

“I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also,
much more than that. So are we all.” James Baldwin

Abstract

Through all his literary works, Baldwin blazed a trail in the literary world with his inspection of racial concerns and social issues. He also wrote about children in difficult family situations, and about the rocky road to understand oneself. Through extensive reading of his works, one can see how a lot of his stories may relate to his own childhood, but also how Baldwin is able to take individuals', who are dissimilar to himself, perspective. As this thesis prove, not only did Baldwin write autobiographically, but he also manages to enhance empathy for appalling characters, and shows how complicated humans are, and how affected one become by the society and one's upbringing.

Keywords: autobiography, racism, family relations

Acknowledgements

I have been so lucky to have received so much help and support from so many people, both personally and professionally. Acknowledgement is simply not adequate to show how grateful I am, but here it goes... A simple thank you.

First and foremost, to my thesis supervisor, Professor Domhnall Mitchell, for his patience, wise words, encouragement, knowledge and extensive supervision. As Carl Gustav Jung said, “One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings”.

My parents who always believed in me, and my sister Julie for all the long phone calls and the managing of my, at times, catastrophic thinking.

The Front Row – Idunn, Ask Kristian, and Sandra. Thank you for all the crying sessions, the academic (and not so academic) discussions, the laughter, and the encouraging words. May we forever be recognised as the Pub Quiz Team on the Front Row.

To my closest friends who kept me going. You know who you are.

And lastly, thank you to James Baldwin, who made me both a better reader and a person. His works are, which is both good and bad, relevant today, as it deals with the still ongoing racism in America. May his words continue to make their way into people’s minds and hearts.

#blacklivesmatter

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	5
Why James Baldwin?	6
Family relations: The Father	9
Mother	15
Children	30
Conclusion.....	37
Works Cited.....	41
Appendix: Pedagogical Relevance of This Thesis	43

Introduction

It was William Wordsworth in “My Heart Leaps Up” (1802) who wrote that the “Child is Father to the Man”, by which he meant that experiences in childhood were significant to the formation of the (male) child in later life. Among those experiences, however, were and are relationships between the child and his actual father (or step-father) and mother, and more than a century and a half later another English poet, Philip Larkin, was much less optimistic about the effect that parents have on children. In “This be the verse”, he wrote that

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.¹

In this thesis, I want to begin by examining the depiction of parents (including surrogate parents) and children in the fiction of the American writer James Baldwin, whose writings are having a moment after the release, in 2016, of the documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (which is based in part on an unfinished draft memoir entitled *Remember This House*) and, in 2018, of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a film adaptation of a 1974 novel of the same name.

Baldwin wrote both autobiographically and fictionally, and in exploring his writings I hope to tease out some of the differences between the categories in his work, and more precisely to see what he does with the figures from his own life in his writing, to understand how knowledge of his life might or might not be useful or even appropriate to a deeper understanding of his works. My primary interest is in seeing what Baldwin has to say about parents, their effects on children, and how his fiction is both a record of his own childhood and an imagining of alternative forms of parenting in a person’s life. For the sake of convenience, I will divide Baldwin’s writings into different sections based on the various ethical dilemmas and themes they convey. Still, it is crucial to understand that several of his novels and short stories can be placed in several of the categories.

¹ Larkin, P. (1974). *High windows*. London: Faber and Faber.

Why James Baldwin?

James Arthur Baldwin was born 2 August 1924, the son of Emma Berdis Joynes (1900-1999), who later married David Baldwin (?-1943), a preacher who was not James' biological father but who legally adopted him. James took his adoptive father's last name, as his mother removed James' birthfather from their lives because of his drug abuse. (Leeming, 2015)

This dramatic beginning to his life was not the only aspect of Baldwin's early childhood that left a deep impression on him, and he returns again and again in his stories to profoundly flawed and sometimes shocking relationships between children and father and mother figures. Additionally, he writes about the struggle of being both black and gay in America, and there are apparent autobiographical contexts here because Baldwin himself was openly gay. However, Baldwin's protagonists are not always and everywhere to be identified as surrogates for himself: sometimes he writes about troubled young black males, but he also writes about heterosexual white men. Baldwin's ability to write from different perspectives is unique, as he manages to write from the viewpoint of characters who are dissimilar to himself. His characters are both white and black, young and old, racists and civil rights activists, heterosexual family men, as well as gay or bisexual men.

Chris Freeman, professor of English at the University of Southern California, describes Baldwin as "intersectional," and told NBC Out that "he was intersectional before there was a classification of intersectional. He is the reason we even have the word" (Simon, 2017).

Almost from the moment I met Baldwin, I recognized that I was in the presence of a highly complex, troubled, and driven individual who was more intensely serious than anyone I had ever met. This is not to say he did not enjoy life or that he had no sense of humor. [...] And he spent his whole life longing to be picked up and sheltered by what he thought of as the power of love in arms stronger than his own (Leeming, 2015).

I will confine myself to one observation regarding this: both the categorising of Baldwin as "intersectional", and the identification of him as "a highly complex, troubled, and driven individual" suggests that the reason his characters are troubled and diverse is that Baldwin himself was. This is confirmed by a *New York Times* book review in 1998 of new releases of his *Collected Essays* and *Early Novels and Stories*: the headline is "Trapped Inside James Baldwin", and the sub-title is "Everything he had to say was some version of the problem of being himself" - as if Baldwin was somehow unable to escape being or writing about his *real*

self.² Although I will argue that knowing something about Baldwin's life gives us certain insights into his writing, I also feel very strongly that we need to recognise his ability to create characters and stories that are beautifully crafted in language and plot: he was an artist, too.

Soon I would have to get up. I listened to Ludwig. He shook the little room like the footsteps of a giant marching miles away. On summer evenings (and maybe we would go this summer) Jules and Ida and I would go up to the Stadium and sit beneath the pillars on the cold stone steps. There it seemed to me the sky was far away; and I was not myself, I was high and lifted up. We never talked, the three of us. We sat and watched the blue smoke curl in the air and watched the orange tips of cigarettes. Every once in a while the boys who sold popcorn and soda pop and ice cream climbed the steep steps chattering; and Ida shifted slightly and touched her blue-black hair; and Jules scowled. I sat with my knee up, watching the lighted half-moon below, the black-coated, straining conductor, the faceless men beneath him moving together in a rhythm like the sea. There were pauses in the music for the rushing, calling, halting piano. Everything would stop except the climbing of the soloist; he would reach a height and everything would join him, the violins first and then the horns; and then the deep blue bass and the flute and the bitter trampling drums; beating, beating and mounting together and stopping with a crash like daybreak. When I first heard the Messiah I was alone; my blood bubbled like fire and wine; I cried; like an infant crying for its mother's milk; or a sinner running to meet Jesus.

This passage, chosen from "Previous Condition", is about Peter, an out-of-work African-American actor who is in a relationship with Ida, a well-off white woman in her thirties from Boston, and possibly with a man named Jules, who is also a friend of Ida's. His father is dead, and he was brought up by his mother. So, there are overlaps with Baldwin's own story, but differences too. However, what is striking about this passage are his powers of observation – the outdoor concert venue, Jules's jealousy about Ida's response to the boys selling popcorn – and the lyric descriptions, as well as the effortless shift from Peter's room to memories of the summer concerts, the orchestra "moving together in a rhythm like the sea" that is enacted in part by the use of the present continuous (moving, rushing, calling, halting, climbing, beating, beating, mounting, stopping). And then there is a powerful response at the end, with alliteration ("blood bubbled") and imagery that mixes the sacred and the earthly (not fire and water, or bread and wine, but "fire and wine"; not a nursing child or the sinner and Jesus, but both). Baldwin's stories often feature moments where music is described in imagery that fuses the religious and the pagan, almost, into a kind of epiphany.

When one looks into Baldwin's childhood and formative years with greater depth, one becomes aware of similarities between the stories he writes and his own life. Yet, what makes the stories so engaging and interesting, is that the narrative perspective often changes, and is

² Anderson, M. (1998). Trapped Inside James Baldwin. *New York Times Book Review*, 13.
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/reviews/980329.29anderst.html>

independent of sex, race and life situation: everyone gets their say. Both the rhythm of the writing and the imagery are often striking.

Family relations: The Father

The issue of family is a prominent theme in James Baldwin's novels and short stories. The non-loving, paranoid and physically and verbally abusive father, the loving, yet passive mother, and the warm, yet disobedient and reckless siblings - these are recurrent figures, and the dynamics between them are strongly reminiscent of Baldwin's life.

James Baldwin had a troublesome relationship to his stepfather, the Baptist preacher David Baldwin. His mother went on to have eight children with David, who also had a son by a previous marriage who was nine years older (Leeming, 2015). Though the young James was adopted by Baldwin, he never experienced being accepted in the same way his siblings were. According to Holliman (2015), it is possible to see aspects of Baldwin's story through his short stories and novels, as they often contain situations where one child is being neglected, beaten, or treated differently than the others.

Several of Baldwin's stories deal with family and family relations, especially the relationship a son has to his father, and are without a doubt based on his childhood. For example, the siblings of John Grimes, the teenage protagonist of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (2013), have a different relationship to their father than John does himself. The siblings are not afraid of their father in the same manner as John is – John senses that his father hates him, while the others are scared their father will beat them for being disobedient. John is terrified of his father, as he knows he is projecting all his anger on him, and if the other children misbehave, he is the one who gets punished, even though he acts respectfully and is obedient.

Like David Baldwin, the father figure in the novel - Gabriel Grimes (the name a wonderful mixture of the angelic and the sordid) - is a preacher, and they both have the same antagonistic attitude to their adopted child. John tries to win his father's respect and love, but he is at first unaware that Gabriel is not his biological father, which makes it difficult to understand why he is treated differently. In the novel, Gabriel is portrayed as a bitter and enraged man who continuously worries about the faith of his children. He is also abusive – he beats his children when they misbehave, and he slaps his wife for talking back to him (Baldwin, 2013, p. 49). At the time the novel was written, it was not unusual for married men to discipline their children physically and this was often understood or performed as correctional: beating during childhood would prevent the child from misbehaving in later life. Religious men also defended punishment in this life as a way of ensuring that it didn't happen in the next. Gabriel's behaviour is defended and justified by his wife, perhaps because she

fears John ending up like his father in the story (who committed suicide): “Your daddy beats you,” she said, “because he loves you” (Baldwin, 2013, p. 19).

