James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and the Psychoanalytic Poetics: Affirming the Subjectivity of the African American

Solomon O. Azumurana
Department of English,
University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

Although James Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain has attracted some critical analysis, most critics seem to see the novel either as Baldwin's creative confrontation with American racism or as an imaginative exploration of the role of the church or the Christian religion in the lives of African Americans. But how the psychoanalytic poetics features in the novel and the reason for its employment appears to be largely ignored. In this essay, I utilize some psychoanalytic concepts in the reading of the novel, and argue that Baldwin's characters' internal (psychological) and external (sociological) conflicts are inseparable since their external problems serve as catalysts for their internal ones and vice-versa. Robert Tomlinson has noted that "when analyzing his (Baldwin's) artistic development, critics tend to polarize the private and the public" (135). But as it is already evident, in this paper, I demonstrate that such dichotomy or polarization does not figure in Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain. I then conclude the essay by contending that Baldwin's appropriation of the psychoanalytic poetics is not just for the fun of it, but to affirm the subjectivity of the African American. In this way, he humanizes the African American who has been dehumanized by white American epistemological thought.

Introduction

Although James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* has attracted some critical analysis, most critics seem to see the novel either as Baldwin's creative confrontation with American racism or as an

imaginative exploration of the role of the church or the Christian religion in the lives of African Americans. For instance, while literary commentators such as Albert Gerard, Donald Gibson, and Shirley Allen see this novel as vindicating Christianity, critics like Robert Bone, Michel Fabre, Nathan Scott, Howard Harper, Stanley Macebuh, David Foster, and Trudier Harris view it as an indictment of Christianity, especially as it affects African Americans (Barbara Olson 296). A third group can also be identified. Barbara Olson and Herman Beavers fall into this category. Olson sees Baldwin's "attitude to Christianity in this novel as being ambiguous" (296). For Beavers, Baldwin's ambivalence lies in "the novel as the announcement of his dissatisfaction with Christianity with its final scene of "salvation" suggesting nonetheless that the novel came into being through spiritual struggle" (196). In spite of the arguments and counter arguments of the above critics, what is apparent is that they are all in agreement that Baldwin's *Mountain* examines the subject of Christianity and its role in the lives of African Americans.

Apart from the above critics, there are those who interpret the work as a creative confrontation with American racism. David Littlejohn is one of such critics. He states concerning Baldwin's characters that they are:

> shredded by violent love-hate combats, pressed by 'the weight of white people in the world'… They beat because they can't afford to love; they beat their own kind because they have no way of getting at the enemy. When they do love they cannot admit it… all release must come from sex, from religious ardor, or from blunt, simple violence-which three as the novel proves, may all be much the same thing. (122)

John and his family are "shredded by violent love-hate combats" because of their experience in the hands of white Americans.

While Littlejohn and other critics convincingly demonstrate the religious and racial underpinning of Baldwin's narrative, their readings nevertheless ignore how the psychoanalytic poetics feature in the novel and the reason for its employment. In this essay, I utilize some psychoanalytic concepts in the reading of the novel, and argue

that Baldwin's characters' internal (psychological) and external (sociological) conflicts are inseparable since their external problems serve as catalysts for their internal ones and vice-versa. Robert Tomlinson has noted that "when analyzing his (Baldwin's) artistic development, critics tend to polarize the private and the public" (135). But as it is already evident, in this paper, I demonstrate that such dichotomy or polarization does not figure in Baldwin's *Mountain.* Describing the turmoil of the 20th century, Terry Eagleton maintains that it "is never only a matter of wars, economic slumps and revolutions: it is also experienced by those caught up in it in the most intimately personal ways. It is a crisis of human relationship and of the human personality, as well as a social convulsion"(131). What Eagleton emphasizes is the synthesis between the sociological and psychological reality of the experience of individual characters. While Baldwin's black characters' public challenges emanate from their socio-political experiences, their private ones derive from their internal or personal traumas – what Tomlinson seems to describe as the knot between the internal and external reality of Baldwin's characters, which is difficult to unknot (136).

