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**HIS TALE TO TELL: JAMES BALDWIN AND THE
THE ARTIST AS A HERO IN FICTION**

by

Jacqueline C. Jones

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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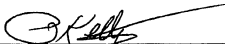
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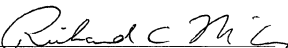
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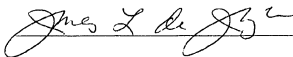
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ABSTRACT

HIS TALE TO TALE: JAMES BALDWIN AND THE ARTIST AS A HERO IN FICTION

by

Jacqueline C. Jones

Advisor: Professor William Kelly

This dissertation examines James Baldwin's concept of the artist as a hero as it develops in "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head. As Baldwin said in 1985, "every writer has only one tale to tell." His tale, taking the form of an artist narrative in which the rebirth of the artist is the central action, reverberates throughout his fiction. The texts covered in this dissertation all offer a multilayered portrait of the artist. Baldwin's ideal artist-hero must transcend categorizations related to race and sexual orientation to achieve artistic and personal success. In "Sonny's Blues" we see how arduous and potentially life threatening the journey to self-recognition is for the African American male artist. Profiling two artists, Another Country offers a similar view in that one of the artist heroes, failing in his attempt to redefine himself, commits suicide. The other artist in the novel, a more successful artist hero, embraces his sexuality in

France and returns to the United States to continue his journey toward self-fulfillment. In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Baldwin critiques conventional notions of success by questioning the kind of achievement the creative person should seek. Finally in Just Above My Head, James Baldwin's last novel, we are again asked whether the artist can combine honesty in his art and personal life and achieve success. James Baldwin subtly acknowledges and challenges assumptions about his work, his desires, and his experiences through his sustained use of the artist as a protagonist. He has been unwavering in his exploration into the life of the artist since the publication of his first essays. The proliferation of artists in James Baldwin's novels are evidence of his desire to shift the focus of analysis of his work from general discussions of race and sexuality to an examination of the role and responsibility of the artist.

Every writer has only one tale to tell, and he has to find a way of telling it until the meaning becomes clearer and clearer, until the story becomes at once more narrow and larger, more and more precise and more and more reverberating.

James Baldwin, 1986 ¹

¹ James Baldwin, interview, Conversations with James Baldwin. eds. Fred L. Standley and Louis Pratt (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989) 277.

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I love y'all!

My sisters, Valerie and Veronica:

You are the best sisters anyone could want. Let's get this party started!

My father, Franklin:

Daddy, thanks for giving me unconditional love, humor, and endless one-liners.
You are right; "one monkey don't stop no show!"

And, finally, to my late mother Peggy,

You may not be here in body, but you are ever present in spirit. The lessons that you taught me continue to guide me through many obstacles. I am fortunate that you and Daddy instilled in me a strong sense of self. My achievements in life are merely reflections of the upbringing and home training that you gave me.

Jacqueline Carlissa Jones

**HIS TALE TO TELL: JAMES BALDWIN AND
THE ARTIST AS A HERO IN FICTION**

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CHAPTER ONE

Reverberations: James Baldwin's Portrait of the Artist

"I want to be an honest man and a good writer."¹
James Baldwin, 1955

This dissertation examines James Baldwin's concept of the artist as a hero as it develops in "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head. As Baldwin said in 1985, "every writer has only one tale to tell."² His tale, taking the form of an artist narrative in which the rebirth of the artist is the central action, reverberates throughout his fiction. The texts covered in this dissertation all offer a multilayered portrait of the artist. They examine the lives of American artists who attempt to combine an aesthetic vision, romantic relationships, religion, and success. In a 1961 interview with Jane Howard for Life, James Baldwin defines the artist as "a sort of emotional or spiritual historian." Baldwin goes on to explain that the role of the artist is to help you to realize "the doom and glory of knowing who you are and

¹ James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" Notes of a Native Son (New York: Beacon Press, 1955) 6.

² Baldwin, interview, Conversations With James Baldwin 277.

what you are.”³ By embracing the doom and glory of his life, Baldwin’s ideal artist-hero must transcend categorizations related to race and sexual orientation to achieve artistic and personal success.

I am principally concerned with how James Baldwin’s vision of the artist as a witness remains consistent throughout his career. In “Sonny’s Blues” we see how arduous and potentially life threatening the journey to self-recognition is for the African American male artist. Profiling two artists, Another Country offers a similar view in that one of the artist heroes, failing in his attempt to redefine himself, commits suicide. The other artist in the novel, a more successful artist hero, embraces his sexuality in France and returns to the United States to continue his journey toward self-fulfillment. In Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone Baldwin critiques conventional notions of success by questioning the kind of achievement the creative person should seek. Finally in Just Above My Head, James Baldwin’s last novel, we are again asked whether the artist can attain honesty in his art, success, and love as well as to ponder the importance of legacy as the artist enters the prime of his life.

The texts I have selected for this study probe a different moment in the life of the artist. I could have included many other works of fiction that James

³ Jane Howard, “The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are” Life (May 23, 1962)

Baldwin produced because artists also play prominent roles in Baldwin's plays (Blues for Mister Charlie and The Amen Corner), his short stories (particularly "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon") and in a later novel, If Beale Street Could Talk. But "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head are linked not merely by the centrality of the artist figure in their respective plots, but, more important, these works comprise a composite portrait, from birth to death, of an artist.

From the beginning of his career, James Baldwin has interrogated the nature of artistic expression and the role and responsibilities of the artist. "The Creative Process," James Baldwin's contribution to the 1964 volume Creative America, is invaluable for its clear delineation of the artist's obligations. As mandated by Baldwin, the artist is in constant combat with forces that seek to deter him from his pursuit of truth. To be an artist one must face isolation to "conquer the great wilderness of himself."⁴ This seclusion, which Baldwin describes as the "fearful aloneness that one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering," contains the possibility of failure and redemption and the seeds for an

⁴ Baldwin, "The Creative Process" The Price of the Ticket (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) 315.

artistic rebirth.⁵

Not a seeker of fame or fortune, the Baldwin artist-hero does not decide to become an artist. He is one naturally, and the struggle comes in gaining the courage to embrace his fate. His central conflict surrounds the question of whether or not he has the fortitude to pursue a career in the arts. "Sonny's Blues" raises explicitly the price an artist pays to pursue his interests. The motif of the price is one that is also present throughout the Baldwin corpus.

By identifying the primary function of the artist as the role of truth seeker or witness, Baldwin establishes his criteria for evaluating artistic integrity. "All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up."⁶ The concept of art as confession lies at the heart of Baldwin's artistic vision and those of his artist-heroes. Achieving a deep level of honesty in one's life and being able to express it through art is the supreme level of success for the artist. Baldwin repeatedly states that, before an artist can fulfill his responsibility, he must first be honest with himself. This honesty requires isolation and courage. The life of the artist is a solitary one. He alone must expose that which we would like to ignore. "The artist is present to correct delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to

⁵ Baldwin, "The Creative Process" 316.

⁶ Baldwin, "The Northern Protestant," The Price of the Ticket (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) 204.

avoid this knowledge.”⁷

Baldwin's novels examine the reflections of a young man on his journey toward the attainment of an artistic identity. The idea of the journey or quest runs through all of Baldwin's fiction as well as many of his essays and interviews. The artist-hero's quest for self becomes, for Baldwin, a "journey of understanding."⁸ Journey implies passage and difficulty and it is the notion of the hardships faced during this voyage toward understanding that interests me most. The most arduous and meaningful transition in the life of the artist, this quest ends successfully when the artist can articulate his sense of himself either verbally or through his art.

Baldwin's essays, plays, screenplays, "dialogues and raps," and interviews document the evolution of his thinking on his most cherished identity, that of an artist. Throughout his career, he meditates on his vision of art and his position as an artist, but he does so more openly and frequently in the numerous interviews he gave before his death in 1987. These interviews allowed Baldwin to address the issue of artistic responsibilities. In a 1962 symposium on the images of man in the arts, James Baldwin exposes the difficult job of the artist: "It is easy to think of the artist as a glamorous person, one who projects his own feeling--his image--

⁷ Baldwin, "The Creative Process" 316.

⁸ Baldwin, "My Journey of Understanding" TV Guide January 12, 1985. It is unclear whether Baldwin gave the essay this title or if it was bestowed by the editors of TV Guide.

with ease and a certain grandeur. But the truth is that nobody in his right mind should ever want to be an artist. You don't decide to be an artist, you discover that you are one; it is a very great difference. What you do, you do because you must. The way fish breathe water, writers write; if they don't they die."⁹ The idea that a person is destined to be an artist is a key element in Baldwin's portrait of the artist as a hero. Success is attained after one embraces that predestined identity of the artist.

For the successful Baldwin artist-hero, race becomes an obstacle not for the artist but for others. He must redefine himself as an artist without any other qualifiers. For an African American to reinterpret his proscribed identity as racially inferior, that most unalterable of identities, is to create, as bell hooks argues, "a radical space from which we can articulate our sense of the world."¹⁰ For James Baldwin that "radical space" lies in the production of music, of song, of a performance and becomes a place where only the truth is told.

The artist's destiny is influenced by his relationships with others. This is certainly a key element in Baldwin's construction of the artist-hero for only those who are successful have strong ties with either their families or a community of

⁹ Baldwin, "The Image-Three Views," Conversations With James Baldwin (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989) 31.

¹⁰ bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin," Yearning. (Boston: South End Press, 1990)149.

artists. Baldwin's Peter in "Previous Condition" and Leo Proudhammer in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone endure both alienation from the African-American community and nonacceptance from the white community. Baldwin presents artist-heroes who manage to achieve some measure of success by combining these characteristics while maintaining close relationships with family and friends.

The chapters that follow seek to situate each primary text among James Baldwin's other work as well as placing it within its social, political and historical context. Documenting the social and political climate in which each novel is written allows for an exploration of the artist in reaction to societal changes. In a speech delivered in 1960, Baldwin discussed the importance of presenting characters within their particular social and political milieu: "In short, the social realities with which these people . . . were really contending can't be left out of the novel without falsifying their experience."¹¹ The commitment to expressing experiences honestly is a key tenet in Baldwin's paradigm of the artist-hero and in his life.

It is his position as a witness, as an essayist, as an "incorrigible disturber of the peace" that is James Baldwin's current standing. Based on summary accounts

¹¹ Baldwin, "Notes For A Hypothetical Novel," The Price of the Ticket (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) 240.

of his accomplishments, James Baldwin's greatest achievements are in his use of the personal essay to argue for the humanity of all people. Baldwin's entire body of work is represented in Quincy Troupe's acclaimed volume, James Baldwin: The Legacy by two autobiographical essays, "Notes of a Native Son" and "The Price of the Ticket."

Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin's first collection of essays, showed the writer to be a man who questioned all labels applied to him by others (male, Negro, American) while proclaiming that which he held dearest, writer. Sensitive about being classified as a Negro writer, Baldwin attempted to attain a unique identity in the literary world by subtly exploring his own position as an artist. Most of Baldwin's early essays focus on the hypocritical nature of American society and the role of the Negro. In "Notes of a Native Son" Baldwin reflects on the meaning of his stepfather's life and his own attempts to live within a racist society. The death of his stepfather provoked Baldwin to rethink the way in which he wanted to live his life.

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are . . . the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace, but must fight

them with all one's strength . . . This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.¹²

The choices that Baldwin makes are evident in his fictional portraits of artists. To become an artist, the hero must release the anger and bitterness that had claimed him. He must also, not only accept "life as it is, and men as they are" but, most important, accept himself as he is. This is the crowning achievement of the artist-hero.

Despite the acclaim his essays have received, Baldwin's use of the artist-novel could prove to be his most political act. As fashioned by James Baldwin, the artist-narrative is what Henry Louis Gates describes as a "double-voiced text." Such a work hails from both white and black literary traditions and signifies on black vernacular expression.¹³ The focus on identity and liberation links Baldwin's artist narratives with key African American literary texts such as Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Baldwin's artist narratives also incorporate elements of the Kunstlerroman, a novel which focuses on the development of the artist. Yet his vision of the artist is centered in an African

¹² Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" Price 145.

¹³ Henry Louis Gates, Signifying Monkey (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xxiii.

American cultural context. The artist's success is based on his ability to transform the life lessons he has learned through his chosen art form. Using art as a forum to discuss his position in the world is one of the primary functions of the African American artist.

The thematic continuity in Baldwin's fiction is evident, but critics are divided as to which of his themes is most prevalent. Joseph Featherstone, John Reilly, and Robert Bone agree that the redemptive value of suffering is a primary component in Baldwin's fiction.¹⁴ I challenge the notion that Baldwin's fiction is linked only by the theme of suffering but stress that the suffering in much of his work is connected to the production of art. I do not agree with the prevailing critical perception that James Baldwin's fictional works all share the theme of the power of redemptive suffering.

The slave narrative marks the beginning of the autobiographical impulse in African American literature. While the former slave writes the story of his journey to freedom, he also documents his rebirth as an artist. Autobiography remains a popular form for African American writers ranging from Frederick Douglass to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Yet, in James Baldwin's work, the artist who tells his own story weaves a tale of deceit, half-truths and hidden fears. For Baldwin, the first person narrator is one who hides behind the act of telling the

¹⁴ See Featherstone, "Blues for Mister Baldwin"; Robert Bone and John Reilly.

story in order to distance himself from his personal narrative. I offer Peter, the actor/narrator of "Previous Condition," the unnamed narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," and Leo Proudhammer of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone as evidence. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is particularly significant because it marks Baldwin's return to the novel form and the use of a first person narrator. These failed artists, linked by the acting profession and the fact that they tell their own stories, are also connected by a distinct resemblance to their creator.

Although he never wrote a formal autobiography, Baldwin used essays and interviews to reflect upon his life and career. He acknowledged the impact of his personal life in his writing but denied that all of his work was mere autobiography. His 1955 essay, "Autobiographical Notes," reveals his feelings about the importance of being honest in one's work.

One writes out of one thing only--one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possible give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.¹⁵

Echoing Henry James with this statement that life must be experienced in order to

¹⁵ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" 4-5.

create art, Baldwin clearly sees himself as being within the Sacred Fount tradition of artists.

Born in Harlem in 1924, James Baldwin had gained modest success in the literary world by the late 1950's. This achievement is made even more impressive because of his background. The oldest of nine children, Baldwin grew up in poverty in Harlem. As detailed in essays such as "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin found that his adolescence and young adulthood were rich with lessons about both the inequalities and the limitless possibilities of the human experience. The years preceding the publication of Go Tell It on the Mountain in 1953 were trying ones for Baldwin. His father's ill health made Baldwin the primary supporter of his family. He simultaneously held two jobs, one as an elevator operator and another as a janitor at a local department store. Baldwin tried to get his work published while coping with family problems and a chronic shortage of funds. When writing book reviews for magazines, Baldwin was dismayed but unsurprised to find that his areas of expertise were assumed to be race relations and the inequalities of American life.

Overwhelmed by both family obligations and by racial oppression, Baldwin left New York for France in November 1948 to fulfill his goal of writing full time. Baldwin implies that in New York City he could hide behind his time-consuming roles of provider, son, brother, employee and friend, but in France he had to face

himself.

The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation.¹⁶

He arrived in Paris with little money and few acquaintances. For the first time in his life Baldwin had time to write and to figure out who he was. I see Baldwin's flight to Europe, and those of many of his artist-heroes, as an attempt to regain an individual identity eroded by the psychological effects of discrimination, poverty, and racism. But, despite his journey, Baldwin discovered that the question of identity remained with him. "The question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer had to be found in me."¹⁷ In his study of the migration of African-American artists to France, Michel Fabre offers an assessment of Baldwin's reasons for remaining abroad. "...[I]n France he had encountered no need to prove that he was a 'regular guy,' no suspicion as an artist."¹⁸ While in France, Baldwin regularly wrote reviews for magazines such as Commentary and Partisan Review. He gained a reputation for being an astute

¹⁶ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" 5.

¹⁷ Baldwin, "Introduction to Nobody Knows My Name, (New York: Dell, 1961) 11.

¹⁸ Michel Fabre, From Harlem to Paris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991)

critic of American literature and society with essays such as "Everybody's Protest Novel." Completed in Europe, Go Tell It on the Mountain, an autobiographical novel in which a Harlem youth is irrevocably changed by a religious conversion, was published in 1953.

Baldwin's first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain traces the events of the day and night of John Grimes' fourteenth birthday. As a Bildungsroman, Go Tell It on the Mountain is the story of awakening, acceptance, and promise. John's descent to the threshing floor initiates self-examination in all of his family members and in John himself. Each character reflects upon his or her own journey to the life of the religious faithful and of the many stones in his paths. Because John Grimes' transformation is not directly related to his sense of himself as an artist, Go Tell It on the Mountain is not a central text in this dissertation. Yet the novel is instructive in terms of Baldwin's emphasis on John's fall to the threshing floor. As Melvin Dixon asserts, "John's threshing floor is . . . the place of John's realization of who he is and of the affectional ties that led him there and now usher him forth into a new life."¹⁹ John's rise from the threshing floor marks his rebirth as a saved person in the eyes of his church and it is his first step toward self-definition.

¹⁹ Dixon, Ride Out the Wilderness 132.

In Go Tell It on the Mountain John Grimes endures pain but ultimately triumphs in the discovery of his sexual, religious, and individual identities. He sets the most important standard for the artist hero, the courage to suffer in order to accept one's identity. It is the promise of John Grimes that we seek in Sonny of "Sonny's Blues," Rufus Scott of Another Country, Leo Proudhammer of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Arthur Montana of Just Above My Head. All of these later characters are variations on John Grimes in that they continue his journey toward self-realization.

In 1957 Baldwin returned from France and, despite being fearful, took his first trip to the American South for a magazine assignment. The results, "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South" and "A Fly in Buttermilk" (originally published as "The Hard Kind of Courage") were published in Partisan Review and Harper's Magazine respectively. Both essays are personal in the sense that Baldwin's observations are colored by his Northernness and his knowledge and fear of what the South has meant for African Americans. Each essay touches on the inequality of educational opportunities for African Americans and questions the application of democracy in America.

Although Horace Porter, Charles Newman, Lyall Powers and David Leeming consider Henry James as the primary influence on James Baldwin's development as a novelist, I propose that painter Beauford Delaney had a far

greater impact on the kind of artist and man that Baldwin became. Baldwin met Delaney when a high school friend suggested that he go down to Greenwich Village to meet the painter. "Jimmy was not yet fully aware of his own homosexuality or of the demands of his vocation, and Beauford, himself a homosexual, a minister's son, and an artist, was there, as a father in art, to help this younger version of himself through a crucial passage."²⁰ This visit alters James Baldwin's life in that Delaney encouraged him in his personal and professional development. Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, Delaney made his way to Boston where he studied at the Massachusetts Normal School and the South Boston School of Art. Delaney later moved to New York City. Delaney specialized in portraits and even painted a portrait of Baldwin.

In the introduction to the compilation of his nonfiction, James Baldwin describes the enormous influence Beauford Delaney had on his life and, in so doing, identifies his criteria for the artist: "Beauford was the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist . . . He became, for me, an example of courage and integrity, humility and passion."²¹ Through their relentless pursuit of truth, the successful writers, musicians, and singers of "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, and Just Above My Head all share the qualities

²⁰ Leeming, James Baldwin 33.

²¹ Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," The Price of the Ticket (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) xi.

that Beauford Delaney epitomized for James Baldwin. David Leeming recounts a conversation with Baldwin in which the writer explains Delaney's teachings. "[I]t had to do with a willingness to face ugliness in order to find what the artist has to find. And it had to do with the fact that finding the truth often involves confronting one's own fears."²² Facing the ugliness often entails a fall to the threshing floor.

While I do not want to speculate about the nature of Baldwin's private fears, it is clear that his artist heroes struggle with accepting their fate to be artists and some encounter problems related to their sexual orientation. As Baldwin's fiction progresses, his artist heroes increasingly are troubled by their bisexuality. Those artist heroes who fail do so precisely because they cannot confront their own fears about their sexual identity. Although David in Giovanni's Room is not an artist, that his confusion about his sexuality leads to death is important. Rufus Scott in Another Country, Leo Proudhammer in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone and Arthur Montana in Just Above My Head all confront death as a response to their attempts to ignore their sexual orientation.

The older homosexual man as savior, a motif in much of Baldwin's fiction, has autobiographical roots. Beauford Delaney was the young writer's mentor and guide to the world of aesthetics. The mentor to the artist serves an important

²² Leeming, James Baldwin 34.

function in James Baldwin's fiction. From Eric Jones in Another Country to Leo Proudhammer in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone to Arthur Montana in Just Above My Head the figure of the older man appears as a protector of the younger, poorer, inexperienced hero. Baldwin had a mentor in literature; one writer led the way for Baldwin as he yearned for greatness while being conflicted about his sexuality.

In terms of using fiction to ponder the responsibilities of the artist, it is Wallace Thurman, a minor yet significant writer during the Harlem Renaissance, who is Baldwin's literary forefather. Wallace Thurman arrived in Harlem in 1925, after having graduated from the University of Southern California. Known for his sarcasm and biting wit, Thurman quickly became part of the young artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Wallace Thurman is probably best remembered for his 1929 novel The Blacker the Berry. Dorothy West, whose essay "Elephant's Dance: A Memoir of Wallace Thurman" remains the most insightful account of Thurman's life and work, describes the writer as follows: "...he was never humble or apologetic, and he laughed very hard when things hurt him most."²³ In The Big Sea Langston Hughes characterized Thurman as a bundle of contradictions: "He was a strangely brilliant black boy, who had read

²³ Dorothy West, "Elephant's Dance: A Memoir of Wallace Thurman," Black World 20 (November 1970).

everything and whose critical mind could find something wrong with everything he read.”²⁴

As James Baldwin was to do decades later, Thurman used the novel, specifically his satire of the Harlem Renaissance, Infants of the Spring, to interrogate the meaning of art, the relationship of truth to art, and the responsibilities of the black artist toward the African American community. In Infants of the Spring Raymond, the central character, longs to produce literature of quality. Raymond's fellow artists living in Niggerati Manor, a brownstone in Harlem inhabited by would-be painters, singers, and writers, seem to engage in only one activity--drinking gin. Since Harlem is in vogue, virtually anything Negro is popular, but Raymond aspires to write great works of literature.

