

23Ibid., p. 104.
the hatred which obsesses him. One is reminded of a catastrophe which occurs in a foreign country; the reader is cognizant of the catastrophe, but is not emotionally involved because it does not affect the reader as intensely as it possibly could. Such is Rufus' case; the reader can sympathize with him, but there is no arousing of pity and fear. Although Rufus dies on page 79, his death is only faintly remembered by page 150. The effect of his death was not felt by any of the other characters except Ida.

Ida, Rufus' sister, has the same type of hatred as her brother. However, in her relationship with her white lover, there is the possibility that her obsession with hatred is not as intense as her brother's, and her love of Vivaldo will mitigate the hatred she has. Initially, Ida was not of this country but possibly an American Negro who had the usual amount of dislike which a young inexperienced, unworldly Negro possesses toward a white person, but one incident awakens her and a tremendous hatred for whites builds up in her. Her brother's death, her only brother killed not only by his own hands, but by this ambivalence of love and hate, is the awakening potion for Ida. However, such a hatred does not totally consume her, and this is the key to Ida's identity and her eventually knowing herself! Yet Ida succumbs to the alien country like the other characters, with no hope until the final pages of the novel. Prior to these pages she is promiscuous and egotistical. Actually one thinks of Ida undergoing several stages in her life; she is at first the sweet, understanding sister of Rufus; then she becomes a revengeful, promiscuous woman; last of all, she becomes the sincere lover of Vivaldo. During the middle stage, Ida reveals her resentment to whites by her actions toward white men. She is insincere, callous,
and antagonistic toward them. She uses her body as a force for attacking and using herself as their nemesis and tends to lower her own dignity of womanhood in doing so.

You don't know, and there's no way in the world for you to find out, what it's like to be a black girl in this world, and the way white men, and the black men, too, treat you. You've never decided that the whole world was just one big whorehouse and so the only way for you to make it was to be the biggest, coolest, hardest whore around, and make the world pay you back that way. Ida explains to Cass in the preceding part of the reason she is promiscuous. Eventually, Ida's deeply-rooted hatred and resentment for whites comes to the surface, for she realizes that instead of her using her white business lover to her own advantage, she is really losing to him. She has lost pride in herself and in her race. Yet one night an incident occurs which awakens Ida to the dilemma in which she exists. While singing in a nightclub before her white lover, Ellis, Ida faces a Negro who is angered by Ida's looseness with her white lover. This Negro bandleader and bass player castigates her by telling her actually what she is. The incident is as follows:

'He made me sing with the band. They didn't really want me to, and I didn't want to, but they didn't want to say No, to him. So I sang. And of course, I knew some of the musicians and some of them had known Rufus . . . . When it was over, and the people were clapping, bass player whispered to me, he said, 'You black white man's whore, don't you never let me catch you on Seventh Avenue, you hear? I'll tear your little black p...y up.' . . . 'I'm going to do it twice, once for every black man you castrate every time you walk, and once for your poor brother, because I loved that stud. And he going to thank me for it, too, you can bet on that, black girl.'

24Ibid., p. 293.
And he slapped me on the ass, hard, everybody could see it . . . And he dropped my hand hard, like it was too hot or too dirty, and I almost fell off the stand . . . And I got back to the table. Ellis was grinning like it was all a big joke. And it was. On me.

After this incident at the night club, Ida begins to face reality; she sees herself as she really is—a black girl being used by a white man. She had been so engrossed in her hatred and her trying to exploit the white man to her advantage that she had nearly destroyed herself. But in the final pages Ida faces reality which is one step toward learning oneself. She confesses to Vivaldo, her sincere and naive white lover, her unfaithfulness and internal hatred, thus purging herself of her sinfulness. However, the two work out their problems, living happily and restful at the moment and possibly from the moment on.

A type of metamorphosis has occurred; the bitter hate which Ida possesses has changed to love, the redeeming force. This love which is the saving force in Ida and Vivaldo's relationship is the love which Baldwin mentions in his essays, not romantic love necessarily, but the love of whites and blacks based on an understanding of each other.