However, throughout the novel, Gabriel, without doubt, treats his children differently, as John, the adopted son, is punished more severely and ruthlessly than his siblings. Not only is the father harsher towards John, but he continually belittles him, telling him that “his face was the face of Satan” and that “the barely perceptible cleft in his chin [was] the mark of the devil’s little finger” (Baldwin, 2013, p. 23). These comments and statements make a stronger impression on John because they appear to represent not just Gabriel’s personal views but those of the Pentecostal religion he claims to represent.

Baldwin writes about the father-son relationship in several stories, including “The Rockpile” in the short-story collection *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), where he uses the same characters from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Again, the focus is on how John’s siblings have a different relationship towards their father than John himself, due to him being born before Elizabeth and Gabriel married. The first implication we get in the short story that John is Elizabeth’s illegitimate son, is when the narrator takes Elizabeth’s perspective: “Her child and Gabriel’s, her children and Gabriel’s: Roy, Delilah and Paul. Only John was nameless and a stranger, unaltered testimony to his mother’s days in sin” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 18). The mother loves her children equally, but it appears that Gabriel treats them differently. John gets the scornful treatment from his stepfather, while the other children are off the hook even though it was Roy who was disobedient. Consequently, Elizabeth protects John to compensate for Gabriel’s harsh treatment and beatings, which makes her lesser in Gabriel’s eyes.

Another important aspect is how the father treats his sons differently. At the very end of “The Rockpile”, the stepfather kicks John in the head when he bends down to pick up his father’s lunchbox, and Baldwin describes “the scrape and jangle of the lunchbox as he picked it up, bending his dark head near the toe of his father’s heavy shoe” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 21) before this happens. The injustice becomes obvious when Gabriel grows upset and enraged when he sees Roy hurt, but does not think twice about inflicting pain on his adoptive son.

Baldwin has several father figures in his short stories – characters who are either fathers themselves or assume that role in some way by having responsibility for someone younger than themselves, not always related. In “Sonny’s Blues”, the unnamed protagonist and narrator is a teacher (of maths), which makes him a father figure for his African-American pupils: he is a role model because he proves to them that they can get an education and a job, reasonably decent housing and a family, just like him. He is also a biological father and feels responsible for his younger brother Sonny - partly because his mother has asked him

to look after Sonny, and partly because he eventually comes to realise that his greater experience makes it ethically right for him to help the brother.

In another story, “The Man Child”, we have the eight-year-old protagonist Eric, his parents, and Jamie - who are all white. Again, there is an exploration of the paternity, this time a more traditional one. The most obvious father is Eric’s, who is both a biological father and one who assumes the responsibility of the role by raising his son and trying to make sure that he has a safe future. A less obvious example is Eric himself. He comes to understand that, as the only child, he will inherit his father’s farm – both the fields and the properties – and this makes him think about the possibility that he too will become a father one day: he even asks his father: “Will I get married and have a little boy?” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 73). Later on, Eric imagines that his yard will contain the cries of his future children, making him aware of his future as a father.

Eric pretended that he was his father and was walking through the fields as he had seen his father walk, looking it all over calmly, pleased, knowing that everything he saw belonged to him. And he stopped and pee’d as he had seen his father do, standing wide-legged and heavy in the middle of the fields; he pretended at the same time to be smoking and talking as he had seen his father do. Then, having watered the ground, he walked on, and all the earth, for that moment, in Eric’s eyes, seemed to be celebrating Eric. (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 77-78)

Here, we see the stability of the paternal role – the son inheriting the father’s land and role before becoming a father himself to a son who will inherit from him in his turn – linked to race and class: it is a position that is occupied by different people over time, but the nature of the position – the status of being the male head of the family, and the ownership of land and cattle – remains the same. In practice, this is possible only under the system of primogeniture, where the oldest male is always the one to benefit from the succession. For women and younger brothers, there is no such stability – and this is where Jamie, Eric’s father’s childhood friend, comes in: he ends up strangling Eric to death at the end of the story, and one can argue that he does so because he is dispossessed – he has no family or land of his own. Throughout the story, it becomes clear that Jamie’s wife left him because he could not take care of her, and that he never had children, something Eric’s father keeps reminding Jamie off. When he murders Eric, he makes sure that no one will inherit the land, because Eric’s mother was unable to bear more children after a subsequent miscarriage: her barrenness is in a way a reminder that her importance in a patriarchal system lies first and foremost in her ability to have children and provide heirs.

The final story from *Going to Meet the Man* is the titular one, and it is also about a white man, a deputy sheriff called Jesse. Again, there is a crisis of paternity in a way, because Jesse is unable to have sex, and therefore to reproduce (he is forty-two, and there is a clear sense that the moment for children has passed). “Going to Meet the Man” opens with a moment of erectile dysfunction, as Jesse lies in bed with his wife, Grace. Almost immediately we learn that he has sex of a different kind with a sex worker, “a nigger girl” who would “do just a little thing for him” if he picked her up or arrested her (“it came to the same thing”): though a “big, healthy man”, he also longs to be young, and “to be buried in [Grace] like a child again” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 230).

Jesse is, without doubt, a very confused and troubled man, who besides has a pathological hatred of African-Americans. Baldwin sets the story against the background of the Civil Rights protests, of the 1960s, and in particular focuses on the use of police violence against non-violent protestors trying to organise voter registration in a town in the South. Yet, Baldwin also makes the struggle - for the white character – a primal one of preserving white, male, Christian dominance in the South, and this is allegorised by repeated references to genitalia and phallic symbols (or to areas, such as the groin):

He lay there, one hand between his legs...
...his hand reaching for his holster, which was on a chair near the bed, on top of his pants...
I put the [cattle] prod to him...He'd pissed his pants already...The boy...tried to scream again
as the prod hit his testicles...
For some reason [as the black man he has been beating addresses him as “White man”, the
sheriff] grabbed his privates...
“You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while – your women! Here’s
what I got for all the black bitches in the world – !” Then...he felt himself violently stiffen...
Men much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order...had been friends to his
father, and they had taught him what it meant to be a man. (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 229-236)

The quotations are interesting because of the way that they mix sexual and ethnic anxiety and confusion. The cattle prod is a symbol of masculine supremacy, as is the pistol in the holster that is placed suggestively on top of the Deputy’s pants (a prod is also used for animals, thus dehumanising the African-Americans). There is the telling moment when the Deputy shouts about using sex as a weapon against African-Americans but then realises that the “you” pronoun is ambiguous and adds “your women”. But the most significant moment is when he reveals that his behaviour is learned, and not innate: one generation teaches hatred to the next.

This leads to a horrific flashback moment, which begins when the reader finds out that Jesse had a black childhood friend called Otis, and the story goes back in time to describe the lynching of an African-American man in front of a large crowd of white onlookers. The man

is being burnt alive, and the young Jesse watches on his own father's shoulders as the man is then castrated:

The man with the knife took the nigger's privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them. In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger's privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, much bigger than his father's, flaccid, hairless, the biggest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest...Then Jesse screamed, and the crowd screamed as the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, as the blood came roaring down. (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 247-248)

African-American history is full of unimaginable crimes such as these, so even if the characters are fictional, the scene is based on real ones. Baldwin also makes this an initiation story ("his father had carried him through a mighty test"), a rite of passage for the young white male, and there are also echoes of *The Fisher King* (the African-American victim has "a wound between what had been his legs")³. The story appears to end with Jesse's potency restored, as "he labored and she moaned" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 249) in ways that, significantly, echo how the young Jesse "heard his mother's moan, his father's sigh" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 241.) on the night before the lynching. It is the historical and symbolic defeat of black masculinity that enables Jesse's masculinity to return, but he adopts the persona of an African-American to do so: "I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 249) (the latter, of course, something that would result in death for the black man). Yet, the story has a twist: the *Fisher King*, we remember, is castrated during winter but then rises again during the Spring, and it may be the spirit of the African-American man who returns at the end, when at "the first cock crow" there is "the sound of tires on the gravel road" (Baldwin, 1965, p.249). Throughout the story, Jesse has fears about retribution for his crimes as an adult, and the crimes of his father(s) as well, and they may about to become real – either that or Baldwin is suggesting that his fear of retribution will never go away. There are references in the story to Jesse's concern that African-American soldiers returning from the Vietnam War will be armed, and capable of taking revenge for the crimes of the past: the symmetry of the story (Otis's father being killed by Jesse's father, Jesse himself being violent to a young African-American man) suggests that it might be Otis who will "kill" him in one way or another (literally, or figuratively through the emancipation of the Civil Rights movement and the later

³ Brantingham, P. (2015). "The Fisher King" *Cyclopedia of Literary Characters*. New York: Salem Press. pp. 844-845.

call to action of people like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers: this suspicion is emphasised by the title, because “the Man” in African-American slang refers to the system of white supremacy).⁴

In all of these stories, biological fatherhood (actual, potential, symbolic or impossible) is crucial to how several of the male characters see themselves, and how they relate to others as well. In “The Rockpile”, Gabriel is frightened when he sees his son, hurt, but is not concerned about the child who is not his own. Eric’s father in “The Man Child” is proud of having property to pass on and an heir (two of the key components to paternity in western society), and Eric’s act of urinating on the ground is a kind of masculine marking of this territory and his ownership of it which Jamie fatally disrupts. In “Going to Meet the Man”, Jesse, and the other white males he encounters throughout the story seem to feel empowered only when they dominate and abuse black people: patriarchy is linked to power over others, and it is passed on from father to son. However, Baldwin hints very strongly that the abuses of patriarchy – black and white – can and must be contested.⁵

⁴ Malcolm X was an American Muslim minister and a civil rights activist. The Black Panther Party (BPP) is a political organization, founded to stop police violence against African Americans. To read more about them, see for example: Harper, F. D. (1971). The influence of Malcolm X on black militancy. *Journal of Black Studies*.