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This is perceptible in the relationship that exists between Gabriel and John Grimes. Although Charles Scruggs acknowledges that this novel is "a sociological examination of the role of the church in the black community," he also asserts that critics have come to also see it "as a psychological study of the clash between father and son" (1). Accordingly, another way to see the hatred between Gabriel and John Grimes, apart from Gabriel's religious conviction, is to interpret it in terms of Freud's Oedipal complex; and in their case, it is expected that this complex would be more pronounced because of the fact that they are involved in a step-father/ step-son relationship.

Whilst Andrew Colman asserts that the term Oedipal Complex was introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1910 in an article entitled "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" (506), Charles Rycroft remarks that Freud first mentioned it in a letter to his friend, Fliessa, in 1897, after the death of his father (105). Whatever the case may be, named after the Greek legendary figure, Oedipus, who unknowingly

and accidentally killed his father and married his mother, and who blinded himself when the truth about what he did emerged, Oedipal Complex in psychoanalysis is used to describe the unconscious sexual desire of the male child for his mother and his feelings to eliminate his father. When viewed from this prism, the impression that is created is that the hatred between father and son is unilateral and emanates only from the "son" to the "father."

Taking into account the fact that it is through the threat of violence or castration at the hands of the law-making father that the incestuous wish-fulfilment of the male child is disallowed, one can then appreciate how the "father" is also implicated in the Oedipal Complex. As the "son" desires to eliminate the father so as to possess the mother, so does the father strive to put the son in check. Against this background, the tense relationship between Gabriel and John Grimes in Baldwin's *Mountain* finds an added explanation. That the bone of contention between father and son is the woman in their lives can be seen in the transcendental experience of John Grimes. Of all sins for which his father should be condemned, it is in relation to his father's sexual encounter with his mother that he condemns him. He says concerning his father:

> I heard you - all the night-time long. I know what you do in the dark, black man, when you think the Devil's son's asleep. I heard you, spitting, and groaning, and choking - and I seen you, riding up and down, and going in and out….And I hate you. I hate you. I don't care about your golden crown. I don't care about your long white robe. I seen you under the robe, I seen you! (231)

It is obvious from this passage that John's hatred of his father is not just because he is a religious hypocrite, but also for his romantic and sexual encounter with his mother. Although in Freud's conceptualization, the Oedipal complex occurs in the phallic stage of psychosexual development between the ages of three (3) and five (5), some critics have pointed to the fact that "the emancipation of desire is impossible" (Jill Anne Kowalik 3). For instance, while Freud posits that for a child to grow into a "normal" adult, it must resolve its

Oedipal conflict by identifying with the same-sex parent after the phallic stage of psychosexual development, Wolf Kittler has pointed out that "Both males and females suffer from a residue of unfulfilled desire for the unattainable parent of the opposite sex. The intolerable nature of this unfulfilled desire causes them to accept a substitute fulfillment which cannot, however, gratify their desire" (quoted in Kowalik 4).The implication of Kittler's observation is the impossibility of a child surrendering its sexual desire for its parent of the opposite-sex even in adulthood. Emotional repression/or suppression is not the same thing as emotional fulfillment. It is significant to note that the child is forced to surrender its libidinal desire, not because the desire has been gratified, but because of society's standard of propriety. Even Freud's assertion that the child in adulthood would continue to search for a substitute object to replace its original object of desire is an indication of the "ungratifiable desire of the child or adult driven by oedipal wishes" (Kowalik 4). This is the situation in which John finds himself in Baldwin's *Mountain.* In spite of the reservation to the contrary, there is enough textual evidence to show that he has not out-grown his oedipal crisis. Though he is well past the age of five, he has not come to identify with his surrogate or foster father in a bid to resolve his libidinal conflict. As already indicated, this might be owing to the fact that he is involved in a step-son/step-father relationship. From this prism, then, more than his father being a religious charlatan, the underlying reason for John's hatred of his father is his desire to possess his mother.