He wanted to write, but he had made little progress. He wanted to become a Prometheus, to break the chains which held him to a racial rack . . . He wanted to do something memorable in literature . . . something which could transcend and survive the transitional age in which he was living. He wanted to accomplish these things, but he was becoming less and less confident that he was possessed of the

²⁴ Langston Hughes, The Big Sea. 1940. (New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 1986) 234.

necessary genius.²⁵

Raymond's unchanging vision of himself as a writer and his attempt to influence others through the production of art connects Infants of the Spring with much of James Baldwin's fiction.

James Baldwin's repeated evocation of the artist as the central figure in his fiction has gained little critical notice. Sherley Anne Williams offers one explanation.

Critics of Baldwin's literary works have usually dealt more with those statements uttered in his role as spokesman or with his alleged homosexuality than with his plays, novels, or short stories. [They ignore] what Baldwin is trying to say about the Black man as artist, lover, and human being.²⁶

Williams alludes to Baldwin's implicit argument for the humanity and sensitivity of the Black man. Houston Baker, Louis Pratt, and, more recently, Bruce Bawer have briefly noted Baldwin's concern for artistic identity. In "Race and Art: The Career of James Baldwin," Bawer sees the tragic depiction of African-American male artists in Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and

²⁵ Wallace Thurman, Infants of the Spring, 1932 (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992) 145.

²⁶ Sherley Anne Williams, Give Birth to Brightness (New York: Dial Press, 1972) 25-26.

Just Above My Head as a suggestion that "the strain of trying to succeed as a black artist in America is too much for them."²⁷ There is more than tragedy operating in these works. Baldwin questions the very nature of the "black artist." Baker's image of the Baldwin artist-hero as an "embattled craftsman," again places the African-American in the role of victim.²⁸ His reading of Baldwin's later artist-heroes as men caught in mid-life traumas will be considered in light of its autobiographical nature. Louis Pratt's fleeting observation that all of Baldwin's protagonists are artists results in a thoughtful conclusion: "Each character is engaged in the pursuit of artistic fulfillment which, for Baldwin, becomes symbolic of the quest for identity."²⁹ I plan to explore this 'quest for identity' in "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head.

Although we are experiencing renewed interest in African American writers and their literary texts, there has been almost no attempt made to read James Baldwin's works in contexts other than those that relate to race or sexual

²⁷ Bruce Bawer, "Race and Art: The Career of James Baldwin," New Criterion 10.30 (November 1991) 23.

²⁸ Houston Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman: An Essay on James Baldwin," Critical Essays on James Baldwin eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: GK. Hall, 1988) 64.

²⁹ Louis Pratt, James Baldwin, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 137.

orientation. To focus on the issue of vocation pushes to the margin those categories which are usually forced to the center of any discussion of James Baldwin and/or his literary work: race and sexuality.

In "The Embattled Craftsman: An Essay on James Baldwin," Houston Baker, one of the few contemporary, literary critics to question the race-based treatment James Baldwin's fiction generally receives, offers a new assessment of Baldwin's work in terms of his fascination with the artist figure. At the center of Baker's argument is his view of the Baldwin artist-hero as an "embattled craftsman," one who is "the artist, the creator, the spokesman as victim of oppression forced to draw from his own life the meaning of existence."³⁰ Citing autobiographical rather than fictional works by African-American writers in which authors reconsider their rise, Baker places Baldwin within a "literary tradition whose most patent mode is autobiographical."³¹ Although he discusses both fictional and nonfictional works, Baker feels that Baldwin's fiction is driven by an autobiographical impulse. The artist is, for Baker, a fighter who uses his talent to bring about change.

Houston Baker suggests one useful method of evaluating the Baldwin artist-

³⁰ Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 64.

³¹ Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 64.

hero: "Where literary art is concerned, for example, a single, ordering, investigative model or trope will necessarily exclude phenomena that an alternative model or trope privileges as a definitive artistic instance."³² Baker's reading of Baldwin's artist-hero differs from Sherley Anne Williams' in one significant way; he sees the "embattled craftsman" as being "supported by the will of the family and the love of the Black madonna."³³ This view coincides with Baldwin's. I would, however, disagree with Baker's inclusion of Baldwin in a list of writers who depict the artist as "persecuted." For Baldwin, victory lies in the ability to resist persecution by others. Although the Baldwin artist-figure struggles with himself and his own self-image, it is clearly the artist who controls his own destiny.

The conflicts of James Baldwin's artist heroes echo W.E.B. DuBois' famous edict regarding the double consciousness of African Americans: "One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."³⁴ The brilliance of DuBois'

³² Baker, Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 10.

³³ Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 76.

³⁴ W.E.B. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," The Souls Of Black Folk, Three Negro Classics, ed. John Hope Franklin (1903; New York: Avon, 1965) 215.

argument is that both identities must be accepted. One cannot choose; one must accept them both. It is this acceptance which provides a challenge for Baldwin's artist heroes who feel a twoness—a tension between vocation and race. Michael Awkward interrogates DuBois' concept of double consciousness in terms of inclusion. "Certainly one way to conceive of the Afro-American's attempt to resolve double-consciousness," Awkward argues, "is as a struggle to be initiated into the larger American society. Such a struggle does not necessarily conclude in acceptance of that society . . ." ³⁵ Awkward's thesis is applicable to Baldwin's artist-narratives in that the artist-hero does not seek acceptance from others. The first step of his journey is to accept himself.

James Baldwin is not the first African American writer to question the role and responsibilities of the African-American artist to his community. The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement extending roughly from 1924 to 1934, encompassed many people who dare to strike an artistic pose. These "New Negroes," to use Alain Locke's term, were often recent migrants to the North who celebrated their urban experiences in their art. In the era of the Depression, the proclamations of these "New Negroes" were both courageous and challenging. The experience of being both an artist and an African American is one that has

³⁵ Michael Awkward, Inspiring Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro American Women's Novels (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 67.

troubled many African American writers. Baldwin follows in a long line of writers, musicians, and painters who struggle to reconcile the potentially explosive and often destructive forces of race and art. These issues concerning representation, responsibility and race confound and divide African-American artists and have led to vigorous debate. The central question thrusting itself onto the consciousness of African-American artists during the Harlem Renaissance concerned the issue of identity. In a 1959 review of Langston Hughes' Selected Poems Baldwin again addresses the dilemma of the African-American artist. There is the sense that Baldwin sympathizes with Hughes. For Baldwin, Langston Hughes "is not the first American Negro to find the war between his social and artistic responsibilities all but irreconcilable."³⁶

This interrogation of identification and responsibility, which seemed to have begun in correspondence between Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, later spread to the pages of The Crisis in 1926 and was most recently continued in the journal Black American Literature Forum in 1987. Hughes asserted that the Negro could be an artist who expressed the culture of his people in his work. "The only thing I'd argue with you over is your 'pure art' idea and I surely don't see why a Negro artist can't be a pure artist. One can write only about Negroes, -- even

³⁶ Baldwin, "Sermons and Blues," New York Times Book Review (March 29, 1959)
6.

only about one Negro, oneself, -- and if it is done well enough be a great artist."³⁷

Cullen, who later was James Baldwin's French teacher at DeWitt Clinton High School, felt that the Negro writer must be free to seek his own subject. "Let the Young Negro writer, like any artist, find his treasure where his heart lies."³⁸

Rejecting the presentation of African-Americans only as fun loving dancers and drinkers, Cullen instead proposed that the African-American artist should try to elevate his brethren through his art.

One can see remnants of this debate in the work of later African American writers. While his success in Europe gave James Baldwin more confidence as a writer, he was still working in the shadow of two prominent African-American writers who produced novels by which the work of every other African American writer would be measured. Richard Wright, whose seminal novel Native Son was published in 1940, and Ralph Ellison, author of Invisible Man (1952), were among the most widely discussed writers of the period. Wright and Ellison represent two divergent paths in African-American literature. In some ways they pick up the debate began by Cullen and Hughes, but these writers fashion differing responses

³⁷ Langston Hughes, "To Countee Cullen." 19 Jan. 1926. The Countee Cullen Papers of the Cullen-Jackman Collection. Trevor Arnett Library, Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta.

³⁸ Countee Cullen, Letter. The Crisis 32.4 (August 1926): 193-194.

to the political, literary, and social forces of the period. Wright's *Bigger* Thomas and Ellison's *Invisible Man* both embark on flights from discrimination based upon their race.

Richard Wright extended the discussion of the responsibilities of the Negro artist in the late 1930s in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Wright suggests that the Negro writer should turn his focus inward. "Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations."³⁹ Ignoring the work of writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, Wright finds what he believes to be a valid representation of African-American life in, of all places, the work of Gertrude Stein. ". . . Miss Stein's struggling words made the speech of the people around me vivid."⁴⁰ In response to Wright, Baldwin celebrates African American culture in his fiction. He captures not so much the speech, but the rhythms and the daily struggles of urban life.

Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* had a substantial impact on the careers of later African-American writers. A Book-of-the-Month Club selection,

³⁹ Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" rpt. *Richard Wright Reader* eds. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 38.

⁴⁰ Richard Wright, "Gertrude Stein's Story is Drenched in Hitler's Horrors" rpt in *Richard Wright Reader* eds. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 75-76. This review is significant because it evolves from Wright's first reading of Stein's short story "Melanctha" which reminds him of his grandmother.

Native Son was the first best-selling novel by an African American writer. In "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone" Baldwin takes aim at one of the men who most influenced him as a writer: Richard Wright. Accusing Wright of utilizing the novel as a form of protest, Baldwin saves his most severe criticism for the protagonist of Native Son, Bigger Thomas. Bigger Thomas, Wright's anti-hero, evoked fear in many white Americans. Seemingly guided by bitterness and frustration, Wright makes Bigger an almost overwhelmingly negative character. The differences between the worlds of the Thomases and that of the Daltons highlighted many racial inequalities of the period. It is Richard Wright's success and his treatment by the white literary establishment that led Baldwin to attempt to fashion a literary career on his own terms. "His (Richard Wright's) work was a roadblock in my road, the sphinx, really whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself."⁴¹ Some of Baldwin's responses to Wright and to Bigger Thomas are in characters like Sonny in "Sonny's Blues" and Rufus Scott in Another Country. Albeit these characters have similar backgrounds to that of Bigger Thomas, they strive to overcome discrimination to visualize themselves as artists.

In reading Baldwin's short stories "Previous Condition" and "This Morning,

⁴¹ Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," The Price of the Ticket. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) 277.

This Evening, So Soon" as a response to Richard Wright's Native Son, Horace Porter identifies the artists in these stories as exemplars of Baldwin's version of Bigger Thomas. Although Porter reads the stories with an interest only in racial and sexual themes, he offers some insights into Baldwin's use of the artist as hero: "Even as Baldwin attempts to revise Native Son . . . the black American actor is still victimized by unexpected eruptions of racial bitterness."⁴² This characterization of the African-American hero as a victim is common in the criticism of Baldwin's novels.

Unlike Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison establishes African-American folkculture as the foundation of his writing with the publication of Invisible Man in 1952. The novel, a potpourri of literary themes and conventions, is a first person account of a quest for identity by an anonymous African American man. Ellison's anonymous first-person narrator embarks upon a search for self that culminates when he accidentally falls down a manhole in Harlem. Here he contemplates his actions and learns the meaning of the blues and the importance of self-determination. Baldwin's artist-heroes are also engaged in a search for self. While the Invisible Man's telling of his tale reveals his quest for identity, Baldwin's artists must learn to express the results of their search for identity in

⁴² Horace Porter, Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1989) 94.

their art.

Baldwin, Ellison, and Wright all use the essay form to reflect upon their evolution as writers and their subsequent success and its attendant responsibilities. In "Blueprint for Negro Writing" Wright advocated that Negro writers stress connections with other groups instead of focusing merely on urban life. Ellison is particularly thoughtful on his role as an American writer as seen in many of the essays in Shadow and Act. Ellison sees art as "a celebration of life even when it extends into death . . . writing is my way of confronting . . . that same pain and that same pleasure. It is my way of seeing that it not be in vain."⁴³ Ellison's mission to find meaning in one's existence extends itself to his work.

Although he knew Wright and Ellison personally, I think that Baldwin consciously decided not to emulate their efforts in his own writing. Neither Go Tell It on the Mountain nor "Sonny's Blues" have much in common thematically with the early works of Wright and Ellison. Class concerns, which play an important role in both Native Son and Invisible Man, are incidental in Baldwin's fiction. With his emphasis on the family and the emotional development of the individual, Baldwin's focus is more internal. He is aware of the stereotypical images of African-Americans, particularly those in Wright's Native Son, and, on

⁴³ Ralph Ellison, "The Same Pain, That Same Pleasure," Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1964) 22-23.

some level, seeks to devise a more comprehensive picture of the African-American community. For example, in Baldwin's fiction we see the relationship between the sanctified church women and the prostitutes. But this desire to present a multi-layered portrait of the African American community should not be confused with Baldwin's mission to explore the experience of the American artist. Race and sexuality help to shape the artist but do not define him.

Unlike Wright and Ellison, Baldwin was born and raised in the inner city. Growing up in Harlem not only shaped Baldwin's feelings about the inequalities of American life, but also provided a setting to which he repeatedly returns in his fiction. It is his urban upbringing that leads Baldwin to take a much more active role in the social, political, and emotional liberation of people of African descent than either Wright or Ellison.⁴⁴ Harlem is a place of warmth and acceptance; it is also a site of danger and unrealized dreams in Baldwin essays such as "The Harlem Ghetto."

Harlem functions as a kind of secular center of gravity for the narrative voice, which, although it resonates in sympathy and harmony with the rich spiritual and rhetorical heritage of the fundamentalist black church, always places final authorial emphasis on the exactness of social,

⁴⁴ During the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin returns from Europe in order to lend his support to students and other folks working for change. Wright is in France and Ellison is living in Harlem at this time.

chronological, and psychological observation in the actuality of time, place, and history.⁴⁵

Religion, cultural connections, and racial oppression operate as cultural signifiers in Baldwin's work. Instead of focusing on how outside forces impinge upon his characters, Baldwin instead emphasizes the cultural and religious bonds that sustain the community. As the short story "Sonny's Blues" attests, the Baldwin-artist hero uses his artistic journey to explore his blackness and the role of art in the African American community. Richard Wright's placement of his infamous hero, Bigger Thomas, outside the African-American community that leads Baldwin to conclude that "the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn . . . which creates its climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster."⁴⁶ Although Baldwin artist-heroes like Peter in "Previous Condition" and the narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" share a similar background with Bigger Thomas and remain, like Bigger, outside of their communities, they manage to channel their anger into art.

With writers such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Chester Himes

⁴⁵ James DeJongh, Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990) 95.

⁴⁶ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone" The Price of the Ticket (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) 72.

spending most of their careers either out of the country or removed from African-American communities, the more famous African-American writers are alienated, at least physically, from the African American community. Using close readings of Wright's autobiographies, Black Boy and American Hunger as evidence, Horace Porter surmises that Wright's artistic impulses and the reaction of his family forced him into the tradition of the Ivory Tower artist. "Not only is Wright pitted against his immediate family and community . . . [but] he must also fight against the prejudices of the larger society."⁴⁷ Porter's conclusion, along with certain passages from Wright's autobiography Black Boy, reinforces my sense that Wright's autobiographical work is disdainful of African-American culture.

The shift from the use of the novel by African American writers as a tool of protest to its present status as a site of linguistic and cultural intertextuality has led many literary critics to focus on a few select texts, namely Jean Toomer's Cane, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. I am troubled by the virtual exclusion of James Baldwin's fiction from the emerging canon of African-American literature. With the rise of feminism and the popularity of African

⁴⁷ Horace Porter, "The Horror and the Glory: Richard Wright's Portrait of the Artist in Black Boy and American Hunger," Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays, eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984) 64.

American women writers, the lack of critical attention to James Baldwin's work, while disappointing, is not surprising. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, Baldwin's contemporaries, have been given canonical status while James Baldwin is overlooked. This dismissal of Baldwin and his work had led to several of his titles being out of print.⁴⁸ Melvin Dixon and Emmanuel Nelson are right in their assessment that the canonized Baldwin must be sexless and voiceless on issues relating to homosexuality within the African American community in order to receive the kind of reverential treatment afforded to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

James Baldwin's diminished reputation in current literary circles is the major impetus for this dissertation. While there was a wealth of criticism of Baldwin's essays, plays, and fiction during the 1960s, 1970s, and (to a lesser degree) the 1980s, the flow has now become a trickle. In "The Embattled Craftsman" Houston Baker identifies our national preoccupation with youth and the rise to fame as reasons for the decreasing interest in James Baldwin.⁴⁹ The most often cited reason for the lack of attention given to Baldwin's most recent work even during his lifetime is that he simply outlived his usefulness. As Martha Bayles says in her review of the film Go Tell It on the Mountain, "Mr. Baldwin's

⁴⁸ James Baldwin's collected nonfiction volume The Price of The Ticket (1985) was out of print for three years and was only recently printed in a small number.

⁴⁹ Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 69.

rhetoric has simply gone on too long, berating white racism not only for the oppression of blacks, but also for every ill he has personally experienced."⁵⁰ Reexamining James Baldwin's fiction in terms of his use of the artist as a hero offers valuable insight into the ways in which artistic identity either blossoms or is stunted.

Literary critics traditionally approach the novels of James Baldwin with an eye toward supporting their own agendas and reinforcing the prevailing belief that his work does not conform to current literary standards. Some, such as Addison Gayle, who seek to discuss race and race relations gravitate to Another Country, but that choice may have more to do with the political upheavals which occurred when the novel was published. Bruce Bawer focuses on the import of race and sexuality in Baldwin's novels in his article "Race and Art: The Career of James Baldwin." This attitude leads to Bawer to undertake an autobiographical reading of Baldwin's novels and to complain that he cannot separate his private and public lives.

It is odd that critical studies that focus on the theme of homosexuality in Baldwin's work tend to focus exclusively on Giovanni's Room and Another Country while ignoring his later fiction. I am speaking specifically of David

⁵⁰ Martha Bayles, "James Baldwin: On the Tube at Last," Critical Essays on James Baldwin, Ed. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988) 297.

Bergman's Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in Literature and Yasmin DeGout's "Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Portraits of Homoerotic Love in Giovanni's Room." In a chapter entitled "The Agony of Gay Black Literature" David Bergman focuses on Eldridge Cleaver's attack on Baldwin in Soul on Ice and on Baldwin's tendency to make his characters bisexual instead of homosexual. The value of Giovanni's Room for Bergman is its accurate depiction of an historical moment and its presentation of "internalized homophobia."⁵¹ I would add that Rufus Scott dies from "internalized homophobia" in Another Country. DeGout continues the trend of describing the negative portrayal of homosexuals in Baldwin's work. "The loss of innocence and the effects of self-denial are deep themes in Giovanni's Room that subvert the interpretation of the work as a novel about homoerotic love."⁵² The same argument can be made about Just Above My Head.

There exists what Emmanuel Nelson describes as a "conspiracy of silence" in terms of other African American writers acknowledging Baldwin's

⁵¹ David Bergman, Gaiety Transfigured (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) 166.

⁵² Yasmin DeGout, "Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Portraits of Homoerotic Love in Giovanni's Room." African American Review 26:3 (Fall 1992): 434.

homosexuality.⁵³ Baldwin's use of language is praised, not what he had to say. This stance allows these writers and others to read the experience of James Baldwin's artist-heroes as commentaries on the plight of African-Americans. The combination of religion, race, sexuality, and humanism reflected in James Baldwin's works makes him threatening to critics. Some critics seem comfortable ignoring the aspects of Baldwin's life which they deem unsuitable for a prominent African-American writer. Certainly leading theorists Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, Jr., and novelist Toni Morrison fall into this category.⁵⁴

The tendency of critics to read all of James Baldwin's work as autobiography has led, I believe, to a decline of substantial, critical attention in his work. Like many critics, Martha Bayles insists on reading all of Baldwin's texts as autobiographical. To promote this fallacy is to ignore the work of a fiction writer, a dramatist, and a poet and instead see the body of his work merely as reworkings of the events of his personal life.

The publication of three biographies on James Baldwin since his death from cancer in 1987 might suggest renewed interest in the writer and his work.

However, these books simply reinforce the prevailing image of James Baldwin as a

⁵³ Emmanuel Nelson, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction," *Journal of American Culture* 14 (Fall 1991): 95.

⁵⁴ James Baldwin's homosexuality is not mentioned in tributary essays by Gates and Morrison. See Morrison's "Life in His Language" in Troupe's *The Legacy* and Gates' "The Fire Next Time."

a homosexual, African American writer. The current literary climate for biographies is one that demands that we uncover the deepest, most personal (preferably sexual) secrets of our subject in order to "better understand" them. The gossipy, sensationalistic tone of W.J. Weatherby's Artist on Fire (1989), James Campbell's Talking at the Gates, and most recently David Leeming's James Baldwin magnify a preoccupation with the writer's personal life and a tendency to reduce all of his literary output to varying forms of autobiography. Weatherby's biography reads like a record of Baldwin's relationship with Dell, his principal publisher. Talking at the Gates is the most thoughtful of the biographies, but it lacks the kind of intense literary analysis that one would expect of a biography of a major American writer. David Leeming's biography is the most disappointing of the Baldwin biographies. Leeming, an English professor, was the writer's friend for twenty-five years and, for a time, was granted access to Baldwin's papers by his family. Yet Leeming's biography misses the mark by focusing too much on the celebrity and too little on the man. The most troublesome aspect of these books is that they are primarily based upon conversations and thus recollections of those who knew Baldwin best. This technique accounts for the gossipy nature of all three Baldwin biographies.

The responses of Gates and Baker to James Baldwin's work provide an interesting contrast. They are divided in their opinion of James Baldwin's literary

significance and his relevance to contemporary African-American literary theory. Interestingly Baldwin's ongoing examination of the construction of masculinity and human sexuality go unnoticed in the critical work of these theorists.