⁵ To read more about patriarchy, see: Nash, C. (2009). Patriarchy. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (pp. 102-107). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Mother

Baldwin admired and respected his mother: as Leeming (2015) tells us, “his mother was a protector and a maintainer of family unity”, suggesting that his mother was the glue that kept the family together.

He did not write a great deal about or speak about his mother, but when he did either, it was with deep feeling and admiration. If, in his use of his own life for metaphorical purposes, his stepfather was the archetypal victim of the ‘chronic disease’ of racism, his mother was the embodiment of the nurturing antidote to that disease.

As one sees in the part about the father figure above, the father is often portrayed as someone unreliable and uncaring. On the other hand, we have the mother, and the motherly figures, who are more attentive, protective and loving. In “Sonny’s Blues”, the mother of the titular character and his unnamed brother is, without doubt, one of those mothers who care for her sons and husband and sees it as her role to provide the emotional support and guidance they need to get through life. When she becomes too old to do this herself, she wants to make sure that the narrator looks after and cares for his brother.

“I want to talk to you about your brother,” she said, suddenly. “If anything happens to me he ain’t going to have nobody to look out for him.” “Mama,” I said, “ain’t nothing going to happen to you *or* Sonny. Sonny’s all right. He’s a good boy and he’s got good sense.” “It ain’t a question of his being a good boy,” Mama said, “nor of his having good sense. It ain’t only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under.” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 116)

There are several points to raise here. One is that “Mama” is not a proper name as such - the mother is identified, as many women often have been, by her role and actions more than by herself. The same could be said, in a way, of Sonny: he struggles to find individuality because he is always the son, the brother - someone defined by relation rather than who he is. Yet, it is also interesting that “Mama” transfers her skills and responsibilities to the narrator. Unlike many of Baldwin’s other stories, there isn’t a patriarchal lineage here, but a more complicated one (she is asking him to care for his brother in the same way that she cared for their father, who in turn had lost his brother). Baldwin seems to be allowing for the possibility that “Mama” doesn’t have to female - and that boys can learn as much from their mother as from their father. For instance, when the narrator tells his mother that “I won’t let anything happen to Sonny” (defining his role through action, through physical protection, through *doing*), she corrects him: “You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him

know you's *there*" (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 118-119). In other words, it's more important to let Sonny know that he is loved and accepted than to *do* something.

And indeed the teacher narrator moves from being someone who learns about his brother's problems reading a newspaper on the way to work (suggesting distance, and a historically public "male" world of relating to children through paid work or after work), to attending a concert where Sonny plays music and is the centre of attention (typical of the "female" world of unpaid support that involves accompanying men to public spaces where their work is recognised but where the women are largely invisible). Previous to this, earlier in the story, it is Isabel who spends time looking after Sonny when the narrator is away, in addition to looking after the children she has with the narrator himself. The narrator struggles to fulfil his mother's promise, and this is expressed in competitive and contentious terms associated with male behaviour: "we had a fight, a pretty awful fight, and I didn't see him for months"; "So I got mad and then he got mad;" "And my voice was very ugly, full of contempt and anger" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 126). But then he begins to listen, to offer positive feedback, to ask questions that are not confrontational but constructive ways of getting Sonny to talk and share his story.

"I had to try to tell you," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I understand that."

"You're my brother," he said, looking straight at me, and not smiling at all.

"Yes," I repeated, "yes, I understand that" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 135)

This sense of recognition and acceptance, confirmed by the repetition of "yes" three times, is fraternal, but what the story works hard to do is to loosen the biological definitions so that different roles (mother, father, brother) are adopted by non-relatives. In the nightclub at the end, for instance, the character Creole ("an enormous black man, much older than Sonny and myself") addresses Sonny as "boy" and the narrator as "son." "A woman's voice called Sonny's name", as well. So we have a father figure, and also a mother. And when, after the first song, Sonny really begins to play, we are told that "Sonny became part of the family again", the family being the group of musicians that he plays with, but more widely the audience at the concert. This is a story that recognises roles that have, in Anglophone societies, often been gendered as "male" and "female", but which also plays with them - with the male narrator coming to occupy a space (almost literally) that is sort of in-between: he is male, and in a nightclub, but the nightclub is an alternative familial and domestic space (Sonny is even given "scotch and milk" after the concert), and the narrator has become

emotionally literate in ways that men - in Baldwin's fiction - often aren't: he describes how Sonny is feeling and says "I could tell this from his face" (whereas, previously, communication between them ended up in arguments).

A lot of attention has been paid to the closing image of "Sonny's Blues", with its reference to the "very cup of learning", but that is to miss the vision of ancestry and family that Baldwin offers in the penultimate paragraph.

He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it. I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. (Baldwin, 1965, p. 140)

The vision of a heritage of suffering and survival is very powerful, and it is striking that Baldwin finishes with *both* Isabel's tears and the narrator's - as Sonny expresses his feelings on the stage, the narrator does so at the table, quietly and invisibly. We are reminded here of when the mother says to her son: "'Your father always acted like he was the roughest, strongest man on earth. And everybody took him to be like that. But if he hadn't had *me* there - to see his tears!'" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 119). It is easy to overlook one of the many implications of that line: men act like they are rough and strong, but in reality, it's often the women characters who have to be strong, and are so.

Another example of a mother figure with no name is the woman in "The Man Child", who is the only human, female, character in a story with three males. Only Eric, her eight-year-old blond-haired son, has a name. As the story begins, we are told that Eric lives with "his father, who was a farmer and the son of a farmer, and his mother, who had been captured by his father on some far-off, unbelievable night, who had never since burst her chains" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 61). What is interesting about this description is that Eric is inserted into a patrilineal sequence, as the son who will, in turn, become the father of the next son. As farmers, the men own land and animals; as men, the imagery of "capture" and "chains" suggests, they "own" women. In the section about father figures in Baldwin, I mentioned how the role of the mother in the patriarchal system is to bear children and raise them. Still, her own lineage is unimportant: she is not "the [daughter] of a farmer", but someone who is joined into the man's family, who is "captured" at "night" as if by a raiding party. Much of "The Man Child" is about two men, Jamie and Eric's father, who are competing over farmland that was once owned by Jamie's father and lost to Eric's father's father: it's also

about whose genes are spread to the next generation. The woman is passive in this: when she becomes pregnant for the third time in her life, Eric's father says "*I did that*", as if the woman had no active part even in the conception of her own children. The father's view is transferred to the child, who *thinks* that "he knew how it was done, he had seen the horses and the blind and dreadful bulls", but he leaves out the mares and cows. In this worldview, regeneration is something that males do; in this system, a woman is a slave "who did not know that she was chained" (Baldwin may be thinking here of the "mind-forged manacles" in William Blake's "London", the invisible chains of ideology).

I wrote that the mother is the only *human* female in the story, and I did that on purpose because the opening line of the story reads "As the sun began preparing for *her* exit..." (italics mine).

...[Eric] saw that the sun had moved and it would not be long now before she would be going...
...looking westward where the sun was moving, pale orange now, making the sky ring with brass and copper and gold - which, like a magician, she was presenting only to demonstrate how variously they could be transformed... (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 68-71)

The world of the farm is run by men, but much of nature is described as female, and even on the farm itself, parts of it have been reclaimed by the mother.

The ground was not muddy as it was in winter, but hard, dry, and light brown. The flowers his mother so loved and labored for flamed in their narrow borders against the stone wall of the farmhouse; and green vines covered the grey stone wall at the far end of the yard. Beyond this wall were the fields and barns, and Eric could see, quite far away, the cows nearly motionless in the bright green pasture. It was a bright, hot, silent day, the sun did not seem to be moving at all. (Baldwin, 1965, p. 63)

Eric's is eight years old, and still a child, not a man yet, so he can relate to his mother and to see things from a different perspective. What he sees is almost pastoral - not because it is set in the country but because it is almost timeless (the sun doesn't move, so time stands as still as the female cows in the distance) and idealised ("green" is repeated, against the green wall). In a very narrow space, the mother creates something beautiful, and the terms of the description are poetic: the alliteration of "flowers...flamed" and "loved...labored". If the flowers are an image of the female world of nature which includes the sun, then the important point is that it can't be *nature* that determines the power relations in the story, but *society* -

which means the power structures can be changed or resisted. In fact, we are told that Jamie's wife has "run away" - like an escaped slave, or like Huckleberry Finn.

By contrast, Eric's mother had to be "*sent away*" and "*taken away*" - to the hospital, twice, because of complications in her pregnancy leading to miscarriages: "One child was in the churchyard, it would have been Eric's little sister and her name would have been Sophie: for a long time, then, his mother had been very sick and pale." If a lot of "The Man Child" seems like allegory (the grave is the only piece of land the mother owns, in a way, it's her space; also if the daughter lived, she would have married and moved away to another man's land), this part is also accurate about the devastating psychological effect that a miscarriage can have on many women.

When his mother came back she seemed to have grown older-old; she seemed to have shrunk within herself, away from them all, even, in a kind of storm of love and helplessness, away from Eric... (Baldwin, 1965, p. 75)

A lot of this story has realistic depictions of marriage and its effects, including several passages of dialogue. For example, the two men spend more time in each other's company than Eric's father does with his mother. This shows how, in a way, the society at that time was segregated: the most important friend in a man's life was often a male best friend. Often what they talk about, even when the mother is present, shows that the two men think very poorly about women, saying things which the mother objects to:

"I didn't think she was as bad as all that," said Eric's mother, quietly. *I* liked her. I was surprised when she ran away."

"Jamie didn't know how to keep her," said Eric's father....

"___ she was a no-good bitch," said Jamie.

"She was beautiful," said his mother, just above him.

Again, they were talking about Jamie's wife.

"Beauty!" said Jamie, furious. "Beauty doesn't keep a house clean. Beauty doesn't keep a bed warm, neither." (Baldwin, 1965, p. 65)

There are beautiful, lyric, passages depicting Eric and his mother, but also these scenes where the men's misogyny (women are for sex, and domestic work, and for having children) is revealed, and where the woman is starved of adult companionship (she is surprised that Jamie's wife left him because clearly, they didn't confide in each other; her own husband spends his free time with Jamie, and for all his abilities as a farmer is emotionally immature).