This same anxiety of being dispossessed of his mother is that which he expresses whenever his mother becomes pregnant. The narrator reports:

> John did not remember very clearly the first time she (his mother) had gone, to have Roy; folks said that he had cried and carried on the whole time his mother was away; he remembered only enough to be afraid every time her belly began to swell, knowing that each time the swelling began it would not end until she was taken from him, to come back with a stranger. Each time this happened she became a little more of a stranger herself. (12)

Before her marriage to Gabriel, Elizabeth as a single parent works the night shift so as to spend the whole day with John. After her marriage to Gabriel, and after the birth of his other siblings, John does not get the usual attention. For not receiving the maximum attention, John sees his mother as becoming a stranger. In this context, John sees not just his father, but also his brothers and sisters as impediments to his desire to possess his mother. Oedipal complex cannot arise without a competitor. Thus, it is with Elizabeth's marriage to Gabriel that John's oedipal crisis developed.

To, however, repossess his mother symbolically, John converts to Christianity. Dan McAdams has posited that "the normal resolution of the Oedipus complex…is for the young boy to eventually come to identify with the aggressor of his fantasies, seeking to be like the father so as to have the mother in a vicarious manner" (65). While in Freud's aesthetics, this identification with the father-figure is supposed to have been effected much earlier after the phallic stage of psychosexual development, John effects it in Baldwin's imaginative world at the age of fourteen. John, at this age, becomes a Christian so as to be like his father, in the hope of possessing his mother vicariously. James Baldwin himself in real life admits to this as the reason behind his own temporary conversion. He says that "his decision, at the age of fourteen, to become a child preacher was a way in which he could confront his step-father on his own terms and his own turf, and beat him there" (quoted in Brooke Allen 1).

This is replicated imaginatively after John's conversion, wherein he (John) reasons that "he and his father would be equals…He (John) could speak to his father then as men spoke to one another…not in trembling but in sweet confidence…" (168). If as already underscored, this novel has a tinge of auto-biographical elements, John's conversion in the light of Baldwin's confession is then sociologically a rebellion in the context of Lawrie Balfour's observation that Baldwin as a teenager "rebelled by becoming a holy-roller preacher and outshining his father in the pulpit" (10), and psychologically an attempt to resolve or cope with his Oedipal crisis.

As already hinted, Gabriel-the father is also implicated in John's Oedipal Complex. This is so because it is through the father's threat of violence or castration that the son represses his desire. Whilst the text, on one hand, gives the impression that Gabriel's violence towards John is because he is not his biological son (248), the other way to look at it is to see the violence as an instrument of warning to keep the son away from his wife. Gabriel calls John-"the Devil's son" (229) and vows to "beat sin out of him" (228). This in one breath can be attributed to Gabriel's hard religious stance, and in another as his attempt to symbolically castrate John. By repeatedly beating or threatening to beat him, Gabriel constantly reminds John of the power or law of the father to castrate.

In Baldwin's artistic world, Gabriel does not miss any opportunity to remind John of this law or power. A case in point is the incident in which Gabriel's biological son, Roy almost got killed by some white boys. Whereas it is Roy who should receive the brunt of his father's ire for getting involved in a gang-fight, it is surprisingly John that receives their father's blame. Leaving the offender and turning to John, he states:

> You see?...It was white folks, some of them white folks you like so much that tried to cut your brother's throat. (53)

And turning to their mother, he advises her:

> You can tell that foolish son of yours (John) something…him standing there with them big buck-eyes. You can tell him to take this like a warning from the Lord. (53-54)

Surprised at this absurdity of leaving the offender and blaming the innocent; Florence, Gabriel's sister, responds:

> Why, Gabriel, it ain't him went half-way across this city to get in a fight with white boys. This boy on the sofa went *deliberately*, with a whole lot of other boys, all the way to the west side, just looking for a fight….I do wonder what goes on in your head. (54)

And looking directly at Gabriel, their mother, Elizabeth, reacts:

> You know quite well…that Johnny don't travel with the same class of boys as Roy goes with. (54)