Although he has revealed how Baldwin's essays shaped his scholarly and personal development, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. seemingly does not find James Baldwin's work suitable for the kind of intense critical analysis that he bestows on texts such as Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Jean Toomer's Cane, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple. In "An Interview with Josephine Baker and James Baldwin" Gates describes his first meeting with Baldwin at which he interviewed the writer and Josephine Baker for an article that Time, then Gates' employer, ultimately decided not to publish. "Those few days in the south of France," Gates writes, "probably had more to do with my subsequent career as a literary critic than any other event."⁵⁵ When discussing Baldwin, Gates steps outside his customary role of a literary critic and becomes instead an adoring, almost uncritical, fan: "I am about to confess something that literary critics should not confess: James Baldwin was literature for me, especially the essay. . . I learned to love written literature, of any sort, through

⁵⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "An Interview With Josephine Baker and James Baldwin," James Baldwin: The Legacy ed. Quincy Troupe (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) 163.

the language of James Baldwin."⁵⁶ With this statement and his later citation of other major African-American literary texts, Gates effectively ghettoizes Baldwin by placing him exclusively within the realm of African-American literature, or "black books" as he puts it. It is also important to note that Gates focuses on Baldwin's use of language and not the content of his work. In terms of his argument that literary texts signify on each other, Gates' failure to note Baldwin's dialogue with Henry James and Richard Wright, among others, is a surprising lapse.⁵⁷ I find his statement that "[o]ne day I hoped to be *forced* [my emphasis] to write about my other hero, James Baldwin" to be particularly puzzling.⁵⁸

The tone of "The Fire Last Time," Gates's tributary essay to Baldwin in The New Republic, is again personal. He describes his adolescent attempts to emulate Baldwin's writing style and the ways in which he has been forever altered by encountering Baldwin's essays. "That [the difference between black culture and white culture] was the paradox that Baldwin identified and negotiated, and that is why I say his prose shaped my identity as an *Afro-American*, as much by the

⁵⁶ Gates, "An Interview With Josephine Baker and James Baldwin" 163.

⁵⁷ In The Signifying Monkey Gates asserts that African-American writers embrace both a written Western tradition and an oral African one. Yet couldn't his argument that "a novelist such as Ralph Ellison or Ishmael Reed creates texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels," also include Baldwin? (Signifying xxiii).

⁵⁸ Gates, "An Interview With Josephine Baker and James Baldwin" 164.

questions he raised as by the answers he provided" (my italics).⁵⁹ In reflecting on the impact of Baldwin's work upon his intellectual development, Gates conveniently ignores Baldwin's fiction. In so doing, Gates implies that novels such as Go Tell It on the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, and Another Country have no impact on his development as a literary critic and consequently no place in the canon of American literature.

It is only when he laments Baldwin's waning stature within the literary academy (no doubt fueled by his own refusal to incorporate Baldwin's works into his influential critical arguments) that Gates turns to his fiction. He chooses what is Baldwin's weakest novel, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, for an analysis of Baldwin's state of mind. Gates then misquotes the title of Baldwin's closing essay in The Price of The Ticket. I can only surmise that it is this tendency to read Baldwin's work only in terms of race that has led to his exclusion from current critical debates on Otherness, identity, and marginality.

On the other hand, Houston A. Baker, Jr. has long been intrigued by James Baldwin's vision of himself as a writer, as an American of African descent and the way in which these identities appear in his fiction. In The Journey Back Baker explores how the three dominant African American writers of the 1950s, Richard

⁵⁹ Gates, "The Fire Next Time," The New Republic (June 1, 1992) 38.

Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison, address their collective histories as African Americans and artists and their visions for the future. He charts Baldwin's philosophical development from through his writing from the late 1950s to the 1970s. Baker describes Baldwin's artist hero as an "intellectual rebel. As formulated by Baldwin, it is a new representation in the black American literary tradition and leads, ultimately, to a kind of theology of art."⁶⁰ His essay, "The Embattled Craftsman: An Essay on James Baldwin" provides the most detailed analysis to date of Baldwin's artist-heroes. Baker sees the "embattled craftsman" as an agent for change. "The artist, the creator, the spokesman as a victim of oppression forced to draw from his own life the meaning of existence--this is a stock figure for Baldwin. One might call it the "embattled craftsman."⁶¹

My reading of James Baldwin's novels places the artist as a hero at the center of any discussion of their literary value. The central characters in "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head grapple with issues concerning self-image, personal and professional success, race relations, and sexuality. The patterns that emerge through an investigation of these artists emphasize the necessity of self-love and acceptance. First, the stripping away of racial and sexual stereotypes leaves the

⁶⁰ Baker, The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980) 61.

⁶¹ Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 64.

artist-hero ready to examine his individual identity. This period of intense self-examination, the threshing floor experience, generally leads to the rebirth of our hero as an artist. The formation of an artistic vision is the singular defining moment in the life of the artist-hero. The methods that he uses to measure his professional success are indicative of his artistic vision of himself. Lastly, the artist-hero's reflection upon his legacy, as an artist, as an African-American, and as a man, reveals the extent of his success. James Baldwin subtly acknowledges and challenges assumptions about his work, his desires, and his experiences through his sustained use of the artist as a protagonist. He has been unwavering in his exploration into the life of the artist since the publication of his first essays. The proliferation of artists in James Baldwin's novels are his attempt to shift the focus of analysis of his work from general discussions of race and sexuality to the status of the individual, specifically the artist.

CHAPTER TWO

Finding A Way to Listen: The Emergence of the Artist as a Hero in "Sonny's Blues"

"It takes fortitude to be a man and no less to be an artist.
Perhaps it takes even more if the black man would be an
artist."¹

In his essay "Repetition As a Figure of Black Culture," James Snead cautions us to consider that "whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we are indeed not viewing 'the same thing' but its transformation."² Snead's thesis that repetition in African American culture occurs most frequently in music, dance, and language is evident in James Baldwin's fiction through his repeated use of the artist-figure as a hero. Baldwin, like Snead, sees these recurring themes in

¹ Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 111.

² *and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 1984) 59.

his work as part of his evolution as a writer and a human being. In citing his religious education as the impetus for his continual self-analysis, James Baldwin discloses why revision is so important to him.

In the church I come from . . . we were counseled, from time to time, to do our first works over . . . To do your first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came*.³

By “doing his first works over,” James Baldwin continually explores the meaning of art and its function in the life of the artist. The short story “Sonny’s Blues” remains his most positive portrait of the artist-figure. Sonny’s stature in Baldwin’s canon is based upon his embrace of his musical ability and the courage he demonstrates in acknowledging and confronting his demons. In this chapter I will examine how Sonny, a jazz pianist, epitomizes the successful Baldwin artist-hero by overcoming disaster to claim his artistic identity.

The recurrence of musicians, actors, vocalists, and writers in his fiction and plays signifies both James Baldwin’s preoccupation with his vocation and his

³ Baldwin, “The Price of the Ticket” xix.

resistance to the perpetuation of stereotypes about African-American creativity. Simply presenting the African American hero as an artist subverts the image of African Americans as criminals. In "Sonny's Blues" we witness the emergence of a distinctive pattern in James Baldwin's fiction that highlights the development of the artist. With Sonny, Baldwin pierces the monolithic stereotype of the African American man as an oversexed criminal by focusing on his hero's sensitivity and fears. He succeeds by showing the perpetual inner turmoil his artist heroes must conquer as they wrestle with professional and personal concerns.

I begin my study of Baldwin's interpretation of the artist as a hero with "Sonny's Blues" not only because it predates the other texts I will examine, but, because in Sonny, Baldwin creates an ideal artist-hero against which analogous figures in Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head can be measured. With its vivid presentation of the initial development of the artist-hero, the story provides a foundation for the evaluation of Baldwin's later fictional studies of the artist figure. In "Sonny's Blues" we are introduced to a musician who ultimately triumphs because he learns to accept and appreciate his cultural heritage and transform it into art. The struggle to define oneself in the face of universal opposition is the subject of "Sonny's Blues." First published in Partisan Review in 1957, the story was later reprinted in Going to Meet the Man, a collection of Baldwin's short fiction. "Sonny's Blues" succeeds

largely because of its concentration on the emotional development of the creative person.

"Sonny's Blues" is pivotal in the Baldwin canon because its only focus is the rebirth of the hero as an artist. The passion Sonny expresses in the short story is strictly for art. The omission of sexual conflict in "Sonny's Blues" emphasizes the precedence of artistic identity over sexual identity in the formation of the artist-figure. Sonny's lack of romantic involvement also makes him Baldwin's mythical artist-hero in that his sexual life remains unexamined. This is a curious decision on Baldwin's part because the success found through art is usually duplicated in love relationships for his other artist-heroes. But sex and sexuality do not complicate the plot of "Sonny's Blues" and so the gut wrenching rebirth that Sonny undergoes is pristine, untouched, and unclouded. With its concentration on the internal struggle of the artist-hero, "Sonny's Blues" is not the tale of the love lost and found, but instead becomes a meditation of the blossoming self, the gradual recognition and acceptance of oneself as an artist.

Baldwin often used the short story as testing ground for ideas he had for novels. The structure of "Sonny's Blues," with its use of flashbacks and a first-person narrator, anticipates many of the narrative patterns of Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head. In "Sonny's Blues" and Just Above My Head an older brother attempts to narrate the life of his

younger brother. In some ways, the older brother cannot acknowledge all the events of his brother's life. In each work the older brother must relinquish the narrative so that the complete truth can be given. The relationship between siblings, central to the plot of each of the above cited works, is more tenuous in "Sonny's Blues." Each man has chosen a different path. Sonny tries to escape the fear and uncertainty of his life through drugs and a military stint, while his brother becomes a high school teacher to avoid the darker side of life in Harlem. Connected by theme and plot, much of Baldwin's fiction provides insight into his evolving thoughts on the status of the artist.

James Baldwin has a "a tale to tell," that of the artist and his journey to self-acceptance, and he begins telling it in "Previous Condition," "Sonny's Blues," and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon." These artist-tales, collected in Going to Meet the Man, show the artist-hero in confrontation with forces that seek to deflect him from his vocation. The production of art requires honest expression and yet these artists are in flight from their inner selves. Their survival is predicated on their ability to examine themselves. Each of the artists in these short stories must find that which sustains him if he is to survive. Although "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" respectively precede and follow "Sonny's Blues" in Going to Meet the Man, both stories concern the artist who is isolated from himself and the African American

community. While the subjects of these two stories initially flee from self examination, they find that there is no real escape but death. "Previous Condition," Baldwin's first published work of fiction, and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," published in Mademoiselle in 1960, offer portraits of the artist who denies his racial identity. In both short stories the artists fail to redefine their racial identities and so emerge as studies of evasion and falsity. The protagonists in "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" serve as antitheses to Sonny. In this chapter I will show how the commonalities in these three stories demonstrate Baldwin's observations on the life of the artist.

James Baldwin published "Previous Condition," his first fictional account of the experiences of an American artist, in Commentary magazine in 1948. The title of the story makes a subtle reference to the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which granted the right to vote to male citizens without regard to "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."⁴ The story is narrated by Peter, a struggling African American actor who wants to be successful, regardless of the personal cost. Intent upon finding his success in the "white world," he continually refuses to acknowledge the impact of race on his life. Baldwin argues that Peter's "previous condition of servitude," namely his race,

⁴ The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, Deirdre Mullane, Crossing the Danger Water (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 297.

continues to inhibit his progress.

The story centers on how race affects the professional opportunities and self-image of a young man. In "Previous Condition" the artistic dilemma takes on a racial overtone. Angered by the limitations placed on him because of his race, Peter nevertheless acquiesces to playing racial stereotypes. This compromise, a treasonous act for the Baldwin artist-hero, leads to failure. His lack of allegiance to the promotion of truth, his unreconciled feelings about his ethnicity, and his vocation as an actor, mark Peter as an unsuccessful artist figure.

Sam Bluefarb offers an insightful reading of "Previous Condition" in terms of the tensions between group and individual characteristics.

This story of the alienated and invisible man in miniature . . . portrays the hero's sensitivity and intellectuality, which form the ingredients of his invisibility; it thus reveals the plight of the black artist-intellectual in the white world, but it goes even further to reveal that individual's plight in the black world.⁵

Alienated by whites and blacks, Peter, an African American artist, becomes invisible. This notion of invisibility extends to Peter's vision of himself and thus

⁵ Sam Bluefarb, "James Baldwin's 'Previous Condition': A Problem of Identification," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman O'Daniel (Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1977) 151.

his artistic demise is assured.

After an encounter with the police, Peter realizes that he must hide his true feelings. “In all this running around, I had learned a few things...I had learned never to be belligerent with policemen, for instance. No matter who was right, I was certain to be wrong. . .After the first few times I realized that I had to play smart, to act out the role I was expected to play.”⁶ Masking, a survival technique used by slaves to fool their masters, entails acting the part of the happy, contented black person while feeling quite the opposite emotions. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s famous poem, “We Wear the Mask” addresses the need for hiding emotions. “We wear the mask that grins and lies,/ It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes.”⁷ The falsity that the mask implies is important for it calls attention to the acting that is required. Peter, the narrator in “Previous Condition,” is an actor. The mask is worn for whites, but Peter even wears the mask for himself. He hides from his racial identity. He is plagued by self-hatred that he doesn’t want to acknowledge. “. . .[H]ow can I explain to you what it feels like to be black when I don’t understand it and don’t want to and spend all my time trying to forget it? . . . I felt that I was drowning; that hatred had corrupted me like a cancer in the bone”(“PC”

⁶ Baldwin, “Previous Condition,” *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dell, 1965) 73 (hereafter cited parenthetically as “PC”).

⁷ Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896; Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1984) 167.

78-79). Peter refuses to address his anger and disappointment about the continual discrimination he experiences. He doesn't even let the mask drop when he goes to Harlem. Because he chooses to live in Greenwich Village, then predominantly populated by whites, Peter must constantly hide his true feelings and play the role of the 'good' Negro. His desire to flee from his racial identity and his refusal to examine these feelings are the cause of Peter's failure to achieve personal and professional success.

Flight is a key motif in "Previous Condition." Because he is running from his racial identity, Peter insists on dating a white woman and living in Greenwich Village where African Americans are not welcome. Forced to move from his room in a boarding house because of a racist landlady, Peter recalls how he deserted his family. At the end of "Previous Condition" Peter goes to a Harlem bar for solace but instead finds himself further isolated.

I longed for some opening, some sign, something to make me a part of the life around me. But there was nothing except my color. A white outsider coming in would have seen a young Negro drinking in a Negro bar, perfectly in his element, in his place . . . But the people here know differently, as I did. I didn't seem to have a place ("PC" 84).

Peter desires to connect with other African Americans, but his denial of his racial self makes this bonding impossible. He won't acknowledge the blues which lead

him to a Harlem bar. When he rebuffs a woman who merely says hello to him, she replies “Nigger. . .you must think you somebody” (“PC” 84). The woman’s evocation of this particular racial epithet serves multiple purposes. First, it calls attention to that which Peter is intent on ignoring -- his racial identity.

Significantly the derogatory label symbolizes how whites see him and how, in a sense, he will always be seen. By using the term “nigger” the woman tells Peter that he is no better than anyone else in the bar. Surprisingly this strategy works for, after a few thoughtful moments, Peter offers to buy the woman a drink.

Though he takes this crucial step, Peter still cannot articulate his blues. Sensing that he is troubled, the woman asks Peter why he is down. His answer “I got no story” is interesting because this is the only place in the story where Peter uses black vernacular speech, and here it signifies both his private identification with African American folkculture and his resistance to acknowledging, articulating, and ultimately accepting his blues. Everyone has a story. The patrons in the bar are there in an attempt to either forget their stories or to share them. Peter will remain unsuccessful until he is able to address his anger and frustration and allow it to fuel his creative expression.

Identity, flight, and acceptance are also the dominant themes of James Baldwin's short story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon." First published in Atlantic Monthly in 1960 and later collected in Going to Meet the Man, this story

focuses on a black actor/singer who leaves the United States and finds fame and freedom in France, a country that represents both a literal and figurative other world for the artist-hero. The story takes place on the eve of the actor's departure to make a film in California. The actor, an unnamed narrator, fears his return to the United States because of the racism he encountered there. His reluctance to face his family and his country is evidence of the dishonesty expressed in his chosen art form and in his life. Baldwin highlights the actor's reticence with a scene in which he juxtaposes the famous artist with some visiting African American students. Visibly proud of their racial heritage, the young students awaken the narrator's recollection of the warmth of the African American community he has forsaken.

His impending return to the United States leads the actor to recall the difficulties he encountered while playing his most famous role. The role, that of an impoverished mulatto man, demanded that the actor use his memories of racism in the United States to bring it to life. Because he fled to France to escape such treatment, the actor initially resists revealing the depth of emotion the role requires. But a French director forces him to draw upon his experiences as an African American:

And you are angry . . . that I *ask* you for the truth. You think I have no right to ask . . . who are you then, and what good has it done you

to come to France, and how will you raise your son? Will you teach him never to tell the truth to anyone?⁸

The director demands that the actor examine his life and express the lessons that he has learned in his art. Although the exiled actor has found commercial success in France, he will not find artistic success until he acknowledges the truth of his racial heritage. He is convinced that his success derives from his flight from the United States, but he has not left his memories behind: "I think of all the things I have seen destroyed in America, all the things that I have lost there, all the threats it holds for me and mine"("This Morning" 128). The actor gradually expresses the fear that he must confront before he can return home. His decision to make a film in California is a sign of his personal growth and leads me to conclude that he will possibly achieve professional success.

Narrated by artists, both "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" locate the artist's failure to achieve self-acceptance in his attempt to deny his racial identity. They each flee from their racial identities by geographically and emotionally isolating themselves from the African American community. The artists in "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" search for their success in white society. Significantly in

⁸ Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," Going to Meet the Man (New York: Dell, 1965) 148 ((hereafter cited parenthetically as "This Morning").

"Sonny's Blues," Sonny finds his artistic inspiration in African American folkculture and so personifies Baldwin's ideal artist-hero. By rejecting "white" cultural standards, Sonny shows the alternative journey, one grounded in African American cultural expression, that the artist figure must travel.

"Sonny's Blues" examines the fate of a young man whose situation is similar to that of James Baldwin. In his youth Baldwin concluded that his options were severely limited because of his race and, for a time, moved from one low-paying job to another. The young African American boys in "Sonny's Blues" found, like Baldwin, that "their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities."⁹ "Sonny's Blues" is an indictment of urban America. Then, as now, few options were available to African Americans of limited education and financial resources. By showing Sonny's various forms of escape, Baldwin suggests that drugs, crime, military service, and death are the only options for African American men during the 1950s. "Written in 1956-1957, 'Sonny's Blues' can be directly related to the author's concern, during the first postwar decade, with coming to terms with the fact and meaning of being black in a racist white world that imposes upon its racial minorities its own notions of

⁹ Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" Going to Meet The Man (New York: Dell, 1965) 87 ((hereafter cited parenthetically as "SB").

superiority and inferiority.”¹⁰ Faced with the responsibility of providing for his ever-expanding family, the young Baldwin initially had little chance to write. It is the writing that nourishes his spirit; music has the same effect on Sonny.

"Sonny's Blues" opens with Sonny's older brother, the story's unnamed narrator, reading a newspaper article about Sonny's arrest for selling and using heroin. Because it is the older brother's narrative, we see Sonny's fall and rise through his eyes. Watching his brother descend further into the life of a heroin addict, the narrator has tried to keep his distance, physically and emotionally, from Sonny. "I didn't want to believe that I'd ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out. . ." ("SB" 87). The narrator sees his potential fate in his brother's fall and is frightened for him because he realizes how easily he could fall himself. All around him, in the faces of his students and his former friends, he sees how fear, violence, and drugs have destroyed lives. This fear remains with the narrator though he doesn't even want to admit that his young students face the same dangers. He has little contact with Sonny, but everything changes when Sonny writes him from prison. We follow the narrator as he works through his denial, trepidation, and anxiety that Sonny's arrest will upset his

¹⁰ Sigmund Ro, "The Black Musician as Literary Hero: Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' and Kelly's 'Cry For Me,'" Rage and Celebration, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984) 16.

precariously maintained middle-class life.

But the narrator's dread is more deeply rooted. The older brother clings to his secure existence as a math teacher to buffer himself from the kind of life that Sonny leads. More than anything else, the narrator fears being reminded of the dangers that lurk outside his apartment door. He is apprehensive because Sonny resists assuming an inferior "place" which leaves no room for personal ambitions. Initially the older brother refuses to address his private concerns. The depth of the narrator's fear is exposed when he finds one of Sonny's friends, now a drug addict, waiting for him after school: "Then I wanted to ask him--too many things. He could not have answered, or if he had, I could not have borne the answers. I started walking" ("SB" 91). The narrator, like Sonny, must learn to listen to his pain. Sonny's imprisonment makes it impossible for him to suppress the fear that he has thus far ignored.

Sonny reaches out to his brother from prison, and it is through his letter that we first hear Sonny's voice. This shift in narrative voice destroys the negative impression of Sonny that his brother's narrative has created. The drug addict, wayward son, and stubborn younger brother give way to a thoughtful, caring, and frightened young musician. He becomes the sensitive young boy that the narrator reminisced about in the first few paragraphs of the story and not the self-destructive young man that the narrator tries to forget. Baldwin presents a young

man who tries to escape the terrors of his life by creating music. For Sonny, music becomes a haven from the world of violence and drugs that lies outside his Harlem apartment, and it is a passion he tries to share with those whom he loves.

Although he desperately wants to leave the ugliness of Harlem, Sonny gains the ability to see and recreate beauty through an intense form of suffering.

The threshing floor or the fall, as shown in "Sonny's Blues," is the requisite first stage of James Baldwin's model for the development of the artist. By defining the artist as a truth seeker, Baldwin makes the fall to the threshing floor the centerpiece of his construction of the artist as a hero. He who falls does so physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Of the three artists presented in "Previous Condition," "Sonny's Blues," "This Morning, This Evening So Soon," only Sonny falls to the threshing floor. This experience, repeated with variations throughout Baldwin's fiction, is the culmination of the artist's quest for identity. The descent symbolizes the artist-hero's struggle with his marginalization as an African American male and how, through the achievement of an artistic identity, he can resist such essentialist categorizations.

Sonny's fall prefigures his rebirth as an artist. His renaissance begins with his acknowledgment of his pain and evidence of his ability to articulate it. A sense of honesty permeates Sonny's disclosures as he tries to make his brother understand how low he had fallen and how he alone brought himself back from his

suffering: "I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? *my stink . . . something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink . . .*" ("SB" 117). This admission of personal suffering is the first step toward artistic success. The battle is for no less than the life of the artist. Sonny's transition from powerless to powerful occurs only when he begins to define himself and tell his story. This transformation does not come easily for the Baldwin artist-hero.

The fall becomes an act of engagement; it is Sonny's initiation into the confessional life of the artist. Sonny's decline, hastened by his drug use and estrangement from his brother, becomes the catalyst for his rebirth as a human being and an artist. These sentiments are embodied in Sonny's description of how he conquered his self-doubt.