Baldwin uses a great deal of religious imagery in his writing, and this story has similar elements. Eric can be compared to Jesus, in that he is the sacrificial lamb, as Ushedo (1997) writes:

In confronting the process that arises from a psychological propensity in the figure of Jamie and (by extension) in the society, 'The Man Child' constitutes a revisiting of the Christian theology of atonement with its implication that the divine-human relationship can be repaired only through the vicarious death of Jesus. (p. 144)

Again, the focus on this as a *male* drama. But Baldwin also makes it a drama of female suffering and losses: if Eric is Jesus, then his mother is Mary. For instance, in the scenes where Eric lies with his head in his mother's lap during the birthday party, it's a loving scene that echoes images of the Madonna and child - and the mother even wears blue, a colour often used in religious images of Mary. Like Mary, the mother is protective and loving towards her son. "And his mother's hand lay on his head like a blessing, like protection" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 69). There may even be hints of Michelangelo's statue of the Pietà, where Mary cradles Christ's body after he is taken down from the cross.

Additionally, just like "Sonny's Blues" the mother is a mediator between competing males - she is the one that keeps the husband and Jamie from becoming too aggressive with each other. She takes care of Jamie as he is a part of the family and tries to soften the effect of her husband's aggressive verbal blows towards his childhood friend. The mother also takes care of Jamie by keeping his clothes clean and making sure that his birthday is celebrated. "They had a party for him. Eric's mother had baked a cake and filled the house with flowers" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 63). In a way, she becomes something between a motherly figure and a wife for Jamie as she treats him like he is a part of the family. She senses the aggression and power struggle between the two men, and how her husband is trying to belittle Jamie for having no family and no land on his own and blames him for losing his wife. "'Jamie can get married and have kids of his own any time he decides to,' Said Eric's mother. 'No,' said his father, after a long pause, 'Jamie's thought about it too long'" (Baldwin, 1965, p.69). Eric's mother does not have the same need to humiliate anyone to feel better about herself, as Eric's father does, which makes her calmer and more mature than the two men (who are both in their thirties but often behave like small children). Even though it is not explicitly mentioned in the story, it is fair to guess that she has to bargain between the two men more than once a week - and this is one of the story's strengths, in that Baldwin in the space of a very few pages gives us a great deal of information about a marriage that is not entirely unusual.

Though a great deal has been written about the homosexual undertones of the relationship between Jamie and Eric's father⁶, and a lot of the tension between them can be attributed to competitiveness and jealousy over Eric's mother. When she returns from hospital after her second miscarriage and the depression afterwards (she is gone for two months), we are told that she still cleaned for Jamie, made food for him, and smiled good night, but that it

was only something had gone out of her familiarity. And if something had gone out of her ease, something had come into it, too, a curiously still attention, as though she had been startled by some new aspect of something she had always known...She seemed to be looking at Jamie as though she were wondering why she had not looked at him before; or as though she were discovering, with some surprise, that she had never really liked him... (Baldwin, 1965, p. 76).

Whereas most critics see Jamie's murder of Eric as revenge on Eric's father, less is said about how it is also, maybe even mainly, aimed at Eric's mother, or women generally. Jamie is like an "incel" - an involuntary celibate, who cannot hurt the woman who left him but lashes out instead at the woman who is closest to him (perhaps because he senses her distance). The end of the story is a rejection of the female world: Eric is tricked into going to the barn by being told that the new "calf" has come, but then realises that this "isn't where the cows are" (to which James responds "No cows here.") As he is strangled, he hears "his mother singing in the kitchen."

Mama. Mama. Mama. Mama. Mama.

Far away, he heard his mother call him.

Mama....

A woman's voice called, "Eric! Eric!" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 80).

One of the cruellest aspects of the story's ending is that we hear the mother singing: it seems as if she is starting to recover. But since we see how her miscarriages damaged her, we can imagine that she will be even further damaged by the loss of her only surviving child. Even though the mother did everything for Jamie - his laundry, his meals and also making sure that he had a birthday party, he targets her in ways that are typical of men's physical violence towards individual women just for being women. It is also interesting that so much of the description at the end of the story involves apples: surely Baldwin is invoking the story of

⁶ For another take on the relationship between the father and Jamie, see Brim, M. (2006). Papas' Baby: Impossible Paternity in Going to Meet the Man. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30(1). Indiana: Indiana University Press. pp. 173-198

Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden, and the expulsion afterwards, to suggest how the Bible targets women more than men, and how this influences men's attitudes towards women in Western society.

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, more in-depth insight is provided into Elizabeth, the mother of John Grimes. Leeming (2015) writes of Baldwin's novel that: "Much of her early life's 'journey' is suggested in the person and events surrounding [her]," and she is consistently portrayed as caring, thoughtful and protective. In "The Rockpile", published later in 1965, and Baldwin clearly had unfinished business, as we encounter the same set of characters as in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Like some of the stories I have discussed previously, it begins with a space, a territory, and competing claims of male ownership:

Across the street from their house, in an empty lot between the two houses, stood the rockpile [...] Roy felt it to be his right, not to say his duty, to play there. Other boys were to be seen there each afternoon after school and all day Saturday and Sunday. They fought on the rockpile. Sure footed, dangerous, and reckless, they rushed each other and grappled on the heights, sometimes disappearing down the other side in a confusion of dust and screams and upended, flying feet [...] "You children stay away from there, you hear me?" Though she said "children" [their mother] was looking at Roy, where he sat beside John on the fire escape [...] John said nothing. He had not really been spoken to: he was afraid of the rockpile and of the boys who played there.

Right from the start, then, we are alerted to the rockpile as a dangerous place, where competition over ownership - like "The Man Child" and "Going to Meet the Man" - can lead to a violent death. As usual with Baldwin, the rockpile could be a real place, or a fictional one - even a symbolic one, with the rock standing for territory. The area where the street is located is described as "forbidden", and the street itself is full of "men and women, boys and girls, sinners all" - a place of "wickedness" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 16).

It's clear from Baldwin's story that this view of the world does not come from the children themselves, or even the church-members who "passed and saw them and waved" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 16). And it's also clear that the description does not apply to the mother, who "sat in the room behind them, sewing, or dressing their younger sister, or nursing the baby, Paul" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 15). Instead, Baldwin paints a picture of women as bystanders, as observers, of male action, who try to prevent them from hurting themselves or others. From the fire escape, Elizabeth tells Roy: "The good Lord knows [...] I don't want you to come home bleeding like a hog every day the Lord sends" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 15). Just before Roy disobeys her, we see another woman "screaming and wailing" as her husband carries the drowned body of their son, Richard, in his arms behind her (when Elizabeth sees this, she

cries “*Lord, Lord, Lord!*”. When Roy is injured in a fight on the rockpile, and John alerts Elizabeth, a woman visitor says to her “Don’t fret, don’t fret [...] don’t fret. Ain’t a boy been born don’t get his knocks every now and again. *Lord!*” Where Elizabeth’s constant calls on the Lord show her compassion and sympathy ““Lord, have mercy,’ murmured Elizabeth, ‘another inch and it would’ve been his eye’” Baldwin, 1965, p. 19), Sister McCandless - the female visitor who says that boys will be boys - is much less merciful: she tells John that it is his fault that Roy is injured because he is “the man of the house, you supposed to look after your baby brothers and sisters [...] Your Ma’s way too soft with you.” Sister McCandless had earlier thrown the bleeding Roy “over her shoulder as she once might have handled a sack of cotton” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 19), and this masculine side is expressed in her seeking to blame, to judge and punish, rather than trying to empathise.

What happens next is a different kind of fight than the one on the rockpile, but this time between Roy’s father and mother, between a malevolent male force and a benevolent female one. When Gabriel comes back from work, he “stood, enormous, in the center of the room [...] John stood just before him, *it seemed to her astonished vision*, just below him, beneath his fist, his heavy shoe. The child stared at the man in fascination and terror - *when a girl down home she had seen rabbits stand so paralyzed before the barking dog*” (italics mine) (Baldwin, 1965, p. 22).⁷ “The Rockpile” is narrated from the third-person, but it’s interesting that at this point, Baldwin colours the narrative by giving us Elizabeth’s perspective, making her the moral centre (and there is a lot of emphasis in the story on her “eyes” and on her looking and watching) but also the generic centre: many short stories are about an epiphany, a moment of insight in one of the characters, and then it’s clear that Elizabeth has that experience.

When Gabriel threatens to beat John, Elizabeth intervenes:

“You ain’t going to take no strap to this boy, not today you ain’t” [...] And she was trembling. She moved, unseeing, toward John and took Delilah from his arms. She looked back at Gabriel, who had risen, who stood near the sofa, staring at her. And she found in his face not fury alone, which would not have surprised her; but hatred so deep as to become insupportable in its lack of personality. His eyes were struck alive, unmoving, blind with malevolence - she felt, like the pull of the earth, his longing to witness her perdition. Again, as though it might be propitiation, she moved the child in her arms. And at this his eyes changed, he looked at Elizabeth, the mother of his children, the helpmeet given by the Lord. (Baldwin, 1965, pp. 24-25)

⁷ Gabriel blames Elizabeth for negligence, and that it is her fault that their son is hurt, even though she was tending to her guest. Roy knows how to play his parents, and he snook out knowing he was not allowed to. As Harris (1987) writes: “No matter how well earned the break, that moment of seeming idleness could support, from Gabriel’s point of view, the idea that Elizabeth is negligent of her children” (p. 55).