Eric, another of the characters in this other world, is the one character in this novel who flies off to Europe to find himself. Prior to his European jaunt, he is ashamed of himself and his homosexual appetites, envying the men who possess the normal masculine traits. But his flight to Europe to forget Rufus' suicide eventually enables him to begin to face reality, for throughout his life he had been searching—seeking in hope to find peace of mind or rid himself of the guilt feelings he possessed about his homosexuality. But this intense desire which, of course results in chaos—his finding whatever male he could—

25Ibid., p. 357.
is continually before him. He wants peace of mind which comes with the fulfillment of the search, but the feeling haunts him wherever he goes, leading to illicit submission, to chaos and no honor.

Just as Mme. Belet in France thought that Eric was not to be judged by the usual criterion of masculinity, so should the members of the American society not ostracize persons totally because they are deviates. "But France did not . . . produce such conundrums as Eric, and he was not to be judged by the civilized standards which obtained in her Mme. Belet's country." He could not be judged by our conventional standards. Although Eric realizes what he is, he continues to dream of escape and yet he cannot ever escape.

'I,' said Eric, 'must understand that if I dreamed of escape, and I did--when this thing with Cass began, I thought that perhaps here was my opportunity to change and I was glad--well . . . .'

'All I can do,' said Eric, at last, 'is love him. ¥eyes, his French lover? But this means--doesn't it? that I can't delude myself about loving someone else. I can't make any promise greater than this promise I've made already--not now, not now, and maybe I'll never make any greater promise. I can't be safe and sorry, too. I can't act as though I'm free when I know I'm not. I've got to live with that. Does that make sense? or am I mad? There were tears in his eyes. . . 'You're right. You're right. There's nothing here to decide. There's everything to accept.'

Eric admits that his life is not the best, but he cannot live even freely. He must accept his fate with the dishonor or chaos which it might bring him. He at one time had tried to be normal and be accepted according to the standards of society, but as with David in Giovanni's Room, he could not overcome the homosexual obsession which overpowered him. Both Eric and David are Americans, who have been

26 Ibid., p. 181.
27 Ibid., p. 285.
involved in heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Both men had encountered homosexual friendships while they were youths; both were involved with beautiful European men. However, Eric returns to America where he tries to live normally, but his feelings of homosexuality become too intense; thus he eventually sends for his love, Yves, to come to New York. Therefore, it might be said that Eric, like David, accepts his fate.

Edgar Z. Friendenberg, a professor at Brooklyn College, believes that Baldwin has set up two characters as spokesmen for the author. "Vivaldo alone does not speak for the author; though I think Vivaldo and Eric do; for Vivaldo is a novelist, while Eric has the strength to be what he is." In a way Eric is strong enough to withstand the pressures to live the way he wishes. Thus Eric, in speaking for Baldwin, announces that one must live as one must in order to really know oneself. If one wants to find his true identity, then he has to forget what may be said of him by others in order to examine his mental activities. Eric is not concerned with a social identity and has no social identity in relation to the average American, but he does possess a personal identity: he knows who he is and what he wants out of life.

Other characters reflect self-knowledge. Cass Silenka, the wife of an untalented novelist, though New England in her ways, does not realize or know who she is. She is existing in a world of which she is unsure, endeavoring to find a reality. In her conversation with Vivaldo she questions whether she is real.

'My God . . . Sitting here in this dark place, full of self-pity and alcohol, while our lovers are out there in the real world, seeing real people, doing real things, doing real things, bringing real bacon into real homes—are they real? are they? Sometimes I wake up at night with the question in my mind and I walk around the house and go and look at the children. I don't want them to be like that. I don't want them to be like me either.' She turned her face sideways, looking unbelievably young. 'What am I to do?'

She, in her wanton position, wants to achieve an identity, a true identity, herself, to live actually in reality. She, a white New Englander, like many other whites, needs an identity. However, Cass answers her own question later on page 342. Is she trapped and can she live in a real world among real people? Is there hope?

'Hope? No, I don't think there's any hope. We're too empty here'—her eyes took in the Sunday crowd—'too empty—here.' She touched her heart. 'There isn't a country at all, it's a collection of football players and Eagle Scouts. Cowards. We think we're happy. We're not. We're doomed.'