'It's terrible sometimes, inside, ' he said, 'that's what's the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to . . . and there's no way of getting it out--that storm inside. You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody's* listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen' ("SB" 115).

This scene is crucial to the construction of the artist as a hero for it encompasses

those elements that the artist both needs and must come to terms with: fear, alienation, love, and truth. Finding the courage to listen to his own pain, particularly after avoiding it, is the ultimate achievement of the artist-hero. He learns not only to depend on himself for his survival but to confront difficulties. This epiphany leads to an acceptance of a self that transcends racial, sexual, and social stereotypes.

The threshing floor experience is complete when Sonny is able to share it with his brother. His telling of his tale signals a deepening trust in his brother. Initially the relationship between the brothers falters when Sonny discloses his musical ambitions. When his older brother, home from the Army to attend his mother's funeral, asks Sonny what he plans to do with his life, he does so without really wanting to hear the answer. The narrator is both surprised and fearful when Sonny divulges his musical aspirations. He sees the life of a musician as one of little responsibility. For him jazz means Louis Armstrong, while Sonny identifies with Charlie Parker. Richard Albert suggests that Baldwin's evocation of these two radically different musicians emphasizes the philosophical distance between the brothers.¹¹

Sonny puts his energy into music to avoid the drug culture in Harlem.

¹¹ Richard Albert, "The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues,'" College Literature 11.2 (Spring 1994) 180.

Michael Clark asserts that music saves Sonny from death: "[T]o Sonny, the music is seen in starkly positive terms: his failure to master the music will mean 'death,' while success will mean 'life.'"¹² Sonny's decision to confront and defeat his fear saves him from certain death. He turns to music to express his fears and his hopes. When Sonny discovers his ability to play the piano, he clings to it as if it is a lifeline. Even his brother realizes how vital music is to him: ". . . I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away, that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life" ("SB" 107). Music keeps Sonny off the streets and away from danger, but, when music is taken away from him, Sonny begins his descent into a form of hell. He begins hanging out with a rough crowd and ends up in jail. Playing the piano ultimately saves him.

Sonny's decision to play jazz piano is not based on financial considerations. While his older brother's primary concern is that Sonny becomes self-sufficient, Sonny's interests are quite different. The priority of desire over necessity reflects courage, the kind of courage demonstrated by the successful artist. The courage to face terror and possible death is reflected in the fall to the threshing floor. Driven to this state by mental necessity, Baldwin depicts the fall in fiction as destiny. The artist who undertakes the fall willingly surrenders his anonymity and defiantly

¹² Michael Clark, "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Childhood, Light and Art." College Language Association Journal Vol. 29 (December 1985): 231.

declares himself to be an artist. Playing music is his life line and one of his achievements is that he has helped his brother to recognize this fact. At the end of the story Sonny performs for his brother and the significance of the occasion is not lost on the narrator. "Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life" ("SB" 122). The identification of the pursuit of art as the pursuit of life emphasizes the vital role that art plays in the existence of the artist. This defining moment is the centerpiece of "Sonny's Blues."

The last section of "Sonny's Blues" in which Sonny plays the piano for his brother, is the culmination of his journey and sets a hopeful tone for Sonny's future. The older brother and the other musicians at the nightclub respect the difficulty of Sonny's journey to the nightclub. Creole, an older musician, becomes a father figure for Sonny and his guide into the world of the blues. "He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing--he had been there, and he knew" ("SB" 120). The mentor to the artist is a witness, one who guides his young friend through the treacherous life of the artist. The approval from his peers is important because their recognition establishes that Sonny has succeeded in his efforts to express truth through his music. Sonny's articulation of his pain assures his eventual success.

Throughout the story Sonny attempts to gain his brother's respect by denying his own identity. Instead of joining the military, Sonny stays in Harlem

as his brother asked. By the end of the story Sonny still seeks his brother's approval, but on his own terms. The story concludes with a reconciliation between the brothers and with Sonny poised on the brink of professional success. The narrator begins his personal evolution when the two brothers go to a jazz club and Sonny sits in with the band. By listening to his brother play the piano, the older brother achieves greater understanding not only of Sonny, but of his own life as well.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours ("SB" 119).¹³

The older brother connects with the pain expressed in Sonny's music and is led to unearth his own disturbing memories. Sonny transfers his experience through art

¹³ Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" 119.

and his brother's reaction is a tangible sign of his success. The juxtaposition of "terrible" and "triumphant" beautifully describes the journey of the artist. There must be pain for there to be pleasure and the artist who accepts both emotions will survive to sing his blues. "Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" ("SB" 122). Baldwin endows music with the power to force listeners to face both their hidden fears and deepest desires. The brother's newly acquired ability to comprehend the importance of the music and the musician is the secondary message of "Sonny's Blues."

It is fitting that the story ends with Sonny on the stage receiving a token drink sent by his older brother. Although Keith Byerman sees this act as an indication that Sonny's "life will continue on the edge between the poison of his addiction and the nourishment of his music," it can be read in a more positive light.¹⁴ The drink, a gesture of love and understanding from one brother to another, symbolizes the older brother's recognition of Sonny as an artist. Sigmund Ro comes closest to what I think is Baldwin's intended meaning of the gift of the drink when he writes that "the last stage of the narrator's development, especially

¹⁴ Keith Byerman, "Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in 'Sonny's Blues,'" *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: GK. Hall, 1988) 202.

his final act of sharing a sacramental drink with his brother, is modeled on the pattern of baptism . . . The effect of this ritualization is to make Sonny's art a public act and a communal experience to be shared."¹⁵ The sharing of experience through art is another sign of Sonny's success.

Sonny's survival is predicated on his knowledge of himself and his ability to express his blues through his music. With his "candid acknowledgment and sober acceptance of adversity as an inescapable condition of human existence," Sonny closely resembles Albert Murray's blues hero.¹⁶ As a blues hero, Sonny concedes that a heavy price must be paid to produce music which will inspire others. His music conveys the intensity and pain of his journey and his triumph emanates for the fact that the audience recognizes and responds to his blues. Sonny's fall and his later description of that descent that he shares with his brother is the price he pays for professional and personal success.

In an essay on Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison ponders the meaning and function of the blues. His definition of the blues as "an autobiographical chronicle of personal disaster expressed lyrically" supports a reading of "Sonny's Blues" as

¹⁵ Ro 25.

¹⁶ Albert Murray, The Hero and the Blues (University of Missouri Press, 1973) 106-107.

a tale of suffering.¹⁷ “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness. . . Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit.”¹⁸ The terms “agony of life” and “toughness of spirit” eloquently characterize Sonny and his struggle to achieve self-expression through the blues.

Arriving at a precise definition of the blues is problematic for James Baldwin. His description of the blues as “the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph” emphasizes the resiliency of the human spirit that is sometimes overlooked (“SB” 131). It is easy to imagine that for Baldwin, the blues are a link to a racial past forged in oppression and strength. He draws on these two characteristics to formulate a definition of the blues that embodies the past and the future for African Americans. For to sing or play the blues, you must first live them and then be able to relay them. For James Baldwin, the blues are a chronicle of life experiences, the good and the bad. In singing the blues, one confronts pain and turns it into something positive. While blues songs may sound sad, they actually celebrate the resiliency of the human spirit. Baldwin argues that the blues embody a kind of victory; “And I want to suggest that the

¹⁷ Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” *Shadow and Act* 78-79.

¹⁸ Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues” 94.

acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this might sound, a kind of joy.”¹⁹ Although derived from pain, the joy that Sonny finds in the blues is evident in his music and this is the quality to which his audience responds.

As Sonny grapples with forcing meaning and music out of his "black and funky and cold" existence, he reaches out to African American cultural forms, specifically the blues, and to the members of his Harlem neighborhood for inspiration ("SB" 115). This return to cultural roots is a sign of success. A street corner gospel singer reminds Sonny of the centrality of music to his very existence. He hears the joy and, most important, the pain of her life and her will to survive it all. Sonny understands that the woman is singing the blues and describes the experience of playing the blues to his brother. "It's not so much to *play*. It's to *stand it*, to be able to make it at all. On any level . . . in order to keep from shaking to pieces" ("SB" 114). Again, art provides sustenance and serves as opposition to death.

In recent years "Sonny's Blues" has garnered more critical notice as the recognition of African American cultural forms in literature has become a popular method of analyzing African American literature. In particular the scholarship of

¹⁹ Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues" 131.

Houston Baker has fueled interest in the ways in which African American writers incorporate vernacular forms such as the blues in their work. Both Ronald Bieganowski and John Reilly assert that the blues, as presented by Baldwin, is responsible for the epiphanies experienced by Sonny and his brother. "Sonny, in telling his own blues, gains some sense of who he is. Talking, telling, and playing the blues require a reciprocal understanding that starts with one's own sense of self."²⁰ Bieganowski sees the older brother's role as an audience as being essential in Sonny's development. He goes on to ignore the importance of Sonny's fall to the threshing floor to focus instead on the aftermath of the fall and the older brother's reaction to Sonny's evolution. Like most of Baldwin's critics, Reilly sees this revelation only in racial terms: Sonny, he argues, ". . . proceeds to lead his brother, by means of the Blues, to a discovery of self in [the Black] community."²¹ Sonny first achieves his own salvation through listening to and expressing how one blues. Whether labeled the blues or not, Sonny's articulation of the troubles he encountered on his journey to the night club is the source of his success.

According to James Baldwin, people endure hardships because they don't

²⁰ Ronald Bieganowski, "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness in 'Sonny's Blues' and Giovanni's Room," College Language Association Journal 32.1 (September 1988): 73.

²¹ John Reilly, "Sonny's Blues": James Baldwin's Image of the Black Community," James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 144.

know who they are.²² The artist must suffer in order to find out who he is. In one of their rare conversations, the two brothers in "Sonny's Blues" comment on the performance of a street gospel singer and question the nature and function of human suffering. "While I was downstairs . . . listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through to sing like that. It's repulsive to think you have to suffer that much" ("SB" 114). Sonny's recognition of the singer's pain is just another sign of his personal growth. This discussion gives Sonny the courage to reveal the depth of his own suffering to his older brother. By telling his own tale, Sonny helps his brother realize that he had been speaking to Sonny without saying anything and listening without hearing. This is the first real conversation the brothers have and it leads to greater understanding between them. The older brother, finally having some sense of his brother's life and the meaning of their talk, later reflects on the meaning of suffering: "For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness" ("SB" 121).

The theme of suffering often performs a redemptive function in much of Baldwin's fiction. It is through the act of suffering that the hero learns to accept

²² Baldwin, "Notes For a Hypothetical Novel," 122.

himself and the quest for identity is fulfilled. Because of the depth of his fall, the figure of the artist in "Sonny's Blues" leads most reviewers to the seemingly inevitable interpretation of Sonny as a victim. Robert Bone argues that the Baldwin hero is "a journeyman in suffering and a martyr to racial oppression."²³ Bone's reading of the hero overlooks the importance of his vocation and the purpose of suffering and emphasizes instead the mere act of suffering. Relying on religious imagery, Bone sees Sonny in "Sonny's Blues" as a priest who earns his stature through his painful journey.²⁴ This reading places too much value on suffering and ignores the fact that Sonny survives to tell his tale and in doing so, inspires others to take a similar journey.

Although I agree with John Reilly's observation that suffering, as presented in Baldwin's fiction, is a form of compensation, I think it is more important to evaluate suffering in terms of its results. Chapter Two of Horace Porter's dissertation, "Baldwin's Portrait of the Artist," focuses on what Porter sees as the presentation of the artist as sufferer in Go Tell It on The Mountain, "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Porter

²³ Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (1958; New Haven: Yale UP, 1965) 228.

²⁴ Bone 230.

reads "Sonny's Blues" as "Baldwin's eloquent statement on the artist as sufferer."²⁵ For Baldwin the purpose of suffering is self-knowledge that is ultimately reflected in art. Porter acknowledges the importance of the artist in Baldwin's work but his view of the Baldwin artist is as one who is "usually saddled with the awesome burden of coming to terms with his past . . . [and] " places too much emphasis on external forces.²⁶ Baldwin's artist-hero must come to terms with his vision of himself, not with his past. As Baldwin states in "The Creative Process," the artist hero who survives the journey to the threshing floor confronts isolation and, like Sonny, ultimately "conquer [s] the great wilderness of himself."²⁷

Horace Porter and Sherley Anne Williams offer two of the more insightful analyses of the figure of the artist in "Sonny's Blues" and his relationship to his ethnic community. In Williams' view, Sonny represents the collective experience of African Americans, particularly men. By describing the musicians in Baldwin's fiction as "the embodiment of alienation and estrangement," Williams addresses the status of African American men.²⁸ Both Williams and Porter stress

²⁵ Horace Porter, "James Baldwin and the Problem of Vocation." diss. Yale U, 1981, 58.

²⁶ Porter, "Problem of Vocation" 59.

²⁷ Baldwin, "The Creative Process" 315.

²⁸ Sherley Anne Williams, "The Black Musician: The Black Hero as Light Bearer," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974) 147.

the impact the personal and racial past have on the artist. But it is not the collective history of African Americans that the artist must confront but his own.

In a discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Houston Baker proposes that African American artists must address the demands of the public to form a viable artistic identity.²⁹ Baker's reading of this survival strategy for African American artists calls for an allegiance to cultural standards outside the African American community. The division of one's life into public and private areas, which echoes the duality suggested by W.E.B. DuBois in The Souls of Black Folks, can only lead to negative results in Baldwin's paradigm. James Baldwin's artist hero must struggle to reconcile his artistic leanings with his racial identity.

The quest of the Baldwin artist-hero for recognition and a desire for self-acceptance is his acknowledged first level of experience. The artistic identity, followed by the sexual identity, comprises Baldwin's hierarchy of personal identity. Salvation is gained through knowledge and acceptance of self. It is first found within oneself, then among one's artistic peers, and finally with one's family and friends.

Baldwin's artist-heroes are not substitutes for the author but represent

²⁹ Baker, Blues, Ideology 59

aspects of his life as an artist. While I do not want to describe "Sonny's Blues" as purely autobiographical fiction, the story does reflect many of the concerns that Baldwin expressed in earlier essays such as "Autobiographical Notes" (1955), "Notes of a Native Son" (1955), and "A Question of Identity" (1954). These essays articulate the search for a self that is racial, political, and artistic. Jocelyn Whitehead Jackson makes a strong case for reading Baldwin's essays as evidence of his ongoing preoccupation with identity: "Most of these essays in some way record the difficulties not only in recognizing, understanding, or accepting one's identity, but more crucially, in *being*. In a sense, the essays are therapeutic vehicles for Baldwin, by which he can work through to his own concept of himself."³⁰ As he traveled through the worlds of commerce and religion, Baldwin was always clear about his intention to be a writer. In "Autobiographical Notes" Baldwin illustrates how closely his sense of himself is tied to reading and writing. Indeed, the essay is a history of Baldwin's life as a reader and a writer. The essay opens as follows: "I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago. I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read."³¹ Baldwin continues to write throughout his childhood as he increasingly defies his father.

³⁰ Jocelyn Whitehead Jackson, "The Problem of Identity in Selected Early Essays of James Baldwin," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, ed. Fred Stanley and Nancy Burt (Boston: GO. Hall, 1988) 253.

³¹ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" 1.

Jackson's thesis is especially valid in "Notes of a Native Son" where Baldwin ponders the meaning of his father's legacy and his own future. In particular he wonders if he has inherited his father's bitterness. The most moving moment in "Notes of a Native Son" occurs when Baldwin asserts his independence from his father. "My father asked me abruptly, 'You'd rather write than preach, wouldn't you?' 'I was astonished at his question--because it was a real question. I answered, 'Yes.' That's was all we said. It was awful to remember that that was all we had *ever* said."³² David Baldwin had been a preacher and James Baldwin was a child preacher from the age of 14 to 17. The two had a contentious relationship and this conversation is David Baldwin's acknowledgment of his son's inherent desire to be a writer. This articulation of his artistic leaning is liberating for James Baldwin because he is able to freely express and define himself. The essays in Notes of A Native Son, Baldwin's first nonfiction collection, are united by a questioning of various forms of identity just as he explores the same issues in his early fiction.

The carefully constructed paradigm for the principled, successful artist in "Sonny's Blues" supports Baldwin's strong belief that the quest for truth is the guiding principle in the private and professional life of the artist. Baldwin's use of

³² Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" 142.

the commitment to honesty as a criteria for evaluating art becomes almost a mantra for him. As he said in 1948, "this rigid refusal to look at ourselves may well destroy us; particularly now since if we cannot understand ourselves we will not be able to understand anything."³³ The truth of which Baldwin speaks comes only through intense struggle. Sonny's descent to the threshing floor is rewarded by a clarity that had been missing in his life. The fall marks the first stage of the artist's development and signifies his rebirth as a seeker and singer of honesty in his life and art.

By examining the circumstances under which a young man is forced to acknowledge his fate, "Sonny's Blues" becomes a testament to the transformative power of art. James Cone's definition of the blues as "an artistic response to the chaos of life" illuminates the title of the short story. Of all of James Baldwin's artist-tales and novels, the short story "Sonny's Blues" offers the most dramatic presentation of the decline and ascension of the artist-figure. By confronting and overcoming his fears, Sonny becomes a blues hero as defined by Albert Murray: "Heroism. . . is measured in terms of the stress and strain it can endure and the magnitude and complexity of the obstacles it overcomes."³⁴ In "Sonny's Blues," James Baldwin, like Audre Lorde, "challenges us to claim all the parts of ourselves

³³ Baldwin, "Lockridge: The American Myth," 18.

³⁴ Murray, The Hero and the Blues 38.

also, including those parts which make us outsiders."³⁵

³⁵ Barbara DiBernard, "Zami: A Portrait of the Artist as a Black Lesbian" Kenyon Review, 13.4 (Fall 1991): 208.

CHAPTER THREE
"Go the Way Your Blood Beats":
The Intersection of Race, Sexuality,
and Art in Another Country

"...[You have to go the way your blood beats. If you don't live the only life you have, you won't live some other life, you won't live any life at all." James Baldwin, 1986¹

In Richard Wright's autobiographical essay, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," he reflects on how he learned to live life along the color line. Wright recalls how his mother, teaching him an early lesson on how to interact with whites, chastised him for engaging in a battle with young white boys. "She finished by telling me that I ought to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn't kill me."² Hence, as a child, Richard Wright experienced the power of whiteness. He thereafter equates whiteness with power, fear, and death. In James Baldwin's novel Another Country white people and the concept of whiteness kill

1 James Baldwin, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats," James Baldwin: The Legacy ed. Quincy Troupe (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) 185.

2 Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Uncle Tom's Children (1940; New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 5.

the African American male artist with words and actions. Sensitive, questioning, and talented, Baldwin's artist-heroes must free themselves of their socially constructed positions as African American men if they are to achieve their artistic goals. Because of his continual confrontational nature, the artist is aware that the possibility of death looms greater over him than any other figure in James Baldwin's fiction. In Another Country Rufus Scott succumbs to the power of whiteness and dies in the first third of the novel. The lesson is continued through the character of Eric Jones who learns to define and accept himself. Baldwin's triumphant protagonists resist being categorized in terms of their race and sexual orientation and ultimately embrace a more meaningful identity, that of the artist.

By making four of his principal characters artist-figures in Another Country, Baldwin argues for a consideration of how race, gender, and sexual orientation influence the artist-hero's journey toward self-definition and self acceptance. A central theme in Another Country, as in much of James Baldwin's work, is the struggle to acknowledge and accept all facets of oneself. This thesis is explored through Rufus Scott, Baldwin's first book-length portrait of the African American male as an artist, and Eric Jones, Baldwin's first artist-hero to embrace all aspects of his identity. The level of success that these characters attain is directly related to their desire and willingness to understand and accept themselves. In this chapter I will show how these two artists, one African

American and one white, illustrate Baldwin's view that the artist-figure is doomed unless he "goes the way his blood beats."³ Published in 1962, Another Country examines the effect of race, sexuality, and discrimination on the artist and his mission.

Baldwin's previous works, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and Notes of a Native Son (1955), were so well received that they cemented his relationship with the reading public. These texts, both autobiographical in nature, use the relationship between a father and his son to establish Baldwin's interest in democracy and individual rights. Go Tell It on the Mountain and "Notes of A Native Son," like Another Country, explore a young man's search for identity. Go Tell It on the Mountain addresses the difficulties between a deeply religious father and his son who wants to be a writer. The father and son are also divided on their views of white people. The father, a migrant from the South, advocates a separation of the races. His son, born and raised in Harlem, thinks of the kindness he received from a friendly white teacher and believes that blacks and whites can coexist in peace.

Go Tell It on the Mountain traces the maturation of a young boy, John Grimes. John's spiritual epiphany, which should bring him closer to his minister father, becomes instead a challenge to his father's authority. The religious tone of

3 Baldwin, "Go the Way," 185.

Go Tell It on the Mountain, greatly influenced by James Baldwin's three years as a child minister, underscores John's sexual and emotional awakening. The ways in which that John Grimes probes his emotional, sexual, and religious development stand as a touchstone for Baldwin's subsequent artist-heroes; this is a benchmark which Rufus Scott fails to meet.

Similarly the essay, "Notes of a Native Son," another of Baldwin's early works, also uses the strained relationship between a father, David Baldwin, and his son James to examine the effects of racism. Finding a response to racism is the central question in "Notes of a Native Son." The autobiographical essay is also a son's plea for independence. Unlike his father, Baldwin believed in his own self-worth and the principles of American democracy. This belief was constantly tested by the many acts of racial discrimination Baldwin encountered. When confronted with continual racism while working in New Jersey, Baldwin was forced to address the anger and rage that he felt.

I first contracted some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and fire in the bowels. Once the disease is contracted, one can never be really carefree again . . . There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood--one has the choice, merely, of living with it

consciously or surrendering to it.⁴

This question of dealing with the rage consumed James Baldwin at this point in his life, and it is this rage that is expressed through the character of Rufus Scott. The difference is that the “dread, chronic disease” claims Rufus’ life.

It is in “Notes of a Native Son,” that James Baldwin begins to understand his father and to comprehend the difficulty of life as an African American man.