Elizabeth speaks truth to power: she stands up to Gabriel's tyranny and tells him the truth about himself, about Roy, and about John. The story ends with this triumph of a woman's vision of truth over her husband's blind rage (he is righteous and angry about John, but "crooned" about Roy in his bias, so that he becomes like the reverse of Sister McCandless, unmanned by his own son), standing up to his greater physical strength (in Hebrew, "Gabriel" is derived from the word for "strong man") and hatred. Whereas much of the story is about women's passivity and the narrowness of their roles ("sat in the room behind them, sewing, or dressing their younger sister, or nursing the baby"), the end is a victory over this passivity. It is Elizabeth who has the vision, who does the right thing in protecting John from Gabriel's hurt and anger. At the same time, there is no indication that he recognises that he is wrong - it is more that he sees her with their child, Delilah, and something in him responds to the core image of the mother and child, the Madonna figure as it were.⁸

In "Sonny's Blues" we encounter Isabel, the narrator's wife, who is a crucial motherly figure in the story – perhaps the most important one. Her role as a mother differs from the way Elizabeth's, as her difficulties as a maternal figure does not originate in her own children, but in her husband's brother. She is a biological mother as well, but she also initiates that her husband takes more care of his brother, and she also takes care of Sonny and makes sure that he is okay. "At first, Isabel would write me, saying how nice it was that Sonny was so serious about his music and how, as soon as he came in from school, he went straight to that piano and stayed there until suppertime" (Baldwin, 1965, p.124). By some sort of motherly instinct, Isabel knows that music is vital to Sonny, both in his recovery and in his understanding and acceptance of himself. Music is his way of communicating to the people close to him, as he has trouble communicating through words and regular conversation. Sonny himself appears to be safe whenever Isabel is around him, and he feels obligated to stay sober for her, and the children's, sake. Sonny is afraid of disappointing and hurting Isabel, which he does when he drops out of school and spends time in a white girl's apartment. "Isabel says she did her best to be calm, but she broke down and started crying. She says she just watched Sonny's face. She could tell, by watching him, what was happening to him" (Baldwin, 1965, p.125). Sonny realizes that his actions are affecting the people he cares for, especially Isabel, whom he has a lot of respect for, and whom he knows is rooting for him and wants him to succeed in life. Isabel and Sonny have a special bond that the brother and Sonny are unable to achieve, because

⁸ "Her roles as mother and wife, in which we first see her in the novel, force Elizabeth to try to keep peace within her family, to protect her husband's image with her children and to save them, as much as possible, from his wrath" (Harris, 1987, p. 55).

the brother is projecting his feelings and issues onto Sonny, and they are unable to communicate. Isabel, however, understands that Sonny communicates better through non-verbal behaviour, such as playing the piano.

As one can see throughout the stories, the male characters often have issues showing their genuine emotions in the stories, while the female characters appear more sensitive. There is no secret that men, especially when these stories were written, often have difficulty for showing emotions and feelings, especially talking about them. Perhaps the reason for this is because some of them were afraid they would appear less masculine and less “strong” if they do not appear unaffected by certain events. The reluctance in showing emotion can also be applied for the men in “Sonny’s Blues” as well. The father only shared his sorrow with his wife. It is safe to suggest that the brothers’ father passed his inability to show feelings on to his two sons, who are unable to voice their feelings, especially towards each other. In the other stories, the men have a cold and rough exterior, while the women are raising the children and giving them the care and love they need.

The mothers in Baldwin’s stories are often more in the background of the story but still plays an immensely important role. It is safe to conclude that several female characters in Baldwin’s stories often have a motherly role, whether they are biological mothers themselves or not. They are protectors and safe havens for the struggling men and boys in the stories, as a sort of solid foundation. The men become more real with their wives and can be themselves when they are alone with them.

Baldwin challenges stereotypical views of women where the women carry and raise children. Although, when you read the stories for the first time, this is precisely what happens with the female characters, but when you take a closer look you can see that the women are more complex and that they serve more purpose than being a faithful housewife and a mother. Without the female characters, the men appear more helpless and bewildered. In “Sonny’s Blues”, the father and the two brothers are consulting with their wife/mother, where the father is grieving the loss of his brother, and Sonny is reaching out to her for help whenever he relapses.

Although several female characters play an important role in the stories, although they mostly are narrated through a male perspective, some women are as mentioned at the beginning, more passive. In her book *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (1987), Harris writes about how the black women in Baldwin’s fiction are portrayed, and how their roles seem to be old-fashioned, where their main goal is to be housewives. Although the book mainly deals with the black women in Baldwin’s fiction, I believe that some of the analysis

can be applied to the white female characters as well. Harris (1987) deals with specific issues regarding the women in Baldwin's fiction, such as their traditional roles, and always being there for their husbands. "Almost all the roles in which we find black women in Baldwin's fiction are traditional ones – mothers, sisters, lovers, wives – and almost all of them are roles of support for the male characters" (Harris, 1987, p. 5). As we see in "The Man Child", the mother is narrowed down to a bearer of children and a mother, although the males in the story are dependent on her. She is narrated through her son's perspective, and her thoughts are not at all voiced in the story.

They are at the beginning of a progression of women in Baldwin's fiction who will never be free until they free themselves of both the secular and the sacred male domination of their lives. As long as they see themselves as women who can define themselves only in relation to men or within the male/God-centered church, they will be limited in terms of how they can grow and how interesting they can become for critical evaluation. (Harris, 1987, p. 13)

As we saw earlier, the men in Baldwin's stories often have problems expressing themselves verbally or emotionally - except in physical ways, some of which take extreme forms such as anger and violence. Alcohol, religion and music are seen as coping mechanisms. One of the interesting things about "The Rockpile" is that Roy gets involved in the street fights, but John sits on the fire escape "drawing into his schoolbook a newspaper advertisement which featured a new electric locomotive." The suggestion is that education is one way to escape the fate of the people on the streets - men, women and children who are somehow lost, trapped by being ethnically and economically disadvantaged; the arts (being able to draw/paint, or to write, or to play an instrument/sing) are other, less literal ways. Women are even more disadvantaged than men in Baldwin's stories because it is the husbands (the narrator in "Sonny's Blues", Gabriel in "The Rockpile" and the unnamed husband/father in "The Man Child") who earn money: the women are dependents, whose main jobs seem to provide sex and having children. But as we have also seen, the female characters have the gifts of emotional intelligence, and they are often the moral centres in the stories. In "Sonny's Blues", the mother (who wears pale "blue", like the mother in "The Man Child", referencing the Madonna figure again) helps the "father get safely through this world. Your father always acted like he was the roughest, strongest man on earth [...] But if he hadn't had me there - to see his tears!" She helps the father to navigate his way through all of the obstacles in his life and validates his pain - enabling him to express suffering positively. In "The Rockpile", too, Elizabeth tells Gabriel the truth about himself. In "The Man Child" the

mother comments on what Jamie and her husband has to say, and seems to understand more about their lives than the men do themselves.

It is important to distinguish between the author and the people he writes about: I would argue that his characters do not represent Baldwin's opinions and feelings regarding women, but that the characters and their attitudes represent the society which existed during the time this was written. It is not Baldwin's fault that he lived at a time when, and came from a place where, many women of colour had little freedom of choice in their lives. It could be argued that he is simply reflecting reality. It is clear that when Elizabeth's earlier relationship with John's biological father is described as "days in sin", that this is coloured by the society. In "The Man Child", where the mother undergoes several pregnancies, provides food, and acts as a peacemaker between the men, it's clear that this in no way represents Baldwin's view of how women ought to live. His criticism is almost always directed at the male characters, while also showing that, in situations where they are not prejudiced against, women are capable of self-reliance.

Baldwin's writing *does* introduce female characters who defy stereotypes about women: Sister McCandless in "The Rockpile" is physically strong, self-confident and assured, but has a mixture of kindness (comforting Elizabeth, thanking the man who carried Roy back to the house) and cruelty (toward John, who she seems prejudiced against, perhaps for the same reasons as Gabriel). She is not afraid to speak her mind, but what she has to say reinforces the male ideas of crime and punishment or retribution: she is three-dimensional, in other words, and not to be reduced to one gender or another. Also referenced in the story is Aunt Florence, who claims to be from the Bronx, but isn't, and is associated with "sinful" places such as "movie palace[s]": her name suggests escape because it can be associated with Florence, Italy, and with the cinema, a venue for escapism, and she is therefore connected with John and his drawing of a train, which is connected with travel, and drawing, connected with art.

There are different kinds of women in Baldwin's fiction, then, and it's interesting that they perform different roles, sometimes. When the narrator's daughter Grace dies in "Sonny's Blues" is the start of a period of introspection and self-questioning in the brother/narrator of "Sonny's Blues" that eventually leads to a kind of epiphany: this is an example of a plausible event (the death of a young child from a low-income background) having symbolic importance (the narrator enters a state of grace). In "Going to Meet the Man", Jesse is unable to perform sexually with his wife. She too comes to symbolise the possibility of redemption in a Biblical way:

He moaned. He wanted to let whatever was in him out; but it wouldn't come out. Goddamn! he said aloud, and turned again, on his side, away from Grace, staring at the shutters. He turned again, toward Grace again, and moved close to her warm body. He felt something he never had felt before. He felt that he would like to hold her, hold her, hold her, and be buried in her like a child and never have to get up in the morning again and go downtown to face those faces, good Christ, they were ugly! (Baldwin, 1965, p. 230).

Jesse turns “away from Grace” and “turned again, toward Grace”, as if he is contemplating whether to embrace her (it) or not. When he thinks about holding her, there is a description of him wanting to “be buried in her like a child [...] good Christ” which is both sexual (he wants to penetrate her), psychological (he is reminded of being a baby feeding at the mother's breast) and religious (being buried like a child invokes a kind of resurrection, and attaining the “state of grace” again). The religious and the sexual imagery play off against each other here, making the imagery rich and complex: “Grace stirred and touched him on the thigh: the moonlight covered her like glory” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 249), Jesse's sexual impotence is mirrored by a spiritual one.

Baldwin's female characters are more complex and serve more purposes than being a faithful housewife and a mother. But Harris (1987) makes the more valid point that most “of the women are revealed through omniscient narration or through male narrators in a third-person, limited point of view” (p.10). Again, one could argue that this reflects how women in lower-income families did not have much of a say in family affairs: it is the men who have economic, legal, religious and physical power. In “The Rockpile”, for instance, Elizabeth is terrified of what will happen when Gabriel returns to find Roy has been injured, and he criticises and threatens both John and his wife:

[Elizabeth] “He got cut on the forehead, but it ain't nothing to worry about.”

[Gabriel] “You call a doctor? How you know it ain't nothing to worry about?”