Life for Cass is hopeless, at least for right now, but such will not continue for any length of time. Cass becomes too involved in the other country, and she has to pay for moving out of her usual environment into this other world. Maybe it would have been best for her to remain in the "happy" world of the average American. By becoming involved romantically with Eric, a character previously mentioned, and confessing the affair to her husband, she is thrown out and brutally attacked by him. Maybe Cass Silenka can not sincerely return to the normal land, but eventually she will endeavor to know herself and what direction she must go to achieve existence and reality.

Yet life is not as brutal as Cass believes it to be. There is a chance of realizing oneself and learning who one is. However, this can

29 James Baldwin, Another Country, p. 234.
not be achieved through sexual identity as most of the characters in
the novel seem initially to believe. One achieves identity by loving and
accepting. One has to delve into one's life and actually think of who
he is; an individual cannot accept the identity he wants to have or accept
the identity which other people think him to possess. As with Eric or
David, the individual has to accept the identity which is his, whether
society condemns that identity or not. Questions like "What am I
actually like?" "What do I really think?" "Am I satisfied with the
way I am?" "If not, why do I want to change?" are those which might
confront any person who wants to find himself. These are the kinds of
questions that Baldwin's characters, no doubt, asked themselves in their
search for their real selves.

Throughout the novel, each character is confused and tends to become
involved in various homosexual and heterosexual relationships. These
characters are living in other countries within our country, for they
encounter inner conflicts of the sexual nature which many Americans do
not experience. However, the search for identity faces practically
all Americans, black or white.

In addition to the previously named characters, there are minor
characters, one "a cynical and empty imposter," a Mr. Ellis, and
Richard Silenka, Cass' husband, a poor novelist who has achieved success
with his first novel. Both of these characters are caught in a false
society and will, no doubt, die in that same society. Cass says that
her husband really doesn't know himself either.

'Maybe,' said Cass . . . 'it happened to all of us! Why
was my husband ashamed to speak Polish all the years
that he was growing up?--and look at him now, he doesn't
know who he is. Maybe we're worse off than you \[ Ida \].\(^{31}\)

It is not just the Negro that Baldwin says needs to find himself; it is true that many Negroes are ashamed of their pasts and are endeavoring to live according to their white compatriots. Yet Baldwin says that many whites are also ashamed of their ancestors, like Richard Silanka, and to an extent the whites are worse off, for they are not aware of a need of an identity. Some whites, like Eric, Cass, or David, are interested in finding their identities and move in the direction for achieving an identity.

\(^{31}\text{Ibid.}, p. 296.\)
CHAPTER III

EVALUATION OF THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN BALDWIN'S WORKS

That Baldwin is an outstanding writer is hardly arguable; however, that Baldwin serves as a spokesman for the Negro American can be questioned. A recurring theme in Baldwin's works is that a person who has troubles, generally of a racial nature, and endeavors to become a functional being and thus achieves an identity. The way one generally achieves an identity cannot be done in the way that Baldwin or his characters, David and Eric, achieved their identities. True, Baldwin went to Europe to find himself; but how can all who wish to find themselves flee to Paris and remain there until they achieve an identity? For those who cannot fly off to unknown territories, but must remain in nearby areas, Baldwin establishes certain ways in which both Negroes and whites may find their identity.

The problem of achieving identity for Baldwin, is primarily a moral one. "History, as Baldwin sees it, is an unending story of man's inhumanity to man, of the white's refusal to see the black man simply as another human being, of the white man's delusions and the Negro's demoralization."1 The white man has simply turned a deaf ear to the Negro. The only element in the Negro's life that has been truly communicable and understandable has been his music, says Baldwin.2 White people do

not want to know about the Negro and most importantly "what do we really feel about them--such a question merely opens the gates to chaos."3

If the whites could examine the Negro and his history, they would find the ugly picture of the American attitude toward the Negroes these hundreds of years.

Thus Baldwin says that because of the white man's belief that the Negro is basically inferior, the real history of all Americans is social.