Whereas Gabriel is aware of this, he still goes ahead to blame John and it is this that Florence and Elizabeth cannot reconcile. What both women have not considered is Gabriel's psychological problem. Gabriel himself is even unaware of the unconscious tension at play. He cannot bring himself to blame Roy, not just because he is the "apple of his eye" (53), but more importantly because he does not see Roy in competition with him (Gabriel) for his wife's love. Though it appears absurd that Gabriel would blame John for Roy's misdemeanor, what is actually happening is Gabriel's attempt to stamp his authority by reminding John of the law of the father. Heidi Nast argues that "it is through the threat of violence; in the case of boys, the threat of castration or even death at the hands of the law-making father that incestuous wish fulfillment are disallowed" (216). Gabriel does not miss any opportunity to symbolically castrate John. Though Gabriel promises Elizabeth that he would love her bastard son (John) as though he were his own flesh, Elizabeth observes that "he had kept the letter of his promise: he had fed him and clothed him…but the spirit was not there" (203). Gabriel's spirit is not in tune with John because he sees him to be in competition with him (Gabriel) for the love of his wife. Therefore, while sociologically religion puts a wedge between father and son, psychologically it is their Oedipal crisis.

The knot between the private and public reality of Baldwin's characters is also enacted with the relationship between Gabriel and Deborah. Just as there is a sociological undertone, so also can a psychological reason be proffered for the relationship. In the text, the analysis that is authorized in one breath is that Gabriel decides to marry her so as to birth a royal line of princes who would reign in his visionary religio-political empire. But there is every reason to conclude in another breath that Gabriel decides to marry her as a replacement for his mother whom he has lost. In Lacanian model, the subject reacts to the loss of the object, who is usually the mother, by finding the semblance of the object in the external world (quoted in Jean Wyatt 39). According to Jacques Lacan himself, "[d]esire finds in

the fantasy its reference, its substratum, its precise turning…" (quoted in Wyatt 39; Lacan 14).

This is particularly true for Gabriel in relation to Deborah. According to the narrator, "he (Gabriel) married Deborah in that same year. After the death of his mother, he began to see her all the time"(111). He then adds:

> Because there was no one, any more, to look after him, she (Deborah) invited him often to her home for meals, and kept his clothes neat…He had certainly never intended to marry her: such an idea was no more in his mind, he would have said, than the possibility of flying to the moon. (111)

In Lacan's aesthetics, though the subject feels desire, it is unconscious of the void that sets desire in motion. This is the phenomenon here dramatized. Whereas his intention is not to marry Deborah, Gabriel goes ahead to do just that; and this is in spite of the fact that he finds her "unattractive", "sexless", "long and shapeless". The narrator even adds that "there was her legend, her history, which would have been enough …to put her far ever beyond the gates of any honourable man's desire…There were (also) people in the church … who mocked Deborah behind her back" (112). Her legend or history for which she is mocked is the fact that she was raped by a group of white men. In spite of all of this, Gabriel sees her as a replacement for his mother who provided his meals and kept his clothes neat, and he goes ahead to marry her. In effect, while externally, Gabriel marries Deborah to birth his children; internally, he marries her because he sees her as a semblance of the lost part of himself and as a replacement for the lost object, who in this instance is his mother. By marrying Deborah, he reconnects with his lost mother in his world of fantasy.

The synthesis between the public and private reality of Baldwin's characters' lives is also evident in the relationship between Gabriel and Florence. Like John Grimes, Florence's hatred of Gabriel is presented as a fall-out of Gabriel's religious hypocrisy. The feeling of Florence is that "if Gabriel was the Lord's anointed, she would rather die and endure Hell for all eternity than bow before His altar" (74).

While Florence was "standing in the need for prayer" (73), she concludes that:

> Gabriel rejoiced, not that her humility might lead her to grace, but only that some private anguish had brought her low; her song revealed that she was suffering, and this her brother was glad to see. (73)

The hatred between Gabriel and Florence is mutual. While the interpretation the text invites sociologically is that religion is the crux of the crisis between brother and sister, another hermeneutics that the text also suggests is in the light of Freud's sibling rivalry. This is simply the competition and animosity between brothers and sisters. However, unlike Eugene and Aunty Ifeoma in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* whose rivalry is predicated on a contemporaneous interaction (Azumurana 143), the rivalry between Gabriel and Florence seems to have its origin in their childhood experiences.