“Is you got money to be throwing away on doctors? No, I ain't called no doctor. Ain't nothing wrong with my eyes that I can't tell whether he's hurt bad or not. He got a fright more'n anything else, and you ought to pray God it teaches him a lesson.”

“You got a lot to say now,” he said, “but I'll have me something to say in a minute. I'll be wanting to know when all this happened what you was doing with your eyes then.” [...] And he looked at Elizabeth in fury: “Can't you put that child down and help me with this boy? John, take your baby sister from your mother—don't look like neither of you got good sense.”

John took Delilah and sat down with her on the easy chair. His mother bent over Roy, and held him still, while his father, carefully—but still Roy screamed—lifted the bandage and stared at the wound. Roy's sobs began to lessen. Gabriel readjusted the bandage.

“You see,” said Elizabeth, finally, “he ain't nowhere near dead.”

“It sure ain't your fault that he ain't dead.” He and Elizabeth considered each other for a moment in silence. “He came mightily close to losing an eye. Course, his eyes ain't as big as

your'n, so I reckon you don't think it matters so much." At this her face hardened; he smiled. "Lord, have mercy," he said, "you think you ever going to learn to do right?"

It's easy to overlook how skilfully Baldwin shows the ways in which Gabriel undermines Elizabeth's authority: she speaks when she has no right to; he interrogates her like a policeman or judge; he accuses her of lacking common-sense (and links her with John, implying that she is a child, robbing her again of adulthood) and of negligence; he uses sarcasm; finally he patronises her by smiling (her anger is comic to him) and again identifies her as someone who needs to learn - like a child. However, it is Gabriel who is an emotional roller-coaster, who is unstable and throws tantrums - just like a little boy.

Though, Harris is undoubtedly wrong when she says the stories do not feature women's perspectives in the broader sense. As Henderson and Lang (2006) put it: "Although most critics of Baldwin label his depiction of woman as misogynistic [he] complicates this interpretation through the intricate portraits of his *characters*" (emphasis mine). The women speak directly, for instance (which is not the same thing as narration, of course, but is still a representation of thought), and as I pointed out earlier, there is a moment in "The Rockpile" where the point-of-view is Elizabeth's (albeit within a third-person narrative). Women's voices, just as in James Joyce's "The Dead", challenge, complicate and contest those of the male characters - who are often ironized by the narrator, much more than the women. When one analyses the stories above and goes into greater depth, one realises that the women are far more than the sum of their domestic chores and their fertility - they are often the foundation of the family, the enablers, without whom the men end up wounded or dead. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and "The Rockpile" Elizabeth is constantly trying to balance the family by protecting John from his step-father, and making sure the children are not caught doing something that triggers Gabriel's anger. Eric is safe with his mother but exposed to danger when he is not. The narrator of "Sonny's Blues" learns how to recognise his brother for the first time through instruction by his mother and by his wife. All of these stories show that it is the men who are morally weak and dependent. Far from being passive, the women characters have more integrity and life-skills than one initially would assume after reading the stories for the first time. In Baldwin's writing, women often try to teach men to behave like fuller human beings - like themselves.

Children

“You’s the man of the house, you supposed to look after your baby brothers and sisters,” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 20) says Sister McCandless to John in “The Rockpile.” In regard to patrimony, there is a contradiction in the short-story. John is the oldest male child in the family, and therefore responsible for the younger children when his parents (and especially his father) are absent. Yet, he is also illegitimate and therefore “unalterable testimony to his mother’s days in sin” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 22). So he has male duties, but none of the rights and privileges that come from being the oldest - those belongs to Roy (whose name is a pun, as we have seen, on the French word “roi”, or “king”).⁹

In his stories, Baldwin addresses what it is like being a stepchild in a core family, where the rest of the siblings have the same parents. In *Go Tell It to the Mountain*, when the readers are given Elizabeth’s perspective, we are given the impression that Gabriel loved John when he was a baby (he did adopt him, after all), but that changed when Elizabeth and Gabriel had their own biological children. The relationships in a family where some of the children either have a stepparent or stepsiblings may be challenging. Crosbie-Burnett (1984) writes in her article that: “Children in nuclear families gain security when the marital relationship is strong and satisfying. Children in a stepfamily may feel threatened by a biological parent’s alliance with someone who is not emotionally bonded to them” (p. 459).

In real life, the author had a close relationship to some of his siblings, especially the younger ones, precisely because he looked after them from an early age. As Mullen (2019) writes: “David Baldwin and Emma Berdis Jones had many children, of whom Baldwin would be the eldest, and often caregiver” (p. 2). But James Baldwin also had older siblings he did not have any contact with, and the absent older brother is also a figure in his writings - think of the nameless narrator in “Sonny’s Blues” or the wounded father of the murdered brother in the same story (a man whose role suggests that the missing older brother is, in fact, a substitute for the absent father in Baldwin’s imagination). Among these is Royal, Gabriel’s

⁹ The example of primogeniture in “The Man Child”, where the firstborn legitimate son lawfully inherits the land, can also be transferred to John and Roy as well. Roy is the first legitimate son, even though he is not firstborn. There is also a historical significance with the choice of names in the story as well, as John’s name can relate to when John Lackland rebelled against his father and tried to take the power from his brother, Richard the Lionheart, in the years 1189-1194, making John a usurper. To read more about this, see: Norgate, K. (1902). *John Lackland*. Macmillan.

earlier (and illegitimate) son by a woman named Ester, in the *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: again, his name highlights the discrepancy between his age (he is older and therefore should have certain rights) and his illegitimacy (Gabriel refuses to acknowledge him).¹⁰

Go Tell It on the Mountain allows Baldwin to explore a greater number of lives; however, the novel focuses mainly on John and Roy and their relationship, and their different upbringing. John and Roy live under the same roof, but they are treated differently by their parents, and this is because of John's illegitimacy - he is a threat to Gabriel's lineage, in a way. The novel features the same scene as in "The Rockpile" where Roy gets hurt, but instead, the mother is slapped by the father because she talks back to him, at which Roy gets angry with his father and protects his mother. "Don't you slap my mother. That's my *mother*. You slap her again, you black bastard, and I swear to God I'll kill you" (Baldwin, 1952, p. 49). At one level, this suggests that Roy is more courageous than his older half-brother. But I would argue that he *knows* that his disobedience will be tolerated to some degree because he understands that his father loves him: he is Gabriel's son, after all, and that makes all the difference. John does not answer back to his stepfather for several reasons - among them that he is more an observer, a watcher, than a participant, an actor. But as an observer, and from painful experience, he realises that his surrogate male parent does not love him unconditionally and that he would hate him more than he already does.

Roy understands, or intuits, his position in the family: but "The Rockpile" makes it clear that he does *not* understand or empathise with his older half-brother's position (partly because it's not his nature, and partly because his confidence as the king in the making prevents him from understanding what it's like for those who will never inherit that status). Before Roy leaves the fire-escape and goes to the rockpile, John reasonably tries to stop him: "'But daddy is going to be home soon!' 'I be back before that. *What you all the time got to be so scared for?'*" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 14: my italics). Baldwin proves how patriarchy in all of its forms makes it difficult for males in power to understand the position of those who are excluded from that power: like women, like other brothers, like landless men, like (in the case of white patriarchy) African-Americans.

Therefore, the behaviour of the brothers is partly natural, and partly to do with conditioning. Baldwin also seems to suggest that, in order to become king, the prince has to display his assertiveness - which is why Roy has to go down to the rockpile and compete with the other boys in the first place: "Roy felt it to be his right, not to say his duty, to play there"

¹⁰ One may suggest that Brother Elisa in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is an "older brother", and therefore a symbol of the admiration that Baldwin had for his older brothers who he had little contact with.

(Baldwin, 1965, p. 15). The author rewrites Biblical history to show this: when John and Roy are watching what's happening on the rockpile" Roy is described as "gazing [as if] he might somehow acquire wings" (Baldwin, 1965, p.15) he winged creature who stares down at an opportunity to rule has echoes of Satan and his revolt. Baldwin seems to reverse the story to suggest that patrimony *rewards* the assertive, rebellious, confident, physically and mentally strong. One can see how differently both boys react to the thought of the father catching them doing something they are not allowed to do. Roy is not afraid to test his father's limits, because even though he gets beaten for his behaviour, he is still the favourite. John, however, fears his stepfather's beatings because he gets punished even though he tries to do the right thing, and he knows that Gabriel's violence is more than correctional – he wants to hurt him. This is nothing to do with courage or cowardice, as we see in one description after John warns Roy not to leave. Roy still goes: his fear is not of the struggle on the rockpile, the natural competition between young males, but the punitive response of the father: "John, not now afraid of the staring boys, looked towards the corner to see if his father was yet in sight." (Baldwin, 1965, p. 15). Baldwin makes it clear how patrimony distorts right and wrong, good and bad: the legitimate heir can do anything and still become king, while the illegitimate child through no fault of his own is punished. But the point to be made is that this also influences the relationships between siblings: as Larkin (1974) wrote, "Man [literally] hands on misery to man [and it] deepens like a coastal shelf." It's almost as if John (and perhaps James Baldwin himself) had read the poem and followed its advice to "Get out early as you can/ And don't have any kids yourself".

When it comes to female siblings, Sarah and Ruth, who are introduced to us already in the first page of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, are good examples of what I might call indoctrinated females - ones who (like Sister McCandless in "The Rockpile") side with male authority figures and find excuses for male misbehaviour. When John sleeps in on his birthday, Sarah says: "Well! About time you was getting up," (p.17), like a little mother-in-the-making (a good example of learned behaviour, of course, and not her fault). She also defends her father when Roy asks Elizabeth why he beats them: "'Looks to me that he's a mighty good man,' said Sarah. 'He sure is praying all the time'" (Baldwin, 2013, p. 19).¹¹

¹¹ Their baby pictures also differentiate them from John, who is naked in his photograph while his siblings are dressed. "None of the other children was naked; no, Roy lay in his crib in a white gown and grinned toothlessly into the camera, and Sarah, somber at the age of six months, wore a white bonnet, and Ruth was held in her mother's hands" (Baldwin, 2013, p. 25). John feels embarrassed about his exposure, and the suggestion is that they are civilized while he is in a state closer to nature, which in the terms of the Christian Gabriel, is fallen.