The Negro, continues Baldwin, is a

...social and not a personal or human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloguing of losses, gains, skirmishes; it is to feel virtuous, outrages, helpless, as though his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease--cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis... even though it cannot be cured. In this area the black man acquires quite another aspect from that which he has in life. We do not know what to do with him in life; if he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed. When he violates this image, therefore, he stands in the greatest danger (sensing which we uneasily suspect that he is very often playing a part for our benefit); and, what is not always so apparent but is equally true, we are then in danger ourselves--hence our retreat or our blind and immediate retaliation.4

In other words, the Negro has been sat in one corner of America's life, and, if he is able to move out of this limited area, then the whites are confused, perplexed and do not know how to cope with him. Why the Negro is unhappy as an invisible person could be a hypothetical question asked by whites. Baldwin might answer that question by simply saying that the Negro wants to be treated like other Americans; he wants

3Ibid., p. 25.
4Ibid.
to deviate from the stereotype in which he is set, take on qualities of a man or woman and cast off those aspects of the stereotype Negro to which he is ascribed.

What most white Americans do not realize is that by their dehumanization of the Negro, they also are dehumanizing themselves and are preventing themselves from achieving their own identities.\(^5\) The Negro is a part of America, a true part of America's history: as a matter of fact, the Negro was one of the first inhabitants of the land; he breathed the air and nourished the soil. Thus this country, America, is a vital part of him.

One point which has contributed to this dehumanized aspect of the Negro is the assumption that the Negro is basically inferior. Baldwin states that it has been proved that Negroes are neither biologically nor mentally inferior:

There is no truth in those rumors of his body odor or his incorrigible sexuality; or no more truth than can be easily explained or even defended by the social sciences. Yet, in our most recent war, his blood was segregated as was, for the most part, his person. Up to today we are set at a division, so that he may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he... eat at our tables or live in our houses. Moreover, those who do, do so at the grave expense of a double alienation: from their own people, whose fabled attributes they must either deny or, worse, cheapen and bring to market; from us, for we require of them, when we accept them, that they at once cease to be Negroes and yet not fail to remember what being a Negro means... that is, what it means to us.\(^6\)

Because of these myths about the Negro, he is subjected to base and vile accusations, as well as segregation. To act as a Negro and to be accepted as a Negro are opposed to each other; to be accepted as a Negro

\(^6\)Ibid.
is to act, for the white man, as only the stertotyped being, the servile being who knows his place. Even today many whites, and many of them not just Southerners, adhere to the age-old concepts, erroneous though they are, of the Negro. The reason that the Negro acts as he does is that he has been conditioned to act that way. Many a Negro, who has been called an "Uncle Tom" has realized that to earn at least the salary of a middle-class wager, he has to live by the standards and myths perpetuated by his "white brothers." However, the old image of the pious, wise, trustworthy and smiling Negro is no more. That image has been replaced by young, unsmiling, literate young men who want their human qualities like men or any citizen in a country. This is the Negro for whom Wright is an articulate speaker.

How might the Negro receive what is rightfully his? It is here that American tradition plays a vital role. To some the Negro has no tradition, but is not tradition that which expresses the "long and painful experience of a people?" The Negro must progress, not daring to look back at his past and as Baldwin states, "undergo a metamorphosis so profound as to be literally unthinkable and which there is no doubt we will resist until we are compelled to achieve our own identity by the rigors of a time that has yet to come."7

Moreover, the white American has also not found himself, for he has blotted out a part of his tradition concerning the past of the Negro. The white American has blotted out the brutal, cruel injustices of the past, and has tried to blot out this image through good works and good deeds toward the Negro. These acts of goodness, says Baldwin, "makes

7 Ibid., p. 36.
of all our good works an intolerable mockery."\(^8\) One cannot rid himself of this image.

There exists among the intolerably degraded the perverse and powerful desire to force into the arena of the actual those fantastic crimes of which they have been accused, achieving their vengence and their own destruction through making the nightmare real. The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. Then he, like the white enemy with whom he will be locked one day in mortal struggle, has no means save this asserting his identity . . . And there is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods with anguish sharp or dull . . . naked and unanswerable hatred.\(^9\)

The Negro cannot really exert his true feelings, then. The image of the white man's injustice is there, whether overt or not. However, the Negro is trying to forget it. Yet how can he forget it? The Negro is confronted with this problem. Many times he has wanted to hurt the white man in some physical manner, but he really cannot. He must act according to that American image or forget it. Any time a Negro adult is called a girl or boy, some bit of hatred or retaliation for that ignorant white occurs. But what Baldwin suggests is not to forget it, but to incorporate this into one's life--not forget the cruel treatments but let that serve as a key to identity. The Negro is not a debased, oppressed being, but a human being.