In his definition of sibling rivalry, Andrew Colman states that it is an "[a]bnormally intense negative feeling towards an immediately later-born sibling…" (676). This happens to be the case between Florence and Gabriel: Florence hates Gabriel as a later-born sibling who altered her world negatively. The narrator comments on this development thus:

> If he (Gabriel) had never been born, Florence might have looked forward to a day when she would be released from her unrewarding round of labour, when she might think of her own future and go out to make it. (81)

For altering her life, at a very tender age, when asked to pray for Gabriel by their mother, Florence "never prayed. She hoped that Gabriel would break his neck. She wanted the evil against which their mother prayed to overtake him one day" (82-83). Florence's hatred of Gabriel has both physical and emotional undertones.

Physically, Florence hates Gabriel for being a drunk and a religious hypocrite, and emotionally, she hates him for coming along to put a wedge between her and her mother. Her reaction as against Deborah's

when “a vomit-covered Gabriel staggers up” (85) to Deborah’s porch is revealing. While Deborah reacts by saying “You know, honey (Florence), the word tells us to hate the sin but not the sinner” (85), Florence cries out:

> I hate him! I hate him! Big, black, prancing tomcat of a nigger! (85)

According to Laura Murphy, repetition as understood by Freud is a means of “working through” a traumatic memory and these memories which have not been fully apprehended “come to us as an “unlaid ghost” (150). Although, what is emphasized in Freud’s theory is repetition of a given action, this essay holds that verbal repetition can also be subjected to the same interpretation. By verbally repeating her hatred for Gabriel, Florence attempts to work through her emotional feelings towards him. For separating her from her mother, Florence is thrown into a state of confusion and unrest and she is continually haunted and disturbed by Gabriel’s presence. This is what is responsible for her inability, unlike Deborah, to separate the sin from the sinner.

Florence’s decision to leave home can also be linked to her attempt to “work through” and cope with her psychological trauma. Whereas it can be asserted that sociologically she leaves home to better her lot in life by her last statement to Gabriel that “If you ever see me again…I won’t be wearing rags like yours” (90), it can also be argued psychologically that she moves out of home because she could no longer stand the presence of Gabriel. In her new abode, Florence always “wonders what on earth had possessed her to undergo such hard trials and travel so far from home, if all she had found was a two-room apartment in a city she did not like, and a man yet more childish than any she had known when she was young” (96). She is unaware of the psychological reason for leaving home, and she always “wonders what on earth had possessed her” to leave the relative comfort of her home. Following her failure to accomplish what she sets out to achieve, one would have expected her to return home like the prodigal son in Jesus’ illustration, but she stays put in a city she does not like and with a man she does not love because she is unconsciously running away from something or someone, who in this case is Gabriel.

This hatred is not unilateral. Just as Florence hates Gabriel, so does Gabriel hate her.The hermeneutics the text authorizes at face value is that Gabriel hates her for being proud and unreligious, but a close reading reveals that another reason for this situation is Gabriel's feeling of abandonment. When Florence decides to leave home, Gabriel was miserable and in grief. He even begs her: "please don't go. Please don't go" (90). Wolfenstein's conception is that the family "as immediate substantiality of mind, is specifically characterized by love, which is mind's feeling of its own unity" (293). This unity is what Florence destroys by leaving home; and by destroying a perceived filial unity, Gabriel feels abandoned and develops hatred for Florence as revenge. As it were, Gabriel no longer considers Florence as part of the family and he treats her as such.