In that year I had had time to become aware of the meaning of all my father’s bitter warnings, had discovered the secret of his proudly pursed lips and rigid carriage: I had discovered the weight of white people in the world. I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me. ⁵

The legacy of bitterness that the elder Baldwin passed on led the son to embark on a lifetime quest to understand and quell discrimination. Baldwin realizes that he must learn to channel these negative feelings if he is to survive. His fiction, particularly Another Country, explores attempts to overcome that anger. In Another Country the question of identity haunts Rufus Scott who must decide how

4 Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” Price 133.

5 Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” Price 129.

to handle his own bitterness which becomes too “awful a thing to live with.”⁶

Baldwin's other works of the late 1950s and early 1960s also address the question of identity. Between the publication of Go Tell It on the Mountain in 1953 and Another Country in 1962, Baldwin produced another novel, Giovanni's Room, published in England in 1956, and a collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son in 1955. Baldwin had a difficult time getting Giovanni's Room published in the United States largely because of the novel's explicit depiction of homosexual relationships. Giovanni's Room explores the dilemma of David, a white American who is engaged to a woman and having a sexual relationship with a young Italian man. David's fear and indecision about his sexuality have a negative effect on those who love him. David of Giovanni's Room and Rufus Scott of Another Country are linked by their fear of their homosexual feelings. Each man has been socially conditioned to repress these feelings, and yet, his freedom lies in his ability to resist such narrow constructions of masculinity. The critical response to the novel was Baldwin's introduction to the racialized literary world. Many reviewers such as Leslie Fieldler seemed disturbed that a novel by an African American writer did not feature any African American characters. James Ivy reviewed Giovanni's Room for The Crisis, the publication of National

6 Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” Price 129.

Association of Colored People, under the title "Faerie Queens."⁷ Ivy lamented the fact that Baldwin, already known as an advocate for African Americans, wasted his talent writing about a homosexual affair involving white men. So it was a courageous Baldwin who next produced a novel which explored interracial and homosexual unions.

Another Country is the basis for Eldridge Cleaver's attack on James Baldwin in his collection of essays, Soul on Ice. Cleaver's views on Baldwin and Another Country are helpful in the sense that they document the reactions of some Black Nationalists to Baldwin's fiction. Cleaver describes Rufus Scott as "a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide."⁸ He goes on to denigrate Baldwin personally: "There is in James Baldwin's work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time."⁹ Insisting on an autobiographical reading of the novel, Cleaver confuses Rufus Scott with James Baldwin. Rufus' self-hatred leads to his death.

Addison Gayle offers a fairly typical black nationalist view of the novel:

7 James Ivy, "Faerie Queens," The Crisis 64 (February 1957): 123.

8 Eldridge Cleaver, Soul On Ice (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 107.

9 Cleaver 99.

“Rufus has been murdered by an uncaring, unfeeling white society. Another Country (is) a novel of vengeance and redemption.”¹⁰ Black nationalists such as Gayle and Cleaver condemn Baldwin for making white characters as important as the African American characters in Another Country. Gayle also accuses Baldwin of conceptualizing African Americans in the same fashion that white Americans do: “Here is depicted also is the terrible tension in Baldwin’s life and work: the refusal to accept his status as a black man equal to Euro-American man and an obsession to claim European history and culture as his own.”¹¹ Instead of adopting European history and culture,” Baldwin uses his time in Europe to clarify his sense of himself as an American. Houston Baker also opposes this view of Baldwin: “Yet some have assumed the Baldwin slavishly courted a Western muse and wished to become indistinguishable from white American. Nothing could be farther from the truth. . .”¹² Most troubling is Gayle’s assertion that Baldwin has accepted white stereotypes about African-Americans.¹³ This argument is more applicable to Rufus Scott in Another Country rather than to James Baldwin.

Some of the characters in Another Country express the kind of frustration

10 Addison Gayle, The Way of the New World (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975) 215.

11 Gayle 214.

12 Baker, The Journey Back 62.

13 Gayle 219.

that Baldwin articulated in essays and interviews during the early 1960's. In "The New Lost Generation," published in Esquire in 1961, Baldwin begins his reflection on the experience of exile with the story of a friend who commits suicide: "Not only did the world stubbornly refuse his vision; it despised him for his vision and scourged him for his color. Of course it despised and scourged me, too, but I was different from my friend in that it took me nearly no time to despise the world right back . . ."¹⁴ This friend, identified in interviews as Eugene, resembles Rufus Scott and Eric Jones, both central characters in Another Country. There are the obvious similarities. Both Eugene and Rufus had white girlfriends and killed themselves by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. But there are also more subtle links. It appears that homosexual desires led both the real man and the fictional character to desperation. In "The Price of the Ticket" Baldwin recalls Eugene saying that he might be in love with him shortly before he committed suicide. In Another Country Eric Jones tells Rufus Scott of his romantic feelings for him but here the confessor is redeemed by receiving the love he so desperately seeks.

Easily the most arresting character that Baldwin has created, Rufus Scott remains unforgettable largely because of the depth of his literal and figurative fall. Another Country begins on the last night of Rufus Scott's life. The first part of the

14 Baldwin, "The New Lost Generation" Price 305.

novel serves as an explanation for Rufus' sense of despair. We witness his decline knowing, as he does, that there is no redemption in sight. Rufus has been roaming the streets of New York City for a month trying to cope with the physical and emotional pain he has inflicted on his lover Leona. He has not contacted his family or his friends and they are all worried about him. After nearly resorting to prostitution in order to eat, Rufus sees that his end has come. "Perhaps, now, though he had hit bottom . . . Yet there knocked in his heart the suspicion that the bottom did not really exist."¹⁵ Rufus drops in to visit his best friend, Vivaldo Moore, before taking his life. Rufus' descent comprises the first section of Another Country.

The fact that Rufus' s artistic identity is formed by the time that we encounter him in the novel foreshadows his demise. The development of the hero as an artist is central to Baldwin's artist-narratives. John Grimes in Go Tell It on The Mountain and Sonny of "Sonny's Blues" have their futures assured primarily because we witness their struggle to define themselves. "Sonny's Blues" and Go Tell It on the Mountain both tell the story of young African American men who come to understand and accept themselves. This developmental element is missing in Another Country. We don't witness Rufus Scott's journey to the stage

¹⁵ Baldwin, Another Country (New York: Dial, 1962) (hereafter cited parenthetically as "AC") 53.

and are left wondering what led him to become a drummer. How did he make it to Greenwich Village from Harlem and what was his life like before he met Leona? Although it is clear from the only scene in the jazz club that Rufus had been a successful and respected drummer, he does not perform in Another Country. Rufus is in constant flight throughout the novel. He even joins the Navy in order to escape the streets of Harlem and the drugs and violence that threatened his future. "And he had fled, so he thought, from the beat of Harlem, which was simply the beat of his own heart" (AC 7). What Rufus fears is as much a part of himself as his heartbeat: his artistic fate. The thing that Rufus is running from is himself.

Unlike Baldwin's other artist figures, Rufus Scott is reduced to the role of voyeur in his artistic milieu. In the only scene in the novel in which Rufus plays with his band, a young horn player communicates his pain to the audience. Listeners become spellbound by the passion and fervor of his music.

He stood there . . . shivering in the rags of his twenty-odd years, and screaming through the horn *Do you love me? Do you love me?* . . . This, anyway, was the question Rufus heard, the same phrase, unbearably, endlessly, and variously repeated, with all the force the boy had . . . And yet the question was terrible and real" (AC 8-9).

In this question, Rufus repeatedly hears the pain and disillusionment that the young man experienced. The scene foreshadows Rufus's death as it marks the end of his career as a musician. Rufus stands as a witness to the rise of an artist who uses his life in his art. Rufus, not the anonymous saxophone player, should be utilizing his music to communicate the lessons that he has learned; Rufus must find the courage to play his blues. Later while listening to Bessie Smith singing, Rufus wonders how people manage to overcome the blues: "...[F]or the first time Rufus began to hear, in the severely understated monotony of this blues, something which spoke to his troubled mind . . . and he wondered how others had moved beyond the emptiness and horror which faced him now" (AC 49). The blues contain the possibility of salvation for Rufus. The fact that Rufus cannot transform his blues into art is the precise reason for his suicide. The artist must articulate his blues through his art. At the end of his life Rufus cannot accomplish this feat and thus his failure is complete.

Characterized in stories such as "Previous Condition" and in Go Tell It on the Mountain as overly religious and life-threatening, Harlem is only a shadowy presence in this novel. Because he lives in Greenwich Village, Rufus is rarely depicted in Harlem. The distance between Greenwich Village and Harlem is not just geographic but emotional. Because his friends and lovers are white, Rufus constantly questions these relationships. By situating Rufus Scott in Greenwich

Village and surrounding him with white characters, Baldwin removes Rufus from his natural support systems. If we consider Houston Baker's view that "the embattled craftsman is always at the center of concentric circles: his family, the larger Black society, and the white world," then Rufus does not meet the requirements for the "embattled craftsman."¹⁶ His avoidance of his family and of his Harlem community is another indication of Rufus' failure as an artist hero. He does not want to see himself reflected in their eyes. Rufus Scott's emotional and physical lack of community leads to his tragic fate.

Because the geographical focus is on Greenwich Village and not on Harlem, perhaps Another Country is Baldwin's test of the integrationist policies of the 1950s. Both Rufus and Ida Scott attempt to realize their artistic goals in the white world of Greenwich Village and midtown Manhattan. Yet both characters become pawns in someone else's sexual fantasy. They cannot escape the sexual stereotypes of African Americans and are seen respectively as the black buck and the Jezebel. Ida Scott personifies the rage of African Americans during the 1960s. Blaming white America for her brother's death, Ida turns her relationships with the white characters in the novel to her advantage. Thus Ida Scott's tenuous standing as a jazz vocalist emerges from the opinion of her peers, jazz musicians. She hasn't endured the requisite suffering and her willingness to profit from Rufus'

16 Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 67.

suffering dooms her artistic effort.

Anger consumes Rufus, leaving no room for art, family, love, or even his own humanity. His cry, "You took the best so why not take the rest?" is the sign of his inability to fight racism, to fight stereotypes, to uphold his humanity. The best to which Rufus refers is all that he has lost: his life as a musician, his role as a respected member of his Harlem community and the community of musicians, and his own self-respect.

Rufus Scott's sense of his powerlessness is shown in his relationships with his friends and his lover. He surrounds himself with white people. Rufus' easy acquisition of Leona, his white girlfriend, leads him to madness. He becomes convinced that Leona dates him because of the stereotype of African American men as well endowed: "She loves colored folks so *much* . . . sometimes I just can't stand it. You know all that chick knows about me? The *only* thing she knows?" He put his hand on his sex, brutally as though he would tear it out"(AC 68). He doesn't want to accept the possibility that Leona might actually love him for himself. Never able to forget his race, Rufus offers the following assessment of his dealings with white women during his Greenwich Village years: "Not an easy scene to play since it can bring out the worst in both parties, and more than one white girl had already let me know that her color was more powerful than my dick"(AC 55). Rufus' unconscious acceptance of the role of black stud and of the

superiority of white women leads to his decreasing self-esteem.

Rufus' irrationality is not the derangement of the criminally insane, but the madness of one who is constantly assaulted because of his race. After a particularly violent fight with Leona, his white girlfriend, Rufus is confronted by his best friend Vivaldo Moore. "'You could be killed for this,' said Vivaldo. 'All she has to do is yell. All I have to do is walk down to the corner and get a cop'" (AC 55). Rufus sees the power of whiteness as the force which inhibits his ability to live his life as he chooses. Whiteness, which translates to power and oppression, fuels his rage.

Rufus Scott's hatred of whites, particularly Southerners, may be traced to his Harlem upbringing and his military stint in the South. Yet the source of Rufus' sexual and physical abuse of these characters is their whiteness, their skin color and all that it represents to Rufus. Only as he descends into his self-made hell does Rufus realize the connections between his relationships with Eric and Leona. "He remembered," Baldwin writes,

only that . . . Eric had loved him; as he now remembered that Leona had loved him. He had despised Eric's manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity. But Leona had not been a deformity. And he had used against her

the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way, with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest (AC 47).

Rufus responds to Eric and Leona's whiteness and not their affection for him. Although they are his lovers, Eric and Leona come to symbolize the power of whiteness, the power that has been denied to Rufus.

Addison Gayle suggests that Rufus' fury emanates from his sense of inferiority: "[A]t the core of the musician's rage is an inability to accept the fact that he is equal to white men, to arrive at a definition of himself outside that vouchsafed by the white world."¹⁷ Gayle's argument gets its validity from the fact that Rufus' has internalized his self-hatred. Rufus Scott's rage against Leona stems from the hostile responses by whites when he is in public with Leona. He picks fights with white men and physically abuses Leona to appease his anger and reclaim his manhood. He has internalized these feelings of inferiority and the myth of the black buck to the point that anger, sex, and violence dominate his life. Rufus' equation of sex and love is troubling: "I just want to get laid--get blowed--loved--one more time" (AC 64). Rufus doesn't seem to be able to believe in love, only in expressions of love. Thus he runs from those who show their feelings for him in a nonsexual way.

17 Gayle, The Way of the New World 216.

At the beginning of Another Country Rufus Scott is in the midst of his descent. Alone and alienated from his family and friends, Rufus must learn to use his isolation to come to terms with his fears. Rufus had been a successful jazz drummer before he met Leona. They immediately embark upon a sexual relationship that ultimately destroys them both. Rufus' sense of powerlessness ("nothing would stop it") is diametrically opposed to Sonny's experience in "Sonny's Blues."

You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out--that storm inside. You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody's* listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen (AC 115).

Like Sonny, Rufus Scott finds himself walking the streets and dealing with "confronting that storm inside." But, unlike Sonny, Rufus doesn't try to understand and conquer the pain. It is this inner conflict that leads Rufus to avoid his family in Harlem and causes him to physically and emotionally abuse his white girlfriend. He simply walks blindly through the streets of Manhattan hoping that the pain will cease.

Perhaps now, though, he had hit bottom. . . Yet there knocked in his heart the suspicion that the bottom did not really exist . . . He wanted to stand up, breathe, and at the same time he wanted to lie flat on the floor and be swallowed into whatever would stop this pain. Yet he was aware that nothing would stop it, nothing: this was himself. . . Nor did he understand what force within this body had driven him into such a desolate place (AC 53-54).

Rufus' failure to comprehend his own experience dooms him. Like Sonny, Rufus must confront that force which drives him to destruction. The distance implied by Baldwin's language demonstrates how Rufus Scott resists understanding and accepting himself. He is attracted to Eric and loves him but can never forget that these feelings are condemned by the larger society. Rufus in turn censures himself.

Through Baldwin's initial focus on Rufus Scott, we examine the ways in which following social norms lead to a denial of identity and ultimately to death for the African American male bisexual. "Baldwin is careful to make all his characters bisexual. [They are never depicted as] 'faggots', by which Baldwin means exclusively and effeminately homosexual."¹⁸ After reading Baldwin's

18 Bergman 165.

Giovanni's Room, Joseph Beam, a gay black man and writer, wondered if there was any hope for the future. "Could there be any happy endings in this kind of love?"¹⁹ In Another Country James Baldwin asks readers to consider what motivates Rufus Scott, a bisexual man, to throw himself off the George Washington Bridge and why Eric Jones, a white homosexual, flourishes. Sadly Rufus clings to socially constructed definitions of himself rather than defining and accepting himself. Because he cannot acknowledge his bisexuality and his love for two white people, Rufus turns his love into hatred. Instead of focusing on his own feelings, Rufus destroys those who love him. "Rufus had despised him because he came from Alabama; perhaps he had allowed Eric to make love to him in order to despise him more completely" (AC 45). Rufus' violence towards Eric, and perhaps Leona, stems from being attacked by a Southern Army officer during his youth. James Baldwin expressed his thoughts on homosexuality and race in a 1986 interview with Richard Goldstein of the Village Voice.

A black gay person who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he's black or she's black. The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger

19 Joseph Beam, "James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother." Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men. Ed. Essex Hemphill. (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991) 184.

in which all black people live.²⁰

Indeed. It is the "question of color" which leads Rufus Scott to commit suicide though his denial of his sexual feelings and acknowledgment of the sexual acts he performs with Eric play an important role. "But I am suggesting that one of the prices an American Negro pays--or can pay--for what is called his 'acceptance' is a profound, almost ineradicable self-hatred. This corrupts every aspect of his living, he is never at peace again, he is out of touch with himself forever."²¹ Rufus has sex with Eric and Leona because he wants their love, but he sees himself as being unworthy of anyone's love. Walking the streets of New York City and contemplating prostituting himself makes Rufus think of Eric: "He glimpsed, for the first time, the extent, the nature, of Eric's loneliness and the danger in which this placed him; and wished that he had been nicer to him" (AC 45). Rufus' own loneliness, compounded by the fact that he has distanced himself from Eric and all those who care about him, leads him to kill himself.

Recent research shows that suicide is surprisingly common among African Americans. Citing the decrease of cultural ties due to the migration of African Americans from rural to urban environments, Richard Major finds that the African American male is increasingly displaced: "Black males are at much greater risk

20 Troupe 180.

21 Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," Price 287.

for suicide than black females, by a ration of four to one. Not only are black males more likely than females to be involved in deviant and self-destructive behavior . . . they are also less likely to complete high school and to be employed."²² When we first encounter Rufus, he is unemployed and homeless. The story of how he descended to this level is told in flashbacks during the first third of the novel. Through his relationship with Leona and his final tragic state, we see how Rufus Scott fits Major's description. Rufus feels as though he failed his family and is ashamed to face them. As he rides the A train, Rufus considers getting off in Harlem to visit his family but continues north. He departs the train at the George Washington Bridge. It is here that Rufus commits suicide.

Though suicide is often presented as a viable option for African American men in James Baldwin's fiction, Rufus Scott's taking of his own life is the only such depiction in Baldwin's fiction. Rufus is characterized by a sense of hopelessness and despair that is unmatched by the other artist heroes. He is unable to address his fear. Peter in "Previous Condition" and Sonny in "Sonny's Blues" acknowledge and accept the possibility that their quests might end in death or madness.

Rufus's death is related to events in Baldwin's personal life. In the introductory essay to The Price of the Ticket, Baldwin sees the suicide of his

22 Majors 275.

friend Eugene as a possible foreshadowing of his own fate.

If I say that my best friend, black, Eugene, who took his life at the age of twenty-four, had been, until that moment, a survivor, I will be told that he had "personal" problems. Indeed he did, and one of them was trying to find a job, or a place to live, in New York.

If I point out that there is certainly a connection between his death (when I was twenty-two) and my departure for Paris (when I was twenty-four) I will be condemned as theatrical (xvii).²³

Describing life for the African American man in such stark life or death terms is overly dramatic, but then their plight seems to call for such a response. Rufus's homelessness is more than physical; he is emotionally and spiritually lost. The deprivation of faith, often associated with a belief in love in Baldwin's fiction, is a major contributing factor to Rufus' suicide.

By committing suicide, Rufus Scott maintains some measure of control over his destiny and continues to do battle with white racism. The act of throwing himself off the George Washington Bridge is foreshadowed throughout the first section of the novel. Rufus seems to hear the Hudson River calling to him as he remembers a childhood drowning victim. His final words, "all right, you motherfucking Godalmighty bastard, I'm coming to you," signal his surrender to

23 Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket" xvii.

what he perceives as white, racist forces (AC 88). Rufus' suicide evokes the images of slaves who drowned themselves during the Middle Passage rather than endure further horrors of slavery. His suicide is also an act of defiance and illustrates his empowerment. Just as Morrison's Sethe kills her daughter in part to retain some control over the quality of life for her child, Rufus finally takes control over the way in which he wants to live or die. With his thoughts on the bridge, Rufus comes closest to articulating his blues and, in Houston Baker's terms, achieves "a resonant, improvisation, expressive dignity."²⁴ Certainly Rufus's experience resonates throughout the remainder of the novel as the other characters try to comprehend his actions.

Reading Baldwin's artist heroes as responses to Wright's Bigger Thomas allows for a contextualization of some of the more distressing aspects of Rufus Scott. In Another Country Rufus Scott is reminiscent of Richard Wright's archetypal figure, Bigger Thomas. The physical abuse Rufus inflicts upon his white Southern lover marks Rufus' descent into Wright's Bad Nigger archetype. Although Baldwin's sensitive portrayal of an African American man consumed with stereotypical notions about his gender and race is sympathetic, I am troubled by the violence and sense of overwhelming despair that link Rufus Scott in Another Country with Bigger Thomas in Native Son.

24 Baker, Blues, Ideology 13.

While Wright presents Bigger's incarceration and probable execution as an outcome of his socialization, Baldwin rejects this naturalistic approach. Clearly Rufus has the ability to shape his destiny but lacks the necessary courage. Rufus tries to achieve his goals, but feels thwarted because of his race. Life in the democratic United States has taught Rufus that he is inconsequential, that he doesn't matter. He even questions whether he matters to God. "Ain't I your baby too?" (AC 78). Unlike Bigger Thomas, Rufus Scott feels too much. His emotional responses to racism and discrimination lead to his suicide. By harming himself as well as others, Rufus internalizes the rage and hatred directed toward him. In his review of Another Country critic Granville Hicks asserts that hate is the overwhelming emotion of the novel.²⁵ There is a great deal of hate in the novel and most of it is directed toward those who are considered different and/or marginal. Rufus dies because he accepts these definitions of himself and because he cannot conquer his self-hatred.

Baldwin's use of two dominant artist-heroes in Another Country lends itself to an examination of the impact of race and sexuality on the maturation process of the artist-figure. Despite the variable of race, both Rufus Scott and Eric Jones must undergo a revelatory experience in order to be reborn as artists. Refuting

25 Granville Hicks, "Outcasts in a Cauldron of Hate," Critical Essays on James Baldwin, Ed. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt, (Boston: GK. Hall 1988) 150.

stereotypes based on race or sexual orientation and adopting instead a primary identification as an artist is the first sign of the requisite reawakening of the artist-hero. The transformation or the lack thereof determines the nature of the ensuing artistic experience. This awakening is particularly important for Rufus Scott because, as an African American male, his humanity is constantly called into question. Houston Baker, echoing Baldwin's concern for African American male characters to accept their humanity, identifies the primary cause of Rufus' death: "The rage of the Black artist is futile unless he is strong enough to cease battling for his humanity by those 'brutal criteria' bequeathed by Leona's forefathers."²⁶ Rufus not only battles with the ideology passed on by Leona's forefathers but he ultimately loses his life in the process. Rufus Scott's descent is paralleled by Eric Jones's ascent in Another Country.