In looking at one's past and one's tradition, one must also think about one's future. Writes Baldwin, "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny."\(^10\) Thus to continue to succeed as a nation, Baldwin states quite explicitly that we must unite--we must turn

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 38.
\(^9\)Ibid.
\(^10\)Ibid., p. 42.
our faces of disdain away from the group who bitterly hate each other, and join together to perpetuate the dream of freedom and that of all liberal men. Baldwin reiterates the idea of goodwill in saying:

Our good will, from which we yet expect such power to transform us, is thin, passionless, strident: its roots, examined lead us back to our forebears, whose assumption it was that the black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like us. This assumption once accepted, the Negro in America can only acquiesce in the obliteration of his own personality the distortion and debasement of his own experience, surrendering to those forces which reduce the person to anonymity and which make themselves manifest daily all over the darkening world. Therefore, the Negro must act as himself, an equal, set apart from the white man. Just as the Chinese, Jews, Italians accept their past without debasement, so must the Negro be able to accept his own experiences and rid himself of the concepts and usages of black evil and white goodness, although these concepts have deeply ingrained in the history of art and literature of America. In Notes of a Native Son Baldwin mentions an idea which is discussed in his succeeding essays—that the white man is not the exemplary one to imitate or follow, or that the Negro should endeavor to become like him. This idea is propounded quite lucidly in the book, Fire Next Time.

The theme of the Negro's beauty is also seen in Nobody Knows My Name. Here Baldwin mentions that the irony in the situation of today is that the black men are stronger than the whites in the South. Implied in this is the idea that the Negro in his lowly manner has had to show much strength, much love, much understanding in existing in such a

11Ibid., p. 45.
situation. What happens is that the Negro is aware, whereas the white
man is not ready to face up to this awareness. "The failure to look
reality in the face diminishes a nation as it does a person." Again
the idea of freedom enters. For a nation to exist, a nation should
rid itself of the illusion surrounding its ideologies and must move
toward human freedom for all; for if the American people are not able
to face realities and re-examine themselves, then America may "yet
become one of the most distinguished monumental failures in the history
of nations."14

Three key ideas of paramount importance in Baldwin's last essays
are these: acceptance, integration, and love. Each of these terms
refers to both Negroes and whites. One might say, in one way of speak-
ing, that Baldwin stresses mainly who you are not and what you need in
his first two books of essays; whereas in his third book, he stresses
the essential qualities needed to achieve identity.

Acceptance for Baldwin incorporates, not white man's approval of
the Negro, but the Negro acceptance of the whites. White people "are,
in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand, and
until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."15 This
brings one back to the American tradition and the Negro as a stereotype.
(only here Baldwin refers to the black man as a "fixed star," an
immovable pillar in a white man's world). But as the Negro shows that

13 James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dell Publishing
14 Ibid., p. 101.
15 James Baldwin, Fire Next Time (New York: Dell Publishing
he is capable of changes and is not satisfied with his present situation, then he shakes the very foundation of white people. Thus the Negro must accept white people with love and understanding, not in a servile Uncle Tom manner, but as one human to another. Baldwin does not say that the white should accept the Negro, however. The irony of it is that the Negro should not want to be accepted by these whites who say that the white way is best. Negroes should not want to be judged by white standards. Yet these ideas are part of the Negro's life. Until very recently and even in some contests today a Negro woman is not considered beautiful unless she has some obvious physical traits of the white race. Thousands of dollars are spent yearly by Negro women for bleaches and hair preparations in order to accommodate the white man's standards. Many Negroes believe that there exists no uglier sight than when Negro women parade around with their hair unpressed and wooly, but Negroes have to accept themselves by their own standards.

A second term, integration, for Baldwin means simply forcing our brothers to end their fleeing from reality. One thinks of whites and Negroes walking together up the mountain to an illuminous future where all are equal.