Another brother worth mentioning, is Sam, David Baldwin's son from an earlier marriage, who had no contact with his father, and who Baldwin admired. As Leeming (2015) puts it, "Sam, too, made a deep impression on his young stepbrother [...] Sam was re-created metaphorically in several strong protective older brothers to more delicate and artistic characters in Baldwin's fiction: Elisha is an older 'brother in Christ' in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*." And as I have also pointed out, David had still another son from his first marriage, with the same name as his father, who died in jail. "David was to be James Baldwin's model for the many fictional 'brothers' who would suffer at the hands of the white 'law' - Richard and the first Royal in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Richard in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, for example" (Leeming, 2015). The figures of Sam and David have inspired some of the brotherly characters in Baldwin's writing - for instance, in "Sonny's Blues", which deals with the, at times strained but loving, relationship between two brothers. The protagonist, who is never named and is identified primarily through his role as Sonny's brother, is a teacher and a family man with his own troubles. At the same time, Sonny wants and needs to be a musician, but is also addicted to heroin.¹² The story focuses on how the brothers are unable to appreciate and come to terms with each other's, and their own life choices, and for much of the time are unable to understand one another or to make themselves understood to the other.

"Sonny's Blues" starts with this passage:

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swing lights of the subway car, and in the faces and the bodies of people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside. (Baldwin, 1965, p. 103)

There several things worth commenting on here. First, there is the repetition which is a feature of Modernist writing (D. H. Lawrence comes to mind, but Hemingway and James Joyce too). Then there is the play of "dark" and "light", as if what we are about to read is a struggle between darkness and light, despair and hope (this imagery is reversed in the last pages of the story). If we focus on siblings, it is strange that the narrator turns out to know so little of his brother's life that he has to read about in the newspaper: there is a clear sense of distance, a chasm even, between the two brothers - and this is reinforced by Sonny being referred to, not by his name, but by the phrase "his name", which is also somehow less personal. Sonny is

¹² Both the drugs and the art are two very different ways to escape reality for Sonny.

addicted to drugs, and has been sent to jail: he is continuously spiralling in a downward circle, and the brother is just as constantly unable to help him. In the first paragraph, the narrator-brother feels “trapped in the darkness which roared outside” (Baldwin, 1965, p.103), which means that he suddenly becomes aware of the presence of the darkness and that he is unable to get out of it for the time being: understanding that is the first step in the direction of understanding more about Sonny’s darkness. But what’s striking is that so much of the first paragraph is given over to the narrator-brother (“I” is repeated six times), and so little to the person named in the newspaper but not, initially, the story. The suggestion is that the narrator-brother is so self-occupied that he has no space for his younger brother.

Another striking thing about the paragraph is the use of the verbs “read” (repeated three times) and “spell” (repeated twice): this repetition isn’t just about Modernist techniques, but about being able to read and write, the basics of education. With Baldwin, education and self-expression are ways of escaping “the darkness which roared outside”: in “The Rockpile”, we saw, John writes and draws, and sits on the “fire escape” rather than fighting and falling on the rockpile below. But in the same way that Sonny is searching for acknowledgement and recognition, the brother is unable to see his own worth and the usefulness of his profession. He is a teacher, and as such is a role model for African American pupils. But according to himself, his pupils “they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities.” He thinks perhaps that heroin “did more for them than algebra” (Baldwin, 1965, p.104). In America, according to Maylor (2009), black, male pupils, in particular, are underachievers. There are many reasons for this (and right now in 2020 we are being reminded of those differences, in the shape of systematic police discrimination), of course, but having a teacher who doesn’t believe that education can make a difference is not going to have a positive impact on those statistics. Children will sense the apathy, and learn that what they are studying is unimportant. And one of those children is Sonny.

As mentioned previously, the two brothers are not able to understand each other; however, they are not capable of understanding each other’s life-choices as well. Throughout the story, the readers learn that Sonny has a dream to become a musician, much to the frustration of his brother. One of the things that happen in the story is that the narrator-brother gradually learns that there are things in life that he doesn’t understand - he is educated, in a way, by Sonny. This begins almost imperceptibly near the beginning of the story after the teacher has finished his classes. His comments about the school children playing in the yard

are negative and harsh: he colours them with his own depression. But there is a break in these dark thoughts, almost against the teacher's will:

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds. (Baldwin, 1965, p. 104)

Later, when Sonny at one point reveals that he wants to "play jazz", the narrator asks him to name the musicians who influence him, and in this exchange, the roles of teacher and pupil, older and younger brother, are reversed - at least for a while:

"Name somebody - you know, a jazz musician you admire."
"Bird."
"Who?"
"Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?" (Baldwin, 1965, p. 121)

But when Sonny then says that playing jazz is more important to him than making a living - that "people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?" - the narrator-brother falls back on the standard answers: "'In the meantime,' I said, 'You got to finish school.'" To which Sonny responds "That's a terrible idea. You know it yourself."

Charlie Parker was important in the development of a jazz style called "Bebop. A term used to describe a specific style that was developed in the 1940s, it would frequently feature complex melodies based on expanded harmonic structures and technical, fast improvisation" (Davis, 2012, p. 39). This is music which is created spontaneously as the musicians listen to one another and then respond accordingly. That bebop is instinctive rather than composed and then learned by the performers is significant: when the narrator-brother listens to Sonny - literally at the end, when he attends a concert, but also in a broader sense when he stops imposing set answers on him, inserting him into structures of education he doesn't even believe in himself - the brothers start to understand each other. Bebop becomes a symbol for an open-minded, improvised, model of communication, where one person responds to what is said rather than to what he thinks should be said. Fixed roles are abandoned, or even reversed, between the two brothers. And this is one of the consistent things in Baldwin's writing - that family roles need to be more fluid and open, with the mother (as in "The Rockpile") taking the so-called father's role of educating, and where wisdom and authority are not assigned because of age or gender or ethnicity.

We are also introduced to another brother relationship in “Sonny’s Blues” as well, namely the one between the father of the protagonist and Sonny, and their uncle. As aforementioned, the mother encourages the brother to take care of Sonny, and they cherish their relationship before it is too late. The father lost his brother when a car with drunk white men ran over him, and the father witnessed the whole incident, which troubled him deeply. The mother is afraid that history may repeat itself, and that the protagonist will be passive for too long and is incapable of protecting Sonny, and that Sonny will end up dead.

Another aspect of siblings in “Sonny’s Blues”, is the brother’s daughter, Grace, which I mentioned briefly earlier. She dies when she is two years old by polio, and shortly after her death, he writes a letter to Sonny. “I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried. I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real” (Baldwin, 1965, p.127). It can be difficult for a person to understand what someone is feeling, especially if they are feeling troubled, without having experienced something severe yourself. By experiencing grieve and loss, the brother was capable of relating to his brother’s suffering as well. There are other examples of dead siblings in Baldwin’s stories as well. In “The Man Child”, the mother has two miscarriages after having Eric.

One child was in the churchyard, it would have been Eric’s little sister and her name would have been Sophie... Then, not long ago, there had begun to be a pounding in his mother’s belly... But then, again, his mother had been sick, she had had to be sent away, and when she came back the pounding was not there anymore, nothing was there anymore. (Baldwin, 1965, p. 61)

What is interesting about this is that two of the deceased children are female, whereas the last child who was miscarried is both unnamed, and the gender is not revealed to the reader. Especially this story has a great focus on patriarchy and the inheritance of farm and land which is Eric’s birthright, and the dead women become an example of the women’s relevance and worth in a male-dominated society. However, their deaths also play an important part in the characters’ development. As aforementioned when Grace died, Sonny’s brother reached out to him, as her death made him realise how fragile life is, and how important it is to take care of the people you care about.

Conclusion

As one can see through my analysis of Baldwin's work throughout this thesis, it is obvious that a lot of his own childhood is reflected in his writing. Read the list of characters in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and they correspond almost one-to-one with the people in Baldwin's own life. As Møller (1975) writes in her book *The Theme of Identity in the Essays of James Baldwin: An Interpretation*:

Baldwin's thematic pursuit of identity is deeply rooted in his own personal experience, something that he acknowledges openly and that seems of the utmost importance to confirm once more. On the level of his private life, there is the circumstance that David Baldwin was the author's stepfather only, their relationship being mutually exasperating one at that. (159)

Baldwin had a tougher upgrowing than most of us, being black in a country that discriminated against and segregated him and his family and friends because of the colour of their skin, being illegitimate in a home with a Christian stepfather for whom this was an affront, being gay in a society that criminalised his love, being physically abused for being another man's son. If ever there was a case of someone about whom it can rightly be said that "They fuck you up, your mum and dad", then Baldwin is that case.

But what's interesting is that Baldwin does not use fiction to take revenge, or to tell the truth about what happened to him ONLY for therapeutic reasons. Even in the most ghastly moments of his fiction - the white policeman beating a black prisoner in "Going to Meet the Man", Jamie murdering Eric in "The Man Child", Gabriel threatening to take a strap to John - he attempts to understand and to contextualise (without ever, ever, excusing) not only what those characters do, but why they do it, and what can be learned from this. So this is never simple, unmediated, autobiography, as I hope my attention to imagery (Biblical, natural), language (the poetic density), characterization (Gabriel's tenderness to Roy, for instance) and - not least - narrative technique (choosing Jesse, the white policemen, to be the focaliser for "Going to Meet the Man") have shown.

It's interesting to compare this with the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard's autobiographical series of six novels, *My Struggle* (2009-2011) (Min Kamp), where - among other things - Knausgaard wrote about his troublesome relationship with his father, and how this relationship had a negative and continuing impact on his life later on. His works have received some negative attention because they exposed private family details since the family members were given no opportunity to review what was said about them. A persistent criticism is that he only portrayed the negative sides of his father, with no attempt at a deeper

understanding of what made him act the way that he did. Semeiks (2012) writes that:

(...) it seems to me that the only character whom one is likely to judge harshly here is the writer's father, a bias that begins to take shape after reading the first pages. And even then, we don't learn a great deal about the father. Why he is cruel, why he is so angry and contemptuous, and why he drinks himself to death remain mysterious. Knausgaard doesn't analyze him (it's possible that, because of their estrangement, the writer doesn't have enough information, either); he merely presents the facts of their interactions.