Eric Jones emerges as Baldwin's most successful artist-hero. Because of his personal struggles, he becomes a model of honesty for the other characters in Another Country. The only son of a wealthy Alabama couple, Eric is burdened with the weight of his parents' high expectations almost from birth. Early on he knows that he is different and that different means wrong. "But by this time he knew that everything he did was wrong in the eyes of his parents, and in the eyes of the world, and that, therefore, everything must be lived in secret" (AC 199).

26 Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 67.

Yet Eric's freedom lies in his rejection of a secret life. His first homosexual relationship frees him from the prison of his Southern hometown and his indifferent parents. "Many years were to pass before he could begin to accept what he, that day, in those arms, with the stream whispering in his ear, discovered; and yet that day was the beginning of his life as a man" (AC 206). Eric's painful journey toward self-acceptance is the single most important factor in his later success. Eric's expression of his sexual self fuels his artistic liberation.

The road to self-love is a long and arduous one for Eric. Finding the strength to acknowledge and accept his identity as a homosexual and as an actor is the quality that makes Eric Jones the principal subject of Another Country. He does so in France and this act of courage is the source of Eric's power. The fact that neither Eric nor Rufus can achieve a sense of wholeness in New York City is Baldwin's commentary on the restricting nature of life in the United States. In "The New Lost Generation" Baldwin contemplates the impact exile had on his life. "In my case, I think exile saved my life. . . A man is not a man until he is able and willing to accept his own vision of the world. . ."27 The distance the artist-hero travels should be in search of self, not in flight from self. It is significant that, for Eric to find out who he was, he had to leave New York City and the United States.

27 Baldwin, "The New Lost Generation" 312.

Like James Baldwin, Eric Jones gains a new, deeper sense of himself in France. Although Eric's embrace of his sexual identity in Europe alters his life, he realizes that he must return to the United States if he is to measure his success: "Why am I going home? he asked himself. But he knew why. It was time. In order not to lose all that he had gained, he had to move forward and risk it all" (AC 230). His renewed sense of self helps his acting career. Eric Jones' sexuality and profession, possible weapons for his enemies, are transformed instead into tools of empowerment.

In Paris Eric learns the meaning of love. "For the act of love is a confession. One lies about the body but the body does not lie about itself; it cannot lie about the force which drives it. And Eric had discovered, inevitably, the truth about many men, who then wished to drive Eric and the truth together out of the world" (AC 212). Eric prospers because is able not only to love himself but to accept himself. By defining himself, Eric achieves the only kind of success that is valued: the love and acceptance of self. "[H]e had to create his standards and make up his definitions as he went along. It was up to him to find out who he was, and it was his necessity to do this . . . alone" (AC 212-213). This definition of love is closely related to what I see as James Baldwin's vision of art. Honesty is the most important element in both artistic and love relationships.

An important indication of Eric's success as a human being and as an artist

is his ability to share his hard-won self love and acceptance with others. Baldwin casts him as a healer, one who heals through love, in Another Country. All who are intimate with him find themselves transformed. Eric has brief love affairs with Cass Silenski, a middle class wife and mother, and Vivaldo Moore, a young writer. Vivaldo, who has had sexual encounters with men in the past, understands that he is basically heterosexual, but his experience with Eric changes him. "So what can we really do for each other except---just love each other and be each other's witness?...So that we can really stretch into whoever we are?" (AC 396). Love, like art, not onl liberates but nurtures. Fueled by honesty, it leads to positive developments. After a sexual "conversion" by Eric during which he discovers new meaning in his life, Vivaldo resumes his writing and his characters speak to him. His life as a successful artist begins. His writing, which had not been going well, begins to flourish. Vivaldo gains insight into his writing and his romantic relationship with Ida Scott. He finally acknowledges the futility of his relationship with Ida Scott.

Likewise Cass Silenski, trapped in her identity as a wife and mother, is liberated through her affair with Eric. After her first sexual experience with Eric, Cass reclaims her womanhood. "She really felt that a weight has rolled away, and that she was herself again, in her own skin, for the first time in a long time"(AC 292). Cass and Eric accept the relationship for what it is--an affair and continue to

be friends rather than lovers. Cass sought attention and honesty from Eric that she felt that was lacking from her relationship with her husband. Strengthened by her affair with Eric, Cass faces the truth about her husband and her marriage. She seeks to duplicate the clarity that she found in her relationship with Eric. Although it is unclear as to whether her marriage can be saved, Cass' willingness to risk everything that she holds dear to gain truth makes her a positive character.

With its focus on Eric Jones and Rufus Scott, Another Country is a critique of conventional notions of masculinity. All of the male characters, with the exception of Eric Jones, struggle with the way in which masculinity is constructed in the United States and each of them ultimately rejects narrow definitions of a gendered self. Even the minor characters Vivaldo Moore and Richard Silenski change their views of themselves as men. Richard had been Vivaldo's high school English teacher and the two are engaged in a subtle competition. Each man has been writing a novel for years, but Richard secretly finishes his novel and presents Vivaldo with a published copy. Richard Silenski's community of family and friends lose respect for him as a writer because they recognize the lack of truth and artistic effort in his commercially successful novel. Richard defines himself by his roles as a father, husband, and provider. He is forced to reexamine his life when his wife commits adultery with a bisexual man. Vivaldo Moore, a minor character, may not be a commercially successful writer like Richard Silenski but

we, as readers, respect him as an artist because we see the internal struggle and self-examination which he undergoes in order to write fiction. He learns to listen to those voices he had previously tried to silence and this development leads him to begin writing his novel in earnest. Through his sexual experience with Eric, Vivaldo redefines himself in terms of his vocation and his masculinity.

bell hooks argues that "masculinity, as it is conceived within patriarchy is life-threatening to black men."²⁸ Often masculinity is defined as being a provider and the head of the household. Achieving this status is difficult for African American men because of cultural differences and the impact of racism on the African American male's ability to gain employment. African American families are more communal and extended. Certainly following the phallogentric, hegemonic notions of patriarchy leads Rufus Scott to attempt to dominate women and ultimately kill himself.

For Houston Baker, the male sex organ is the key symbol in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. "The Black phallus as a symbol of unconstrained force that white men contradictorily envy and seek to destroy . . ." ²⁹ In describing his rather combative relationship with fellow writer Norman Mailer, Baldwin

28 bell hooks, "Representations: Feminism and Black Masculinity," Yearning (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 77.

29 Baker, Blues, Ideology 182.

reflects on the status of African American men. "It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others."³⁰ The stereotypical image of black men as purely sexual beings is evoked not by Baldwin's white characters but by Rufus Scott. He becomes so obsessed with what he believes are negative comments on his blackness that he internalizes the racism he perceives. Rufus increasingly defines himself in terms of his sexual prowess. By the time he becomes involved with Leona, he is no longer able to express his homosexual feelings and becomes, in his own eyes, the stereotypical black buck. Rufus even describes his penis as "that most despised part of himself" (AC 74). He accuses Leona of wanting to be with him only for sex: "Why don't you tell the truth? I wouldn't have to beat you if you'd tell the truth. He grinned at Vivaldo. Man, this chick can't get enough . . ." (AC 56-57). Rufus can't hear or accept the truth. Leona loves him for himself, but all he can see is race. Having internalized negative stereotypes of black men, Rufus cannot accept love from anyone and cannot love himself.

Rufus Scott's restricted definition of masculinity excludes his unacknowledged homosexual acts with Eric. It is significant that, at the end of his life, Rufus thinks of Eric and regrets the ways in which he punished Eric for

30 Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," *Price* 290.

helping him to reveal his own homosexual desires. Rufus must disavow his feelings for Eric in order to remain "black" and "male" in his own eyes and in the eyes of the African American community. This adherence to rigid cultural standards leads Rufus to deny his affection for Eric and thus submerge a part of himself. Rufus exemplifies Baldwin's belief that "the American ideal of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity."³¹ As Baldwin says in The Furious Passage of James Baldwin, "I know a lot of people who turn into junkies because they're *afraid* they might be *queer*."³² Confronting the fear of being different becomes the acceptance of a personal identity. Unlike the indecisive David in Giovanni's Room, the men in Another Country are forced to make decisions about their sexuality if they are to survive. In his study of gay self-representation in literature, David Bergman asserts that a negative identity becomes "an absence of identity."³³ In other words there is no identity without a homosexual one. Eric Jones contradicts Bergman's argument when he delivers the message of the novel: "I mean, I think you've got to be truthful about the life you *have*. Otherwise, there's no possibility of achieving the life you *want* . . . or *think* you want"(AC 336). The responsibility of whether to live a life of truth or a life

31 Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons" 678.

32 Fern Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin (New York: M. Evans, 1966) 32.

33 Bergman 45.

of lies clearly is the domain of the artist. Eric is determined to live life fully and honestly and it is this sense of completeness that the other characters in the novel seek.

Eric's open acknowledgment and acceptance of his multiple identities silences those who would persecute him. By embracing both his masculine and feminine qualities, Eric Jones personifies Baldwin's philosophy of love. Eric Jones has found fulfillment in his personal and professional lives while remaining clear about his sexuality. Vivaldo sees these qualities when he watches Eric at work. "...This masculinity was defined, and made powerful by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine either. . . It was a quality which great numbers of people would respond without knowing to what it was they were responding . . . it was a face which suggested, resonantly, in the depth, the truth about our natures"(AC 330). Eric personifies masculinity, femininity, strength, and vulnerability. His ability not only to embody all these qualities but to express them is another factor in his success as a artist-hero. Baldwin would again return to this theme in "Here Be Dragons," the last essay in The Price of the Ticket. The essay, originally published in Playboy as "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," opens with a definition of androgyny as containing both male and female qualities. Baldwin concludes the essay with the argument that everyone is androgynous. "But we are all androgynous. . .because each of us, helplessly and

forever, contains the other--male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white."³⁴ By rejecting America's definitions of homosexuals, Eric is forced to define himself. His role as healer is suggested by Baldwin's choice of an epigraph from Joseph Conrad's 1915 novel *Victory*: "Why don't you take me in your arms and carry me out of this lonely place?"

The many depictions of sexual relationships in the novel have garnered more attention than Baldwin's exploration of the artist figure. The fascination that surrounds black sexuality overshadows any aesthetic concerns. In *Another Country* sex operates much in the same fashion that love does in James Baldwin's works. It becomes a symbol of self-acceptance and personal growth and is something that takes on a transcendent quality. Critics such as Houston Baker and Craig Werner offer different interpretations of Baldwin's use of sex in this novel. Baker, for example, sees both Ida Scott and her brother Rufus as characters who use their bodies to advance their careers. "And the Black artist as prostitute is an important figure in this novel filled to the brim with artistic spirits."³⁵ Clearly, Ida Scott initiates a sexual relationship with Steve Ellis, a music and theatrical producer, in hopes of advancing her singing career. Baldwin implies that Ida's talent is not as great as her sense of survival. While Baker's conclusion might be

34 Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons" *The Price of the Ticket* 690.

35 Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 68.

true for Ida, it rings false when applied to Rufus. Baldwin addresses such misreadings of Another Country in a series of interviews with Fern Eckman, his first biographer. "It's not sex at *all*. It's pure desperation . . . it comes out of the effort to tell oneself a lie about what human life is like. It comes out of the attempt to cling to definitions which cannot contain *anybody's* life."³⁶ Eric Jones triumphs in the novel because he ceases to allow others to define him while Rufus Scott dies because he is afraid of what his definition of himself might reveal.

What is uncovered by focusing on the meaning and legacy of Rufus Scott in Another Country is that without this quest for self, without "going the way your blood beats, . . . you won't live any life at all."³⁷ Eric Jones possesses the courage to examine himself and so he joins Sonny in representing the quality of honesty in life and art that characterizes the successful Baldwin artist-hero. I believe that the novel becomes a sanctuary for James Baldwin as he ages. It is a place for him to explore his position as an artist, as an African American, as a man. Certainly Another Country, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and Just Above My Head are all studies of the creative person in various stages of development and of the factors which affect his self-image. More and more frequently the novel becomes the place for Baldwin to interrogate and analyze his own fragile position

36 Eckman 32.

37 Baldwin, interview, Troupe 185.

as a writer and his more accepted, though unwanted, stature as a racial spokesperson. In his next novel Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, James Baldwin examines the meaning of the artist who flees from truth and ends up in a prison of his own making.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Delusions of Fame: Success and Artistic Identity in Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone

"Fame is the spur and--ouch!" James Baldwin in his high school yearbook, 1941¹

"The trick is not to be deluded, you know, by your obscurity or by your fame." James Baldwin, 1968 ²

These epigraphs attest to the consistency of James Baldwin's attitude toward what he saw as the corrupting nature of fame. From his high school days until his death, Baldwin was conscious of the price of fame for artists, particularly for African American artists. Fame, in Baldwin's view, could be extremely destructive. Certainly this is the image that is presented in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, a novel that traces an African American actor's pursuit and attainment of celebrity. Fame supplants honesty as the actor's goals and herein lies his downfall. That the actor's misplaced priorities lead to acclaim and financial rewards is James

1 Leeming, James Baldwin 29.

2 James Baldwin, "Interview with Robert Crony," 1968. Baldwin gave this interview during his publicity tour to promote Train.

Baldwin's commentary on the falsity of American morality. For Baldwin, at this stage of his career, fame is the result of selling out. As seen in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the nature of fame removes the artist-figure from his community, and this loss of intimacy leads to failure.

Because James Baldwin's Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is a novel about an African American actor and was published in 1968, it was assumed that Sidney Poitier, the most popular African American male actor of the period, was the real-life model for the central figure. In an interview with Poitier for Look magazine in 1968, Baldwin tried mightily to dispel the notion.

There's speculation that the central figure of my new novel, who is a black actor, is based on Sidney. Nothing could be further from the truth, but people naturally think that because when they look around them, Sidney's the only black actor they see. Well, that fact says a great deal more about this country than it says about black actors, or Sidney, or me.³

The only similarities between Sidney Poitier and Leo Proudhammer are that both are African American and both are actors. As he made clear in his autobiography This Life, Poitier's life and career differed greatly from Leo Proudhammer's. As a devoted

3 Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier" Look (July 23, 1968): 58.

father and husband, Poitier drew upon on his close network of family and friends to sustain him in his professional endeavors. Throughout his career, Poitier remained dedicated to his profession as an actor and not to the accompanying stardom.

The 1950s saw the rise of a successful African American male actor: Sidney Poitier. Prior to the late 1950s African Americans had been presented generally in films as servants and comic figures. Poitier follows in the gigantic footsteps of Paul Robeson, the African American actor, scholar, and athlete. "Robeson's greatest contribution to black film history. . . was his proud, defiant portrait of the black man."⁴ By portraying noble, educated, and well mannered characters, Poitier also came to symbolize a kind of New Negro in film. I use the term "Negro" and not Black or African American in reference to Poitier's roles because of the integrationist attitudes that many of Poitier's characters seem to embody. Born in Florida and raised in the Bahamas, Poitier began his acting career in the theater. Fame came to Poitier through his film roles. In 1950 he made his film debut playing a doctor in "No Way Out." Film historian Donald Bogle argues that Poitier's success came from his broad appeal to both black and white Americans.⁵ He is perhaps best known for his role as Walter Lee in the stage and film adaptations of Lorraine Hansberry's play A Raisin in the Sun. Poitier worked consistently during the 1950s and 1960s with 1967 being his

4 Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattos, and Bucks. 1973. (New York: Continuum, 1989) 98.

5 Bogle 175-176.

busiest year. It was at that time that three of his most popular films ("To Sir With Love," "In the Heat of the Night," and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner") were released. Poitier won an Academy Award in 1963 for his portrayal of an ex-soldier who helps a group of nuns in "Lilies of the Field." The epitome of the noble and principled, Sidney Poitier is the antithesis of James Baldwin's Leo Proudhammer.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, with its examination of social and political change, typifies the decade of the 1960s and contains James Baldwin's most sustained meditations on fame and the impact of celebrity on the artist. The novel tells the story of a famous African American actor, Leo Proudhammer, and his inability to bring any level of truth to his art. Leo Proudhammer's story is about the failure to analyze and accept oneself and the resulting pain and loneliness of living a lie. In this chapter I will explore how fame influences the artist's vision of himself and his craft and how Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone reflects James Baldwin's philosophy about art and the role of the artist.

Despite its profound statement on the experience of the African American artist, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, James Baldwin's fourth novel, has been forgotten by contemporary, literary critics. Negative reviews, its length, and the fact that the novel is not as interesting as its premise have led to its dormant status within the Baldwin canon. I find Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone to be extremely revealing in terms of James Baldwin's attitude toward the trappings of his

vocation. I have documented Baldwin's continual interest in the life of the artist throughout his fiction. Most of the previous artist-heroes in this study have been portraits of artists who learn to accept themselves as artists. This novel, more than any other in this study, examines the consequences when you adopt the values of one culture while forsaking those of your own. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is an exploration of the artist as a failure in terms of his professional and personal lives. It is significant that, at the pinnacle of his own celebrity, Baldwin turns his attention to the pessimistic effects of fame on the artist and his pursuit of his vocation. With this novel, Baldwin's vision of the artist as a hero takes a decidedly negative turn.

The decade of the 1960s brought a new level of racial and social upheaval in the United States that culminated in death, violence, and a realignment of the social order of the country. The nonviolent protests of the 1950s gradually gave way to a new kind of political consciousness on the part of young African Americans. This movement is explored in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone through the character of Christopher Hall, a young African American activist. Although he had been living in France where his career was flourishing, James Baldwin returned to the United States in 1957 because he felt strongly that he could assist in the fight for civil rights. The Fire Next Time, a nonfiction collection containing two essays concerning the fate of a racist United States, quickly became one of James Baldwin's best-selling

books. Baldwin's elegant words and observations introduced him to a new audience, one that was unfamiliar with his fiction. The positive response to The Fire Next Time was due to its focus on the crucial matter of race. Baldwin's statement that the future of the country was linked to its treatment of African Americans enthralled the country. "The price of the liberation of white people is the liberation of the blacks."

⁶ He appeared on talk shows and was interviewed innumerable times. With success came fame, and it is the nature of fame that James Baldwin probes in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

Essays such as "Notes of a Native Son" catapulted James Baldwin to prominence. His readers and reviewers were primarily interested in his pronouncements regarding racial tensions that reviewers. The success of the prophetic The Fire Next Time (1963) casts a shadow on the reception of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968). The entire country seemed to be waiting for James Baldwin to explain exactly how peaceful coexistence was possible. With the rioting that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, civic and business leaders were looking for ways to pacify urban dwellers. As the title of an Esquire essay on Baldwin indicates, everyone was searching for ways to get "black people to cool it."⁷

6 Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time" Price 375.

7 Baldwin, "How Do We Get Black People to Cool It?: An Interview With James
(continued...)

Frequently described as angry young man, James Baldwin was hailed as the most literate American writer of his time on the subject of race relations. Largely because of his social commentary, he became a celebrity. This development is slightly ironic because a disdain for fame runs throughout Baldwin's essays. He was uncomfortable in the role of spokesman for his race and despised being cast as a "Black" writer. He angrily expressed his unsuitability for that role which had been forced upon him: "I can barely represent myself. I'm not a spokesman . . . I'm a raggedy ass shoeshine boy."⁸ This comment is not simply a rejection of the role of "race leader;" it also hints at Baldwin's desire to disregard fame and financial success. As his essays show, Baldwin was still struggling to come to an understanding of himself and so this statement reveals his frustration and discomfort with the demands of fame.

By the mid to late 1960s James Baldwin began to retreat from active participation in the ongoing efforts to achieve civil rights for all Americans. After having organized a 1963 meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, participated in the March on Washington, and given countless talks on college campuses and in churches, Baldwin felt the need to reclaim his identity as an artist

7(...continued)

Baldwin." *Esquire* 70 (July 1968): 49-53.

8 Baldwin, interview. *Black Voices*. ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: NAL, 1968) 667.

and as a writer. It is at this time that Baldwin visits Turkey to ponder his future and to write Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

Baldwin's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement caused him to question the role, rights, and responsibilities of the African American artist. From 1962's "The Creative Process" to 1969's "Sweet Lorraine," Baldwin's attention was diverted from the experience of the American artist to the perils of being an African American artist. This is not to suggest that race isn't important for Baldwin before the late 1960s, but that it takes on added significance as his artistic identity becomes secondary, at least to a majority of his audience, to his racial identity.

Accounts of Baldwin's life during the mid-1960's vary slightly but all share one common denominator: fame. He was frequently described as being surrounded by an entourage, being accosted by strangers, and always searching for time and space to write. Surely the former Harlem schoolboy reveled in this attention, but he also was well aware of its dangers.

The most compelling portrayal of Baldwin during this period is that offered by Fern Eckman in her aptly titled book, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin. Part biography, part literary criticism, and part interview, Eckman's book endeavors to capture the essence of James Baldwin and, in doing so, offers a portrait of a mercurial writer. Although she refrains from delving into his sexual liaisons, Eckman succeeds in conveying a sense of the whirlwind within which Baldwin lived.

Constantly surrounded by an entourage, Baldwin moved from one speaking engagement to another. Alternatively angry and mellow, the writer was only occasionally sober. Though he is seldom alone, the image of Baldwin that emerged was that of a lonely man. As Eckman says, "he . . . feels himself a stranger everywhere, not least of all within himself."⁹ Perhaps more important, Eckman identifies the demands of fame as the source of Baldwin's melancholy. It is no coincidence that Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the novel Baldwin wrote during this period, addressed this issue.

Baldwin composed Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone from 1965 to 1967, over several continents, and amid much confusion. His inclusion of the dates and locations of the writing at the end of the novel is a testament to the difficulties he encountered. During these years James Baldwin was attempting to juggle his writing career with his assumed duties as a spokesperson for the Negro race. The demands upon him to speak out against racism continued to increase while time set aside for writing dwindled. Inevitably, personal doubts and professional criticism began to emerge.

What he produces in the next few years, he has told associates, will be crucial to his career . . . If he could disentangle himself from the debris of his day-to-day collisions, he might bring to his fiction

9 Eckman 246.

. . . the deliberation and the discipline that have sometimes been missing, lacunae that have delayed realization of control; the flame might burn brighter if it threw off less heat.¹⁰

Eckman implies that the demands of fame hampers Baldwin's ability to produce great works of literature.