The third word which is most important in these essays is love. Teilhard de Chardin, a contemporary French theologian-priest-philosopher, interprets love, to an extent, as Baldwin does:

Love has always been carefully eliminated from realist and positivist concepts of the world; but sooner or later we shall have to acknowledge that it is the fundamental impulse of Life, or if you prefer, the one natural medium in which the rising course of evolution can proceed. With love omitted there is truly nothing ahead of us except the forbidding prospect of standardisation and enslavement--the doom of ants and termites. It is through love and within love that we must look for the deepening of our deepest self, in the
life-giving coming together of humankind. Love is the free and imaginative out-pouring of the spirit over all unexplored paths. It links those who love in bonds that unite but do not confound, causing them to discover in mutual contact an exaltation capable, incomparably more than any arrogance of solitude, of arousing in the heart of their being all that they possess of uniqueness and creative power.17

Love is a vital element of life, a fundamental part which enables man to understand the feelings, emotions and sorrows of other men. It is an expression which enables men to unite on common ground and eliminate any hatred, arrogance or insincerity which they might have. Love must be lived; it is a "conquest of life." Baldwin sees love also as fundamental image in one's life, especially between Negroes and whites or minority groups and dominant groups. Though to an extent Baldwin is not a Christian, he places that term exceedingly high. It is true that Baldwin discusses hatred, and to some persons he is full of the venom of racial distrust and mistreatment, but he does not leave his feelings of hatred there with no solution for eliminating these feelings. He acknowledges the value of love as a factor in the solution of the American problem.

A vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time... to be released from the tyranny of his mirror... It is for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live without and know we cannot live with. 18


18 Ibid., p. 109.
Love here does not mean happy, satisfied contentment, but a sense of "quest and doing and growth." Men and women, black and white, must work together with this love as the guiding principle or the key. Should the whites have the need to judge the Negro, the latter should be able to accept this criticism, and love should be a factor in helping the white man to accept this criticism. The criticism would show white Americans that other Americans have ideas, understanding, and the concern for their country.

Baldwin, furthermore, alludes to this idea of agreement in relation to love. The Negro should not follow in the footsteps of the whites, but both must work together to create a greater nation. The fallacious importance attached to color must be eliminated. We must change that concept that has been handed down as a result of the whites' warped values and must write a newer and more complete history with the Negro's role indicated.

Baldwin closes his essay with a word of caution that Negroes and whites must work together to achieve an identity as Americans and end this racial nightmare. If we are unable to do so, then, no doubt, destruction will come to us: "No more water, the fire next time!"\(^{19}\)

Some Negroes believe that Baldwin has too much hate. Were his experiences as a boy in New York so bitter that such caustic qualities penetrate his works, especially his essays? Several of Baldwin's former teachers at DeWitt Clinton High School feel that he was not mistreated. In the *National Review* several letters written of Baldwin's cynicism and

\(^{19}\text{Ibid., p. 120.}\)
hatred for New York, especially the slum ghetto of Harlem, revealed that Baldwin undoubtedly has incorporated all of the hatred of the Negro race in his novels. 20

Yet Baldwin defines his role as a writer who counsels knowing not only who you are, but what you are also.

He [the artist, as Baldwin] has to tell because nobody else in the world can tell, what it is like to be alive. All I've ever wanted to do is to tell that. I'm not trying to solve anybody's problems, not even my own. I'm just trying to outline what the problems are. 21

Yet Baldwin in his works discusses problems which are for all Americans, not just Negroes; those problems concern personal identity as well as group identity and the possible solution for achieving identity.

To many Negroes the situation or Negro problem hardly seems a problem of such hatred. But for many whites Baldwin's books are illuminations; they, the whites, were not aware of the Negro's hatred.

In elaborating on this idea, Baldwin says

Even today, so brainwashed is this republic that people seriously ask in what they suppose to be good faith, 'What does the Negro want?' I've heard a great many asinine questions, but that perhaps [is] the most asinine and perhaps the most insulting. 22

It appears that all Americans are not aware of what the Negro wants; it is not necessarily integration: "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?" asks Baldwin. The Negro wants equality and the treatment by whites as if he is as he is, a human being with human characteristics, not an inferior animal. He wants to be treated as a man

who is able to study as he wishes, go where he wishes, and marry whomever
he finds compatible.

Robert Dwyer in the National Review mentions that one value of
Baldwin's writing is that of the immense racial pride revealed in his
writing.