Unlike Knausgaard, Baldwin proves that he is capable of showing empathy and understanding for people who would not appear to remotely deserve it: he uses his powers of description and observation to make them human.

As I have attempted to show, through extensive quotation and analysis, throughout this thesis, Baldwin was an incredibly gifted writer but also a generous one. It is especially his ability to write from different perspectives that I find ethically exemplary. Even though characters such as the morally repugnant Jesse are completely different from Baldwin himself, he manages to take their perspective and create a complex story. Not only does he show the reprehensible sides of police racism in America, but he also shows how Jesse did not care about ethnic differences as a boy: it is culture and not nature that has made him into a hater, and the optimistic side of that insight is that culture can be changed for the better. When Jesse thinks back to his carefree days as a child playing with the African-American Otis in the dirt, the readers are introduced to a child who is not bothered by the colour of his friends' skin, and how that changes as he grows older so that he is made to feel that he has done something wrong in liking Otis: "Now the thought of Otis made him sick. He began to shiver." (Baldwin, 1965, p. 242). One of the morals of this story is without question that family, and especially parents, possess a great deal of power when it comes to forming children's value systems and attitude towards the world. Baldwin manages to show the complexity of an individual whom he completely disagrees with and enhances empathy within the readers for the child who was taught that one should hate black people. But he also shows how parents, in particular, can help shape their child's future for better and worse, and how society, in general, has a responsibility to educate its citizens in ways that counteract those negative aspects.

Baldwin himself possessed that gift of understanding the pain of the oppressor as much as the oppressed. In an early interview with the *New York Times*¹³, for instance, he said that white people

¹³ Baldwin, James (1965, March). "The American Dream and the American Negro". *The New York Times*. p. 83.

have been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible some of their lives may be and no matter what disaster overtakes them, there is one consolation like a heavenly revelation - at least they are not black. I suggest that of all the terrible things that could happen to a human being that is one of the worst. I suggest that what has happened to the white Southerner is in some ways much worse than what has happened to the Negroes there.

Another example of imaginative kindness is when Gabriel comes home to see his son lying on the sofa, apparently wounded: at first he is overpowering and terrifying, but he then melts at the sight of his son's suffering. Gabriel behaves in ways that are gendered as female (crooning, reassuring, supporting): he is tender, soft and loving, and he is genuinely worried and scared for Roy, and through this, we can see the other side of him. Similarly, in perhaps the most stunning example of empathy in Baldwin's fiction, Eric, even as he is being strangled by Jamie in "The Man Child", tries to find ways in his mind to appease his murderer, to right all of the wrongs that have made him into a killer. It's an astonishing and heartbreaking act of love, and typical of the spirit of Baldwin's writing, which is to avoid hate in all of its forms. It is fiction rather than autobiography that gives Baldwin the freedom to rewrite his life and the lives of others, without ever whitewashing the truth. As Bone (1974) puts it, Baldwin's stories "are a moving record of a man's struggle to define the forces that have shaped him, in order that he may accept himself" (p. 30).

There is one aspect of "Sonny's Blues" that I have not yet touched on in depth, and that is the relationship between Sonny's father and his brother, Sonny's uncle, a guitar-player, who was killed by a group of drunken white men. For most critics, the significance of this parallel relationship between two brothers, one of whom is also a musician, is structural: it suggests Sonny's vulnerability and the need for the narrator-brother to protect and look after him. But I would like to suggest that when Sonny's mother instructs the narrator-brother to do this, what she is *actually* doing is ensuring that *the brother* has something to live for - she is making sure that he is involved, integrated, in the larger family, given something outside himself to think and care about. We saw earlier that the narrator has a tendency to isolation and depression - he is very rarely seen together with others. When he is, he often comments negatively on them. In giving him a duty of care, the mother is trying to ensure that he survives as much as Sonny. Think too of the moment, at the end of "The Rockpile", when Elizabeth tells John to "pick up your father's lunchbox like a good boy": she is signalling to both Gabriel and John that they are in a relationship, even if it is not biological, and have responsibilities to each other. When the unnamed mother in "The Man Child" makes a

birthday dinner for Jamie, she too is attempting to signal that he belongs in an extended way to the family. Not all parents are bad, of course, but Baldwin also shows how other people can act as surrogate parents, to show empathy and understanding by example. That is what Baldwin does in his stories - he tries to let us see our common humanity, to take us away from the darkness, to make us talk.

Works Cited

- Anderson, M. (1998). Trapped Inside James Baldwin. *New York Times Book Review*.
Retrieved from: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/reviews/980329.29anderst.html> Accessed 14th of June 2020
- Baldwin, J. (1965). *Going to Meet the Man*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Baldwin, J. (2013). *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Baldwin, J. (1965, March 7th). "The American Dream and the American Negro". *The New York Times*. p. 83
- Bone, R. A. (1966). Novels of James Baldwin '. *The Negro Novel in America*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Brantingham, P. (2015). The Fisher King. *Cyclopedia of Literary Characters*. New York: Salem Press. pp. 844-845.
- Brim, M. (2006). Papas' Baby: Impossible Paternity in Going to Meet the Man. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30(1). Indiana: Indiana University Press. pp. 173-198
- Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1984). The centrality of the step relationship: A challenge to family theory and practice. *Family Relations*. Minnesota: National Council of Family Relations. pp. 459-463.
- Davis, J, S. (2012). *Historical Dictionary of Jazz* (Historical dictionaries of literature and the arts). Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press.
- Derman-Sparks, L., & Phillips, C. B. (1997). *Teaching/learning anti-racism: A developmental approach*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harper, F. D. (1971). The influence of Malcolm X on black militancy. *Journal of Black Studies*. California: SAGE Publications.
- Harris, T. (1987). *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. University of Tennessee Press.

- Henderson & Lang (2006). In Henderson, C. E. (Ed.). *James Baldwin's Go Tell it on the Mountain: Historical and Critical Essays*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Holliman, C. (2015, 30th November). Surviving and Suffering: A Historical and Ethical Look at James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues". Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/world-literature/surviving-and-suffering-ed3c3a94bc94> 02.03.2020
- Larkin, P. (1974). *High windows*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Leeming, D. (2015). *James Baldwin: A Biography*. United States, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Maylor, U. (2009). 'They do not relate to Black people like us': Black teachers as role models for Black pupils. *Journal Of Education Policy*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Mullen, B. (2019). Baptism by Fire: Childhood and Youth, 1924–42. In *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (pp. 1-21). London: Pluto Press.
- Møller, K. (1975). *The Theme of Identity in the Essays of James Baldwin: An Interpretation*. London: Coronet Books.
- Nash, C. (2009). Patriarchy. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (pp. 102-107). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Norgate, K. (1902). *John Lackland*. New York City: The Macmillan Company.
- Semeiks, J. G. (2012). Karl O. Knausgaard. My Struggle: Book One. *Confrontation*, 112, pp. 233-237. Brookville: Long Island University.
- Simon, M. (2017, February 7th). "James Baldwin's Sexuality: Complex and Influential". *NBC News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/james-baldwin-s-sexuality-complicated-influential-n717706> Accessed 14th of June 2020.
- Ushedo, B. (1997). Unloading guilt: The innocent victim as illustrated by James Baldwin and Rene Girard. *Journal of Religious Thought*. Washington, DC: Howard University.

Appendix: Pedagogical Relevance of This Thesis

Derman-Sparks & Phillips (1997) write in their book *Teaching/learning anti-racism: A developmental approach* that:

Anti-racism education is not an end in itself but rather the beginning of a new approach to thinking, feeling, and acting. Anti-racist consciousness and behaviour means having the self-awareness, knowledge, and skills – as well as the confidence, patience, and persistence – to challenge, interrupt, modify, erode, and eliminate any and all manifestations of racism... Racism affects everyone, and so, too, anti-racism education benefits everyone. (p.3)

As a teacher, one has a great responsibility in teaching the students about racism and social inequalities, and today, that has never been more relevant and important. At the time that this thesis was written the Black Lives Matter movement, an international human rights movement, is currently affecting the entire world. Police brutality and violence is devastatingly something that is still happening today, and people are reacting by demonstrating in the streets, and enlightening themselves about “everyday racism” and what one can do as an individual and as a community to stop racism. Therefore, the schools must enlighten future generations on this topic.

Using literature is something that makes demanding topics easier to process, and it may also be more comfortable for students to empathize with the different situations they are introduced to through literature. This thesis does not focus on racism as much as the subject of family, but James Baldwin’s literature is relevant in the classroom when teaching about racism and social injustice, as well as teaching the students about children in difficult family situations, and showing them that such topics are essential to address and talk about, which may also make the threshold for talking about one’s situation a bit lower.

Reading and writing about literature is useful because it teaches students how to analyse texts carefully and critically, and literature is also enjoyable for a lot of students. Baldwin is a "minority" writer, and at a time when Norway is beginning to recognise that it is a multicultural society with diverse ethnic populations, this is a way of showing students that minority writers can achieve recognition and respect. In the United States, it is very clear that there are still huge racial tensions underneath the surface. Discrimination in all of its forms is something that people of colour all encounter - but that is especially the case for women, homosexuals, and trans people. Any educational study that says that Black Lives Matter is an important humanist document.

Most young people are writers and editors, in one form or another - they use Instagram, chat platforms, blogs and Snapchat to publish information about themselves. Baldwin is especially interesting in this case because much of his work *appears* autobiographical (and some clearly is), but is also highly crafted and artistic, with a strong emphasis in attempting to record injustice, but also to understand how *other* people think and act, and what drives them - no matter how repugnant their actions appear to be. Baldwin can serve as a model for how "life-writing" and "writing" feed into each other in creative ways, then, but also as a model of rational thinking - of the attempt to engage in dialogue with "the other", to essay understanding in order to know how best to deal with it.