Baldwin was also coping, or trying to cope, with the fact that the leaders of the more militant nationalistic Black Arts Movement found him passe because of his "assimilationist" stance. Black nationalism was the rage and Baldwin, with his white characters and friends, simply didn't fit its rigid criteria for blackness. African American revolutionaries such as Eldridge Cleaver accused Baldwin of being ashamed of his race and derided him for his open homosexuality. Using Baldwin's review of Norman Mailer's The White Negro and his novel Another Country as reference points, Cleaver accused Baldwin of self-hatred and of hating other African Americans.¹¹ Yet Baldwin suffered these attacks in silence preferring not to spar in public with those whom he considered his children.

While all these events were taking place, James Baldwin was trying to write Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, a novel that explores the life of an African American actor. Although he frequently has written about musicians, James Baldwin

10 Eckman 245.

11 Cleaver 99.

turns to acting for his examination of the African American male artist and the ways in which he is co-opted by fame and his celebrity status in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Leo does not inspire sympathy as Sonny did in "Sonny's Blues." His detachment from himself and his life, aided by his profession, becomes infectious. The enticing, almost sensual mystique of the artist and his chosen art form, an integral element in Baldwin's most memorable artistic characters, is clearly missing in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. It can be argued that the choice of acting as Leo's artistic medium is the source of Baldwin's difficulties in the novel, but perhaps Baldwin did not wish to generate sympathy for this character. Because music allows a singer or a musician the freedom to express his emotions in a way acting is unable to do, we, as readers, do not feel the actor's struggle to become a true artist. Leo Proudhammer must continually play a role, both on stage and off, to attain fame. Thus, Leo remains a caricature.

Leo Proudhammer is Baldwin's only novel length treatment of an actor as the central artist hero. That Leo is an actor is the first clue to the kind of social commentary Baldwin is offering here. This choice of a vocation requires further examination. Acting allows Leo to run away and assume new personas just as he tried to do as a child. Perhaps Baldwin is arguing that the African American male must somehow make himself palatable to a white audience to achieve the level of success that Leo Proudhammer has garnered. Instead of discovering how acting

allows Leo to express his rage, frustration, and intimate feelings, we witness the trap of fame as Leo glosses over the rough parts of his life and basks in his successes. Leo's choice of a career is apt, for Baldwin depicts him as being as artificial as the world of the movies he so adored as a child. In Baldwin's fiction movies are seen by African Americans as windows on the unattainable white world. As John Grimes did before him, the young Leo escapes to the dark microcosm of the movies to enter traditional white society in the only role it allows him: that of a voyeur, a visitor. "The faces of the movie stars . . . looked like faces far from me, faces which I would never be able to decipher, faces which could be seen but never changed or touched, faces which existed only behind these doors."¹² Leo's description of actors whose faces can never be penetrated proves to be an apt description of his later life. Leo hides his emotions behind the mask of celebrity. As an adult Leo seeks to duplicate the distance that he associated with actors and acting since his childhood.

The accouterments of celebrity, the special treatment, the adoring fans, are all things that Leo uses to hide from himself. "I am ready: dark blue suit . . . Brazilian cufflinks, black pumps. I am a star again. I look it and I feel it"(Train 309). His only identity, the only one that he can face, is that of a famous actor. Acting becomes Leo's mask. Instead of attempting to gain a secure identity, Leo prefers to adopt one

12 Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, (New York: Dial, 1968) 36 (hereafter cited parenthetically as "Train").

each night at the theater. The title of Proudhammer's next motion picture, "Big Deal," is Baldwin's commentary on the emptiness of his life and career.

Baldwin had examined the world of acting earlier in some of his short fiction and briefly in Another Country. Although "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" predate Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the similarities between these texts suggest that the novel is in some ways a continuation of the short stories. If, as W.J. Weatherby states, Baldwin originally imagined Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone to be a short story, then perhaps it might well be read as an expanded version of "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon."¹³ Not only are the narrators of the stories and the novel actors, but they all suffer from the same affliction: the fear of confronting their innermost fears and desires. These African American actors, Peter in "Previous Condition, Leo Proudhammer in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and the unnamed narrator in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" conceal their feelings and personal terrors from their families, lovers, and the larger African American community. They are almost uniformly devoid of any sincere emotions and cannot fulfill the primary mandate of the artist as hero: to identify, acknowledge, and embrace his artistic fate. The protagonists are exiled from the African American community and "Previous Condition" and "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,"

13 Weatherby 318.

like Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, conclude with the actors still estranged from those who love them. Only the artist hero in "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" recognizes and begins to remedy his stagnant state. The story concludes on a hopeful note as the actor prepares to return to the United States to confront his private fears.

In 1968, at the pinnacle of his fame, James Baldwin offers his newly expanded audience a novel that mocks celebrity by showing the way in which it isolates his main character. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone opens with its hero, Leo Proudhammer, suffering a heart attack during a performance. Leo Proudhammer is appropriately named because his beating heart, his proud hammer, is the source of his physical illness. As Proudhammer recalls the events of his personal and professional lives during his convalescence, we learn of his long-term relationship with Barbara King, a white actress, and his new alliance with Christopher Hall, a young black political activist. Leo recovers and, as he does so, becomes nostalgic and begins to reminisce.

Leo's memories form the three sections of the novel and serve as an introduction to those who had the greatest impact on his life: Barbara King, his onetime lover and now friend, and Caleb Proudhammer. "The House Nigger," the first section of the novel, begins with Leo's heart attack. Lying in his hospital bed, Leo finally reflects upon his past. This section centers on the relationship between

Leo and Caleb, his older brother, as it is this relationship that most dramatically shapes Leo's personality as an adult. Leo's feelings about his sexuality are also in "The House Nigger" as he reflects on his two forbidden loves, a white woman and a homosexual man.

The second section, "Is There Anybody There, Said the Traveler," focuses on Leo's youthful experiences with the Actors' Means Workshop and the closeness he once shared with his brother Caleb. David Leeming notes that several characters in this section are based on acquaintances Baldwin made during the brief Broadway run of his play Blues for Mister Charlie in 1964.¹⁴ As the only African American in the theater company, Leo is constantly aware of being out of place. His activities, monitored by distrustful townspeople, lead to his being harassed by the police. The second section of the novel also further explores relationships between the members of the Proudhammer family.

As Leo sees it, his family struggles to keep their humanity in the face of racial hostilities and inequalities. Throughout the course of the novel, Caleb Proudhammer is converted from a sensitive criminal into a righteous preacher. One of the biggest failures of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is that this transformation takes place off stage and is a bit forced. As a young man Caleb falls into the illicit

14 Leeming, James Baldwin 279.

underworld of Harlem and is incarcerated for his participation in a robbery. When Caleb goes to jail, so does Leo in a sense because the close emotional and sexual bond between the brothers casts a shadow over Leo's life. Only with Caleb does Leo feels loved and needed. After Caleb's arrest, Leo distances himself from everyone. He feels abandoned, and consequently, is afraid to love or to trust once his brother is taken away. Leo creates a prison for himself, one created by fame and loneliness. More than anything, Leo is afraid.

Caleb's evolution triggers a bitter response in Leo. After his release from prison, Caleb enters the military. His return from the Korean conflict marks his emergence as a Christian and a saved man. In The Fire Next Time Baldwin describes his own tenure in the church as a search for safety. "Like Leo, Caleb has reached out to embrace a safe identity to escape that which has tortured him: his virile, black male identity. Leo realizes that Caleb has changed, but doesn't see that he is embarking on a similar journey.

I did not know, when Caleb walked into The Island on that far-off night, how many ways there were to die, and how few to live . . . I had made . . . some enormous and unshakable resolution. I had arrived at an awful cunning which was to be protected by silence . . . I was alone all right; for God had taken my brother away from me . . . God was not going to do to me what He had done to

Caleb. Never. Not to me (Train 311-312).

Leo decides to live by distancing himself from everyone and simply retreats further within himself. The artist usually uses this isolation to explore the facets of his identity, but Leo refuses to reveal any personal emotion. Leo resents the church for taken his brother away. "Having suffered unspeakable degradation and unanswerable treachery, he [Caleb] finds release in the Black church. He, in fact, represents Leo's alter ego, what John Grimes could have become without his compulsion to create."¹⁵ Caleb returns later in the novel as a hypocritical preacher who opposes the vocation chosen by his younger brother. Caleb Proudhammer's stories of oppression and brutality help to push Leo further into the false world of acting. Leo continually flees from those events and memories that are too painful to address.

As a young boy Leo learns of the disparity between the races and questions the meaning of democracy. The reality of racism ruins his childhood fantasies. The Proudhammer family consists of a father, an immigrant from Trinidad, a somewhat idealized mulatto mother, the older rebellious Caleb, and little Leo. One explanation for Leo's estrangement lies in his relationship with his brother Caleb. The respectable older brother, a stock character in the Baldwin canon since the publication of "Sonny's Blues," is present in the guise of the reformed Caleb in Tell Me How Long

15 Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 70.

the Train's Been Gone. Disabled by his inability to accept the changes wrought by imprisonment and racism faced by his older brother Caleb, Leo does not allow anyone to get close to him. He is intent on not experiencing the transformative power of deeply emotional, religious, and sexual life that releases Caleb from his dungeon.

The lack of one consistent emotional and sexual relationship in Leo's life is further evidence of his failure as an artist-hero. Linked by their desire to escape their respective backgrounds, Leo Proudhammer and Barbara King, a white actress, sacrifice their personal happiness for public recognition. They meet as young, would-be actors who join a summer theater troupe. One of the most crucial moments in the novel occurs when Lola and Saul San Marquand, the directors of the Actors' Means Workshop, assess Leo's and Barbara's talent. After comparing Leo unfavorably to the legendary Negro actor Paul Robeson, the San Marquands deliver their verdict. "There is nothing to indicate--ah--in our opinion--that you have any very striking theatrical ability" (Train 301). The San Marquands' unequivocal statement that Leo must be a spectacular actor to compensate for his race leads to him to an almost exaggerated emphasis on attaining professional success. This scene, slightly reminiscent of Baldwin's own conclusions expressed in The Fire Next Time, echoes Barbara King's demand for greatness. King, ever the realist, acknowledges the futility of a romantic relationship with Leo.

It means . . . that we must be great. That's all we'll have. That's the

only way we won't lose each other . . . you don't belong to me . . .
but let's be to each other what we can. But if we do it right . . . we
can stretch our while a very long while and we can make each other
better (Train 274).

This pact neatly removes any guilt from Leo for his selfish treatment of Barbara. Her love for Leo allows him to keep her at a distance lest she crack his armor. Barbara's willingness to accept a platonic friendship, the only relationship Leo offers her, permits him to dictate the nature of their coupling.

Finally, "Black Christopher" returns us to the present as Leo leaves the hospital and resumes his life with Christopher Hall, a young African American man. While it is often assumed that the inclusion of Christopher Hall, Leo's young lover, is Baldwin's answer to critics who assert that he is out of touch with the social and political movements in the black community in the late 1960s, my interest lies in how Christopher affects the artist-hero. Leo Proudhammer's relationship with Christopher Hall is Baldwin's first depiction of a loving, long-term sexual relationship between two African American men. Leo plays a role with Christopher. Secure in his manhood, Christopher is perhaps a precursor of Jimmy, another self-confident young man in love with an older successful African American singer in Just Above My Head. Christopher's function in the novel is twofold: first, he forces Leo to reevaluate his life in terms of race and his obligations to the African American community, and,

in doing so, Leo finally begins to experience life instead of pretending to live one on stage. Or, as Leo puts it, Christopher defrosts him: "In beginning to thaw, I had to see how I had frozen myself; and, in freezing myself, had frozen Barbara" (*Train* 449). Christopher and Barbara operate as two halves of a whole that Leo is determined to keep separate. Leo, the successful star, emerges as an empty vessel, ready to be loved and more than willing to play the variety of roles dictated by him. He is Christopher's lover and Sugar Daddy but not really his friend. Christopher redeems Leo by helping him to acknowledge those many identities which define him: being famous, being bisexual, being African American, and being an actor.

The hero's relationship with Christopher can be read as an attempt to reconnect with his cultural past. Christopher, a young activist, remains part of the African American community. Having described Baldwin's post-*Another Country* writing as overly political, Houston Baker finds the relationship between Christopher and Leo troubling: ". . . Leo remains unsure of what he must do for or with Christopher. And while he provides material comfort to a degree of understanding, it is impossible to assume he truly understands his young lover."¹⁶ As written, the relationship appears doomed. Leo's uncertainty pervades every facet of his life. At the end of the novel, Leo heads off, alone, for a European vacation. We don't know why Christopher doesn't accompany him and are left to assume that Leo the loner has returned. The

16 Baker, "The Embattled Craftsman" 71.

solo trip Leo Proudhammer takes at the end of the novel is yet another indication of his failure.

In many ways Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone helps us to define Baldwin's ideal artist-hero because it presents a portrait of everything the successful artist is not. Baldwin suggests that Leo's preoccupation with fame is the fate of the artist who avoids truth in his personal life and who refuses to express honesty in his art. By failing to achieve the most basic requirement for the Baldwin artist-hero, self-knowledge and self-love, Leo becomes Baldwin's anti artist-hero.

Conceiving of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone as a study of "the divided self" provides additional weight to the image of Leo Proudhammer as a negative representation of the artist as a hero. Characterized by Maurice Beebe as confessionals, artist-novels such as Ivan Turgenev's Diary of a Superfluous Man and Gustave Flaubert's Sentimental Education frequently present their heroes as being unable to reconcile their professional goals with their personal ones. "Most of the heroes are so self-absorbed that they have difficulty getting outside themselves and hence are naturally at odds with their environment."¹⁷ For James Baldwin, the famous artist, particularly the actor, no longer honestly represents his community or himself for his work has been tainted and made more palatable for the sake of

17 Maurice Beebe, Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce (New York: New York University Press, 1964) 54.

success.

The cynicism with which Baldwin viewed actors and the acting profession was evident in an article originally published in 1961 in The Urbanite and in his 1968 Look interview with Sidney Poitier. Baldwin outlines the challenges before the Negro actor and his diminished chances for actually making it to the stage in his 1967 article, "James Baldwin on the Negro Actor": "And, whatever his training, he is not there to get a role he really wants to play: he is there to get a role which will allow him to be seen."¹⁸ Baldwin implies that exposure is the actor's sole motivation. Reflecting on Poitier's performance in "Cry, the Beloved Country," Baldwin sounds particularly melancholy. "That was the young Sidney, and I sensed that I was going to miss him . . . but then I miss the young Jimmy Baldwin too."¹⁹ A similar air of disappointment and resignation pervades Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

Leo's desire to be an actor becomes entangled with his pursuit of stardom. In the only discussion of his approach to acting, Leo acknowledges his failure. "I've always tried to do things I wasn't sure I could do . . . And then you just do the same thing over and over again and pretty soon you're not an actor, you're just a kind of highly paid--mannequin . . . Manipulated" (Train 75-76). Leo Proudhammer becomes a celebrated actor after appearing as butlers and other domestic servants in

18 Baldwin, "James Baldwin on the Negro Actor," Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre, ed. Lindsay Patterson, (New York: Publishers Co., 1967) 129.

19 Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier" 52.

various theater productions. Leo achieves fame when he plays a role intended for a white artist. One may ask what kind of truth Leo sees in his portrayal of white characters. "The price a black actor pays for playing, in effect, a white role. . . . is, at best, to minimize and, at worst, to lie about everything that has produced him, about everything he knows."²⁰ The ease with which Leo achieves astonishing success speaks of his ability to remove himself from his ethnic and racial identity. Leo Proudhammer must at least pretend to be something other than what he is in order to be accepted.

Meaningful artistic success eludes Proudhammer because, as he acknowledges, he cannot pay the price: "My pride became my affliction. I found myself imprisoned in the stronghold I had built. The day came when I wished to break my silence and found that I could not speak: the actor could no longer be distinguished from his role" (Train 46). What Leo describes as pride, I would call fear. He is frightened by his sexuality and his innermost desires.

The image of Leo imprisoned by fame and denial is present throughout the novel. He is alienated from the African American community and his family. Isolation and alienation, the terms Baldwin uses most frequently to describe both the artist and his experience in America, characterize the nature of Leo Proudhammer's

20 Baldwin, "Can Black and White Artists Still Work Together," New York Times 2 February 1969.**.

condition. While it is a tenet that the artist-figure evolves in solitude, for Baldwin, the artist-hero "is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself."²¹ Conquering the self requires understanding and accepting all parts of the self. The journey toward self-acceptance is an important characteristic of the artist-novel. The artist typically moves toward truth, not away from it. Leo Proudhammer consistently fails these requirements for the successful artist-hero. Leo's negative self-image and his sexual confusion begin during his childhood when he repeatedly refers to himself as a sissy. Allowing others to define him, Leo does not assert his own identity. Leo Proudhammer constantly runs away from unpleasantness and disappointments as a child. Twice he flees home, once by riding the subway and later by going to the home of one of Caleb's friends. Each time he stays within the black community, but does not find the permanent refuge he seeks. As an adult, Leo's flight takes a more subtle form. He doesn't share his intimate thoughts and feelings and his vocation as an actor encourages Leo's evasive behavior.

In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Baldwin's hero has not been forced underground like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but instead imprisons himself behind a carefully constructed public persona. By becoming an actor, Leo hides behind the characters he portrays. Or as Leo says, "It's hard, after all, for a boy to find

21 Baldwin, "The Creative Process," *Price* 315.

out who he is, or what he wants, if he is always afraid and always acting, and especially when this fear invades his most private life" (*Train* 348). With this statement Leo Proudhammer acknowledges his deep-seated fear. Leo is fearful of his homosexual desire and of sharing the kind of intimacy he had with his brother Caleb. The artist's recognition of the precarious state in which he must reside can lead to an increased sense of isolation. This isolation leads not to introspection but to a further distancing of self. Reflecting upon the "success" he and Leo Proudhammer have attained, Baldwin adopts a somewhat cynical tone. ". . .[T]he nature of the society isolates its artists so severely for their vision; penalizes them so mercilessly for their vision and endeavor; and the American form of recognition, fame and money, can be the most devastating penalty of all."²² It is particularly destructive for the African American artist and it can alienate the artist-hero from himself and from those he purportedly represents: ". . .[E]very Negro celebrity is regarded with some distrust by black people, who have every reason in the world to feel themselves abandoned."²³ The feeling is that your success is paid for by a certain amount of insincerity--the wearing of a particular mask. At the novel's end Proudhammer briefly alludes to a planned trip to Europe where he will attempt to connect with the

22 Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier" 52.

23 Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier" 56.

self he left behind in Harlem, but Baldwin has led the reader to conclude that nothing will come of his journey.

Reflecting on Miles Davis' legacy, Baldwin ponders the meaning and impact of legendary status.

In many ways I have the same difficulty as he has, in terms of the private and public life. In terms of the legend. It's difficult to be a legend. It's hard for me to recognize *me*. You spend a lot of time trying to avoid it . . . it's unbearable, the way the world treats you . . . because time is passing and you are not your legend, but you're trapped in it.²⁴

Yet it is easy to hide behind fame rather than accept the harsh reality of real life. Other African American writers, most notably Ralph Ellison, learned from Baldwin's harsh experience with celebrity. In his last interview, the reclusive Ellison offered these observations on the nature of fame: "One of the advantages as a writer I still have is that people usually don't recognize me. . . One of the mistakes that some good writers make is latching onto celebrity, being feted wherever they go. That blurs things. You can be lonely in a crowd. That isolation, which allows you to hear a little better, and sometimes to see with more perception--that's what real novelists

24 Baldwin, interview, Troupe 189.

have."²⁵ Ellison could be describing the last twenty-five years of James Baldwin's life. The double nature of celebrity is a concern for Baldwin early in his career. The interviews given after 1964 show a writer who is preoccupied with the responsibilities and effects of fame. He clearly differentiates between the achievement of honest expression in art and commercial success. Again, as in "Sonny's Blues," the idea of success is juxtaposed with death. "Writers can die in many ways. Some perish in obscurity and others in the light. They die in the street and in the Waldorf Astoria sipping champagne."²⁶ This sentiment pervades Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone in the persona of the emotionally dead Leo Proudhammer. The spirit of the person is what is important. The trappings merely attempt to obscure it. Though fame gave him a ready audience for his views, Baldwin found that he was greatly restricted in terms of subject matter.

The African American artist has the additional hurdle or obligation of race to confront in terms of audience. In his touching remembrance of Lorraine Hansberry, Baldwin reveals the reasons underlying his respect for the playwright: "She was wise enough and honest enough to recognize that black American artists are a very special case. One is not merely an artist and one is not judged merely as an artist: the black

25 David Remnick, "Seeing Ralph Ellison," The New Yorker 2 May 1994: 41.

26 Baldwin, "Interview with Dan Georgakas" Black Voices. ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: NAL, 1968) 661.

people crowding around Lorraine, whether or not they considered her an artist, assuredly considered her a witness."²⁷ The ultimate goal is the Baldwin artist hero is to be a witness. Here race adds a peculiar flavor to creative expression. As a witness, the African American artist must be committed to expressing the truth about his experiences as an African American in his work. The artist is, in Baldwin's view, speaking for the group. Because Hansberry employs her vision to testify to the experiences of African Americans, she, in Baldwin's view, achieves meaningful success.

After spending his childhood in Harlem, Leo is well aware of the reality of his racial identity and of the value of fame. Being well known protects Leo from negative experiences since he is elevated to a superior status in comparison to any other African American man. After collapsing on stage, he thinks only of being identified as a celebrity at the hospital.

I had not showered, I had not removed my makeup, I had not got [ic] my own face back . . . No one would recognize me where I was going! I would be lost. 'Oh, Pete,' I muttered, I moaned, and I could not keep the tears from falling. 'Please wash my face' (Train 17).

He knows that police officers harass a ten-year-old child because of the color of his

27 Baldwin, "Sweet Lorraine." To Be Young, Gifted And Black. By Lorraine Hansberry (New York: New American Library, 1969) xii-xiii.

skin because it happened to him. He also knows how frequently African Americans are mistreated and so uses fame as his shield. The sense of falsity that marks all aspects of Leo's life arouses pity, not respect.

Although he realizes the steps he must take to overcome feelings of isolation and confusion, Leo is afraid and unwilling to engage in the necessary self-analysis.