His writing shows a tremendous pride in his race, and a
conviction that the Negro has a treasure to add to America
if only he is allowed to do so. This is the best part of
what Baldwin has to say, the only constructive thing he
insists on .... The Negro has a great deal to give to
America, but I believe that essentially the best qualities
of the Negro are the same qualities that made America
great. They are not colored qualities, they are merely
virtues .... [they] consist in a rejection of myth and
romance .... in order that the next generation can have
a better life.

I do not believe that Dwyer and Baldwin are at odds with each other.

Dwyer assumes that the Negro has received the blessings of all Americans
and that the myths about the Negroes have been already eliminated. Baldwin
discusses the myths which exist and the need for the elimination. Baldwin
does not say that the Negro is superior, as the Black Muslims do, but
that the Negro is equal and does have virtues to give to America. He
further asserts that black men and women are beautiful and that they can
not be judged as beautiful according to the white man's standard of the
beautiful and handsome. The old idea that blackness is ugly and anything
relative to Negro features is unappealing to the eye is now past. There
is beauty in blackness.

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23 Robert Dwyer, "I Know about the Negro ... ," National Review,
December 17, 1963, p. 517f.
SUMMARY

Now that many of the ideas to which Baldwin referred are gradually becoming the law, what will happen to Baldwin? It can be assumed that Baldwin and similar writers will hold a place in our American literature, for the historical incidents of an era aid in shaping the literature and its writers. To some, Baldwin will be considered as a Negro writer, dealing with Negro themes primarily. It might be advisable to separate Baldwin's essays from his novels for a more lucid discussion. According to Finn in the Commonweal, Baldwin's essays are concerned with contemporary concepts and problems, but "will become historical."¹ This is valid in that much that Baldwin says in his essays has already been changed. His comments on Atlanta and other parts of the South, for instance, are already obsolete. Especially is this seen in the essay, "Nobody Knows My Name" of the work, Nobody Knows My Name. No longer are there segregated buses in Atlanta nor does the Negro vote lack power. However, other points in his essays hold true, and it will take much longer than tomorrow to change the conditions. Americans must be able to face reality and eliminate the problems of slums, inferior school facilities and establish genuinely integrated schools and communities. The ideas of acceptance, integration, and love must be paramount in order to realize a better America. Baldwin realizes that the incorporation of

these ideas into our daily lives will not come up over night. Much of the hatred that both the Negro and white possess is and must be mitigated or eliminated. From the younger generation, like those of the three civil rights workers who were killed in Mississippi in June of 1964, have come courage, optimism, and a sense of true identity with all Americans.

Baldwin's novels, on the other hand, may be read for their historical content as well as their literary value. Even today his works are listed under the "era of alienation and revolt" and his characters are alienated from the rest of society of Americans because they cannot be identified with the mainstream of thought. In most cases the characters have sought personal identity first and then searched for a social identity with some other persons involved. John Grimes, the hero of Go Tell It on the Mountain, wanted a personal identity and did receive it through religion. Baldwin goes further than the establishment of personal identity in the case of David in Giovanni's Room: David discovers his personal identity by his "deliberate" thinking on his past experiences and thoughts. David wants to be accepted as a "regular" or "masculine" male and wants to be identified as such, for he is aware of society's condemnation of the "feminine" male. David also wants a social identity with, no doubt, a wife and family, in order to prove to his family, his friends and others that he is a "masculine" male. David is concerned with a personal identity (though he knows that he might submit to previous temptations at one time or another) and a social identity which will reveal him as a member of regular American family. The characters in Another Country also want an identity. At first
they too seek personal identities, but eventually these identities lead them to seek social identities and acceptance (except Eric, who is satisfied with his own personal identity as a homosexual).

Thus Baldwin's novels are not necessarily historical, though an element of history can be seen in them; they are concerned with characters who are trying to find out who they are as citizens of America. This idea of wanting to find oneself, whether personal, social, or religious, may have a setting which tends to be historical, but these qualities are universal. As Baldwin explains, to find and to know oneself whether on a personal or social or religious level is not simply a problem among Negroes (though they so drastically need it), but a problem for white Americans and to an extent for Europeans. The characters of Baldwin are examples of persons, who want and are desperately seeking an identity.
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