There is also a psychological reason behind Gabriel's hard religious stance. In psychoanalysis, childhood experiences are important in the sense that they determine adult behaviour. In the case of Gabriel, he replicates in adulthood the treatment that his mother meted out to him in respect of embracing Christianity in childhood. The narrator describes this treatment thus:

> [Gabriel's] mother would walk out into the yard and cut a switch from a tree and beat him…until any other boy would have fallen down dead; and so often that any other boy would have ceased his wickedness. Nothing stopped Gabriel, though he made Heaven roar with his howling…as his mother approached, that he would never be such a bad boy again. And after the beating, his pants still down around his knees and his face wet with tears and mucus, Gabriel was made to kneel down while his mother prayed. (82)

Gabriel grows up with this childhood mentality that it is only by exacting punishment that his wife, children, and relatives can embrace Christianity. The punishment his mother metes out to him in childhood is what he reproduces in adulthood. Accordingly, just as the protagonist of *Another Country* (another imaginative work of

Baldwin), all the major characters in Baldwin's *Mountain* are presented as victims of both their private and public environment.

Describing his aesthetic project in *Another Country,* Baldwin states concerning the character of Rufus:

> He was in the novel because I didn't think anyone had ever watched the disintegration of a black boy from that particular point of view. Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way (to suicide) by white people. (23)

Although *Mountain* was published in 1954, eight years before the publication of *Another Country* in 1962, there is no doubt that Baldwin's claims in *Another Country* began with the aforementioned novel: presenting characters as socio-psychological victims might have fully crystallized in *Another Country* with the maturation of Baldwin as a writer, but it has its beginning in *Mountain.* Just as in Rufus' depiction, Gabriel Grimes and his family members are as much victims of their external as well as their internal reality. They are driven to act not just by the racism of white people, but also by their own psychological reality.

Conclusion

Breaking out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven to suicide by white people is important in Baldwin's aesthetics because it allows him to demonstrate, even if imaginatively, that the black man has the same desires and capabilities as the white man. As he himself appears to claim, no one has ever depicted the disintegration of a black boy from a psychoanalytic perspective. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin attacks Richard Wright's *Native Son* for treating the Negro "as either super-or subhuman, not as a man, not as American man" (Harvey G. Simmon 251). A character that is super-human or sub-human has been denied of its humanity. It can, then, be inferred that Baldwin's quarrel with Wright's *Native Son* is the perceived failure of the novel to depict the African American in his humanistic dynamics. In an interview he granted in 1963, Baldwin

notes with nostalgia that “the white man, swollen with desire and guilt, creates an image of the Negro as savage, as animal, as child. He sees him as anything but a man, for to see him thus is to admit common capabilities and desires, and this is forbidden” (Harvey G. Simmon 250). Accordingly, by appropriating the psychoanalytic poetics in the portrayal of the experience of the African American, Baldwin reveals that like the white man, the black man does not easily abandon his libidinal position, and thus he is comparable to the white man in his desires, fears, and anxieties.

Eva Tettenborn has noted that “Contemporary African American literature has portrayed characters with different, melancholic minds as figures who are not to be pathologized but who must be read as subjects engaged in acts of political resistance to dominant versions of memory and historiography” (102). Among the dominant versions of history against which contemporary African American literature has protested is what Saidiya V. Hartman has observed that “pain” to the white supremacist “isn’t really pain for the enslaved, because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief” (quoted in Tettenborn 110). Thus, there is a sense in which it can be argued that it is the essential inability of white Americans to accept the subjectivity of the African American that precipitates Baldwin’s appropriation of the psychoanalytic poetics. The psychoanalytic poetics embedded in Baldwin’s narrative, therefore, becomes a narrative strategy through which to establish the affinity between black and white Americans. In other words, by showing that the black man is susceptible to the same psychological problems as the white man, Baldwin affirms the subjectivity of the African American.

Although Albert Shalom asserts that “the fundamental metaphysical problem concerning any and all organisms capable of subjective experience is the problem of explaining the source and nature of subjectivity itself” (227), R. W. Sperry seems to suggest that subjectivity is “correlated with mental states of psychic activity” (quoted in Shalom 228). What is emphasized by Sperry, to borrow the words of Tettenborn, is that “without a self, no melancholia can exist” (116). The psychic reality of the African American then is not so much an exemplification of his pathological state as it is of his subjectivity.

To be depressive that an object has been lost, one has to be human. In this vein, by depicting the psychoneuroses of African Americans in their familial and filial relationships, Baldwin expresses their selfhood/or subjectivity: he humanizes the African American who has been dehumanized by white American epistemological thought.

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