My race was revealed as my pain . . . the possibility of creating my language out of my pain, of using my pain to create myself . . . My pain was the horse that I must learn to ride. I flicked my cigarette out of the window and watched it drop and die. I thought of throwing myself after it. I was no rider and pain was no horse (Train 102-102).

Leo's acknowledged refusal to express his pain through his art dooms him. Leo's momentary contemplation of suicide links him with the doomed Rufus Scott of Another Country and is yet another sign of his failure as an artist.

Leo's standing as an artist-hero is indicated through his relationship with the African Americans community. The successful Baldwin artist hero never leaves the community emotionally. The community is an extension of the African American family. Leo's being on stage is an excellent metaphor for how he distances himself from others.

I was one of the speakers at this rally. I would have been there anyway . . . but I was seated on the wooden platform because my name can draw

crowds. Having never been quite able to consider my name my own, this fact meant something else for Christopher and also for the crowds, than it could have meant for me (Train 112).

The fact that Leo does not even claim ownership of his own name is telling.

Another indication of Proudhammer's failure is his lack of closeness with his own family. Family is an important component in James Baldwin's paradigm of the artist as a hero. Yet the Proudhammers play only a minor role in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Leo Proudhammer shares the same Harlem upbringing as John Grimes in Go Tell It on The Mountain, Sonny in "Sonny's Blues," Rufus Scott in Another Country and Arthur Montana in Just Above My Head. But Harlem is a place from which Leo flees. As a celebrity, Leo Proudhammer ceases to belong to himself and instead becomes a commodity. He is a star, not just a relative, even within his own family. "I do not want to see Caleb, but Caleb will be meeting the plane in New York—in spite of everything or perhaps because of everything I am still his little brother and besides I am famous."²⁸ Leo Proudhammer removes himself from the community and, as he grows older, desperately desires to repair the rupture.

The intense public clamor that greeted all of his nonfiction publications during the 1960s caused Baldwin to question his own effectiveness as a novelist. Many

28 Baldwin, Train 308.

critics and readers either ignore Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone or point to it as evidence of Baldwin's limited talents as a novelist. Mario Puzo and Irving Howe both describe the novel as a "soap opera."²⁹ It is astonishing how many treatments of Baldwin's fiction ignore this novel. In his book length evaluation of Baldwin's work, Horace Porter mentions Train only twice; apparently only the homosexual relationship and the attention to political issues in the novel are important. Irving Howe and William Farrison are disgusted by the references to phallicism and the use of obscenities in the novel. "But is it probable, one wonders, that an established author such as Baldwin would need to resort to vulgar usage for want of a large vocabulary?"³⁰ James Campbell, one of Baldwin's biographers, charges that the novel is overly long and does not have a plot.³¹

Houston Baker and Commentary's John Thompson find merit in Baldwin's presentation of the life of an economically successful African American and see a strong connection between Leo Proudhammer and Sonny of "Sonny's Blues" and

29 Mario Puzo, "His Cardboard Lovers," Critical Essays on James Baldwin, eds. Fred Standley and Nancy Burt, and Irving Howe "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse," James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Keneth Kinnamon.

30 William Farrison, "If Baldwin's Train Has Not Gone" James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation, ed. Therman O'Daniel (Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1977) 75.

31 Campbell 226.

Rufus Scott in Another Country.³² The portions of the novel in which Leo reminisces about his childhood in Harlem are universally praised because many reviewers agree with Irving Howe's appraisal that "James Baldwin can never be wholly uninteresting when he writes about Harlem, especially Harlem as seen through the eyes of a vulnerable black boy."³³ Because Noel Schraufnagel's interest in Train is restricted his vision of the novel as evidence of Baldwin's renewed political activity, it is all the more surprising that he finds the novel to be "Baldwin's best since Go Tell It on the Mountain."³⁴

Many reviewers, like the New York Times Book Review's Mario Puzo, insist on reading Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone as Baldwin's "attempt to recreate . . . the tragic condition of the Negro in America."³⁵ The assumption that the persona of the artist is incidental to the tale of the hardships and inequalities of Black life in America explains many of the reviews of not only Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, but of Another Country as well. Thinking exclusively in terms of race precludes many reviewers from noting that the focus of much of James

32 See Baker, The Journey Back and John Thompson, "Baldwin: The Prophet as Artist," Commentary 45 (June 1968): 67-69.

33 Irving Howe, "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse," James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Keneth Kinnamon, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall) 100.

34 Noel Schraufnagel, From Apology to Protest: The Black American Novel, (Deland, FL: Everett/Edwards, Inc. 1973) 187.

35 Puzo 155.

Baldwin's writing is not race relations, but the experiences of the artist. I tend to agree with one reviewer who noted that the novel "lacks . . . the faintest penetration from real life and real feeling."³⁶ Irving Howe offers the most sustained estimation of Baldwin's talents as a novelist, even comparing him to Jane Austen. "Baldwin's true gift as a novelist is for comedy of manners, nuanced observation, refinement of detail."³⁷ But, like most critics, Howe is unable to separate Baldwin from his novel.

For the Negro writer, if he is indeed to be a *writer*, public posture matters less than personal identity . . . James Baldwin has come to a point where all of these problems crush down upon him and he does not quite know who he is, as writer, celebrity, or black man; so that he now suffers from the most disastrous of psychic conditions--a separation between his feelings and his voice.³⁸

It is hard for me to disagree with Howe's argument that Baldwin's use of language is forced in sections of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

The title of the novel refers to the train as a motif for freedom in African American literature. Thus, "tell me how long the train's been gone" alludes to the

36 Philip Toynbee, "Don't Go Tell It on the Mountain: Review of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone," The Atlantic (July 1968): 91

37 Irving Howe 107.

38 Howe 98-99.

length of Leo's imprisonment for he has missed the freedom train. The price of Leo's liberation is the courage to face himself. He can only be saved by his recognition and acceptance of his identity as an African American, homosexual man. He must fall to the threshing floor. Leo Proudhammer articulates his inability to be an artist, as Baldwin defines it, through his lifestyle and profession. His upcoming vacation fills him with fear because he will be left alone without the mask of a role to confront the real Leo, the one who wants to be an artistic success.

The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play; and it is not always easy--in fact, it is always extremely hard--to maintain a kind of watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is.³⁹

Leo typifies a retreat from artistic integrity, an exchange of morality and truth for renown and money.

Autobiographical elements are sprinkled throughout the novel, but what are we to make of them? Leo, the name of our narrator, is also Baldwin's astrological sign. Like Leo, Baldwin lived in an artists colony and worked part-time as an artist's model. It is clear that he drew upon some of the experiences for the writing of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. A recent biographer views the similarities between character and author as a sign of ineffective writing. "Leo's voice is James

39 Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" Price 291.

Baldwin's voice, but the character can merely mimic his creator, and the result is parody."⁴⁰ David Leeming, Baldwin's authorized biographer and secretary during the writing of Train, leaves no doubt as to the autobiographical import of the novel; "Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone would reflect Baldwin's situation by focusing on a public man's mid-life struggle with himself, his career, and the evil that beleaguers him."⁴¹ Indeed some of Baldwin's attitudes toward fame are strikingly similar to Proudhammer's. "I have a public life--and I know that, O.K. I have a private life, something which I know a good deal less. And the temptation is to avoid the private life because you can hide in the public one."⁴² In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Baldwin presents an artist who succumbs to the temptation.

If the African American artist is to achieve any sort of success, it is necessary for him to resolve a way to remain true to himself and his community in a society that demands that he does exactly the opposite. An examination of the relationship of the artist to his audience and the price he pays, particularly African American artists, for commercial success is the focus of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Leo Proudhammer is more financially successful than any other Baldwin artist figure

40 Campbell 227.

41 Leeming, James Baldwin 264.

42 Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin" The Black American Writer, Vol. 1. ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969) 214.

yet the price he pays for his achievement is a high one. The trappings of success, fame, and money make it more difficult for Leo to accomplish what should be his primary function: to serve as a witness. Sometimes, as with Rufus Scott in Another Country, the price is simply too high, but in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Leo Proudhammer refuses to pay his emotional debt. Sadly, our society rewards the kind of falsity and lack of truth that Leo symbolizes. "It is one of the less pleasant aspects of the American way when a black artist is successful and silent, he remains a national favorite. But when a black artist becomes important enough to want better roles (usually those with more dignity and less racism inherent in them) or when the artist makes some comment against the social-political climate of the country, he becomes a doomed man."⁴³ In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone James Baldwin condemns the price American society extracts for commercial success by painting a tragic portrait of the African American artist, alienated from his community, his friends, and even himself. The struggle of the artist figure to achieve a sense of self and a personal identity, free from racial or sexual categories, continues in James Baldwin's final novel Just Above My Head.

43 Bogle 94-95.

CHAPTER FIVE
“Another Light, Last Light”:
Legacy, Love, and Art in Just Above My Head

I don't know whether you can hunt more and more of
your own life or if more and more of your own life will
hunt you, but it comes back to you during points in your
life in another light. One's relationship to the past changes.
Yet that boy, the boy I was, still controls the man I am.
James Baldwin, 1986¹

Many changes took place in James Baldwin's life between the publication of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone in 1968 and Just Above My Head in 1979. He wrote another novel, If Beale Street Could Talk, one play The Amen Corner, one screenplay, One Day When I Was Lost, and compiled two collections of essays, No Name in the Street and The Devil Finds Work. If Beale Street Could Talk and The Amen Corner also examine, in small part, the obstacles facing the African American male artist. Baldwin also collaborated on two

¹ Baldwin, interview Conversations with James Baldwin Eds. Fred. L. Standley and Louis Pratt (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989) 278.

conversations, A Rap on Race with Margaret Mead and A Dialogue with Nikki Giovanni. Between the publication of Just Above My Head in 1979 and his death in 1987, James Baldwin published just one book, The Evidence of Things Not Seen, a long essay on the murder of twenty-six African American children in Atlanta, Georgia. Of all these works, only Just Above My Head continues the precise exploration into the rights and responsibilities of the artist in much the same fashion as “Sonny’s Blues,” Another Country, and Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone. Just Above My Head marks Baldwin’s return to fiction and to a new examination of the life of the artist. The passing years made a generally reflective Baldwin, then in his late fifties, all the more introspective. He was trying to come to terms with his diminished reputation as a writer, the process of aging, and his failing health. In several interviews James Baldwin discussed the difficulties he encountered during the writing of Just Above My Head. Baldwin’s frustration with the endless interpretations of his fiction as pure autobiography is evident in most of his interviews. He seems compelled to remind readers that he is writing fiction.

When I was writing Just Above My Head, I’d never been more frightened in my life either as a man or as a writer. Yet I knew it had to be done. That book is not directly autobiographical at all, but it is autobiographical on a much deeper level. There are

elements which you can place in my life . . . yet there are no direct, one-on-one relationships between my life and the lives of the people in that book. It truly is a composite.²

The division between public and private is slight in Just Above My Head. It should be noted that Arthur is Baldwin's middle name and Jimmy is his nickname. These similarities help to support Baldwin's view of the characters as composite portraits, but do little to silence critics who insist on reading his fiction as autobiography.

The autobiographical stance that Baldwin takes in his nonfiction greatly impacts the critical response to his fiction. Baldwin's audience became enamored with the public persona that was created by his frequent appearances on television and radio programs. The personal tone of essays such as "Notes of a Native Son" and "My Dungeon Shook" from The Fire Next Time encouraged readers to make a personal connection with Baldwin. "My Dungeon Shook" is actually a letter Baldwin wrote to his nephew and namesake James. Even David Leeming, Baldwin's close friend, perpetuates the idea that Baldwin is writing autobiographically. He describes Just Above My Head as "an extended metaphor through which Baldwin could once again examine his own life and career as an

² Baldwin, interview, Conversations 278.

artist and witness.¹³ This reading greatly simplifies the novel. It is more valuable to see this novel in terms of its continuation of the theme of the artist-hero.

Just Above My Head marks a return to familiar territory in terms of its subject matter and still manages to offer a more intimate look at the life of the artist than any of Baldwin's other works. This novel, shrouded in nostalgia and melancholy, shows Baldwin's age as a man and his expertise as a novelist. Published in 1979 when Baldwin was 55, Just Above My Head is Hall Montana's remembrance of his brother, gospel singer Arthur Montana. For the first time in Baldwin's work, we are presented with a full portrait of an artist as the novel follows Arthur Montana from birth to death.

Among the issues that I will consider in this chapter are the central questions of whether Arthur meets the criteria for the successful artist-hero in Baldwin's paradigm and whether his death either supports or lessens his standing. The impact of Arthur's homosexuality on his mission as an artist and as a man will also be examined. Besides being James Baldwin's only artist-narrative that includes the death of the central artist-figure, Just Above My Head revisits several issues that dominate "Sonny's Blues," Another Country, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. The exploration of the bond between brothers, begun in "Sonny's Blues" and continued in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, is

³ Leeming, James Baldwin 345.

again examined in Just Above My Head. Hall Montana's narration of the novel is his attempt to understand his young brother's life. The novel asks whether an African American singer can survive the combination of religion, art, and homosexuality. With the death of Arthur Montana, one can conclude that the answer is seemingly a negative one. The question of whether it is possible for the homosexual artist-hero to attain a long lasting commitment and to achieve of commercial success without sacrificing his integrity is just one of the issues that is resolved in Just Above My Head.

By beginning and ending with the death of the artist-figure, Just Above My Head clearly investigates the question of legacy. This novel is Baldwin's last published portrait of the artist as a hero and it can be read as his final statement on the experiences of the American artist. Arthur Montana, an enigmatic gospel singer, is the artist hero in Just Above My Head. As a singer, Arthur combines the expressive qualities of Sonny and the performance ability of Leo Proudhammer. The structure and narrative strategy of the novel distance the reader from the central character and so the essence of Arthur Montana's character remains elusive.

Just Above My Head traces the lives of the members of the Montana family--Paul, the father; Florence, the mother, and their sons, Hall and Arthur and their relationship with the Miller family- Joel and Amy and their children Julia and

Jimmy. These two families are bound together by religion, music, and the friendships between the children. Young Julia Miller's calling to preach the gospel irrevocably alters the lives of all the characters in the novel. Her time spent in the pulpit has a negative effect on her family and ultimately destroys Arthur's first serious relationship. Arthur later becomes an internationally famous gospel singer while his older brother Hall marries and starts a family. As he approaches middle age, Arthur falls in love with Jimmy, Julia's younger brother, and this union draws the Montanas and the Millers even closer.

Just Above My Head, told in flashback, is divided into five books: Book One, "Have Mercy," looks at the impact of Arthur's death on his family; Book Two, "Twelve Gates to the City," focuses on the influence of religion on the black family; Book Three, "The Gospel Singer," concentrates on Arthur's development as a man and a singer; Book Four, "Stepchild," examines the love lives of Hall and Arthur Montana, and Book Five, "The Gates of Hell," explores the last years of Arthur Montana's life.

As a teenager Arthur forms a gospel quartet, the Trumpets of Zion, that is mentored by his father. Singing helps to keep the young boys away from the dangers in their Harlem neighborhood. The group, Crunch, Peanut, Red, and Arthur, embark upon a singing tour of the South to generate some income. The young boys become young men during this trip due in large part to the sad fact

that only three members of the quartet survive the journey.

Arthur's singing career is encouraged by his family and he later follows in his father's footsteps by becoming a professional entertainer. Although Hall attests to the difficulty of Arthur's journey in his narration, he also suggests that he and his father shelter Arthur from danger. Unlike the narrator in "Sonny's Blues," Hall Montana is very much aware of the price his brother pays in order to sing. Paul Montana, understanding music and its effect on performers and audiences, trains his son Arthur to be a musician and a singer. Arthur's rebirth as an artist begins when he performs for his family.

The first song that Arthur sings in public is a prophetic statement on his life.

When in the darkness
I would grope
Faith always sees
A star of hope:
And soon from all life's grief
And danger, I shall be free,
Someday.⁴

⁴ Baldwin, Just Above My Head (New York: Dial 1979) (hereafter cited parenthetically as Just) 28.

The light and dark imagery of the song correlates to Baldwin's view of knowledge, particularly self-knowledge, as illuminating. Despite his professional and personal success, Arthur remains melancholy.

My contention that James Baldwin has "only one tale to tell" is best exemplified by the connection between "Sonny's Blues," published in 1957, and Just Above My Head, published in 1979. Examining Arthur Montana in connection with Sonny allows us to see how Baldwin's vision of the artist and his mission remains consistent despite the twenty-two years between the publication of the two works. Baldwin acknowledges the linkages between "Sonny's Blues" and Just Above My Head in interviews that he gave to promote the novel.

Just Above My Head has been with me for so long. I didn't do any rehearsals for it at all, except--this is hindsight--the central situation, the situation of the two brothers, is in an old short story, "Sonny's Blues," and the metaphor is music, and to some extent but in a very different way in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. But I really connect this in my head with "Sonny's Blues."⁵

Not only do both Arthur Montana and Sonny have the same favorite drink, Scotch and milk, but "Sonny's Blues" and Just Above My Head also share the distinction of having first person narrators who are not the subject of the work. Each text is

⁵ Baldwin, interview, Conversations with James Baldwin, 205.

narrated by the older brothers of the protagonists. This technique can create a distance between the reader and the protagonist that is difficult to overcome. Despite a distant narrator, the emotional impact of "Sonny's Blues" is redeemed when Sonny takes over the narrative to reveal his ascension to art. Significantly Arthur Montana does not assume the narrative in Just Above My Head and so remains voiceless.

Just Above My Head presents Arthur's life through the eyes of his older brother, Hall. Although Hall describes the novel as "a love song to my brother," he admits his own prominence. "It was not meant to be my story, though it is far more my story than I would have thought, or might have wished . . . It is an attempt to face both love and death" (Just 497). Just as the younger brother's personal odyssey threatens to overtake the narrator's journey in "Sonny's Blues," so too does Arthur Montana's story become Hall's. Eleanor Traylor argues convincingly that Hall's focus on Arthur causes him to be less introspective about his own experience. "Hall's ability to see out blurs, sometimes, his ability to see *within*. For really, it is Hall's story, via Arthur, that we witness."⁶ Much of the novel concerns Hall Montana's love affairs and his life with his wife and children.

Hall, like the unnamed narrator in "Sonny's Blues," is an unreliable

⁶ Eleanor Traylor, "I Hear Music in the Air: James Baldwin's Just Above My Head. Critical Essays on James Baldwin, eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988) 222.

narrator on many levels and yet he claims to view his brother's life with a clarity missing from his own. "He was on stage. He caught the light, and so I saw him: more clearly than I will ever see myself" (*Just* 17). Technically it is impossible for Hall to truly know Arthur's intimate thoughts and feelings; he can only claim to know himself. And yet Hall professes to have a certain insight into his brother's life. The two brothers are separated by a seven-year age difference and their sexual orientation.

One wonders just how clearly Hall sees his brother. He obviously sees Arthur's homosexuality and yet feels that he cannot tell this part of his brother's life. Melvin Dixon implies that Hall Montana's status as a heterosexual makes it impossible for him to understand Arthur's life. "The novel is Hall's attempt to relieve his evasiveness and to examine if not the lower 'frequencies' of Arthur's death . . . then the heights reached in Arthur's career and personality that are, for the most part, beyond Hall's reach."⁷ Although he admits to having no knowledge about certain parts of Arthur's life, Hall's relinquishing of the narrative to Jimmy, Arthur's lover, at the end of the novel is unsettling. Is it possible for someone, however close, to know the details of another's life? This is a central question in the narrative. "Hall's narration of the life of gospel singer Arthur Montana . . . is merely one brother's manipulation of another to come to terms with his

⁷ Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness* 137.

conventional responsibilities to family and self."⁸ I disagree with Dixon's assessment of Hall's motives because I believe that Hall's reflections are an attempt to understand Arthur as well as accept his death. The question of whether Hall accepts Arthur's homosexuality is one that perhaps unanswerable.

Because Just Above My Head is Baldwin's last novel and focuses on the life of a singer, it can be read as his final statement on the artist as a hero in fiction. Arthur is James Baldwin's only artist-hero who manages to combine an artistically successful career with a promising love relationship for a sustained period of time. Yet the message that Arthur Montana sends is a mixed one, full of passion and contradictions. Arthur's death links him with Rufus Scott, whose suicide is the pivotal act in Another Country. While it is clear that Arthur Montana fulfills some of the requirements for the artist as a hero, he seemingly fails the most important one: acceptance and love of self.

Arthur Montana fulfills some of Baldwin's mandates for the artist-figure. For Arthur Montana music is linked to honesty. When Arthur sings, he does so as a witness. He accepts the role of a witness which James Baldwin feels is the essential function of the artist. The unwavering sanction of his mission as a singer sets Arthur Montana apart from Baldwin's artist-figures. Having chosen to perform gospel music, Arthur remains physically, emotionally, and, most

⁸ Dixon, Ride Out the Wilderness 135.

important, artistically entrenched in the African American community. His trip to a Harlem bar where he is recognized symbolizes the attainment of success in Baldwin's paradigm. Although the bar patrons are familiar with Arthur's international fame as a gospel singer, they treat him as a member of the family. Arthur's ability and desire to socialize with regular folk despite his celebrity status signals his allegiance to African American cultural standards.

Arthur demonstrates his commitment to expressing truth in his art through his dedication to singing only gospel music. Having been raised in the Baptist Church, singing gospel music is what is most comfortable to Arthur. Although he is tortured by his feelings of shame and condemnation about his homosexuality, Arthur's partial success as an artist-hero is assured because, as Sonny and Eric do before him, he uses his art to illuminate some element of truth in his life. As a homosexual, Arthur feels that it would be dishonest for him to sing popular love songs about women.

The most crucial element in the development of the artistic identity, the threshing floor experience, is bypassed in Just Above My Head. The threshing floor episode is characterized by an emotional and physical collapse. The artist, worn out by pretending to adhere to someone else's definition of his identity, finally accepts his destined fate: to be an artist. Arthur's inability to articulate his pain either verbally or through his art precludes him from the fall to the threshing

floor.

Because previous artist-figures in this study have been closely identified with the blues, it is fitting that Baldwin's presentation of the artist as a hero concludes with the portrait of an artist who literally sings the blues. The blues are often linked to the personal experience of the blues singer. Paul Oliver advocates this autobiographical reading of the blues song in Blues Fell This Morning: "Blues is, above all, the expression of the individual singer. Declaring his loves, his hates, his disappointments, his experiences, the blues singer speaks for himself, and only indirectly, for others."⁹ Julie Nash sees the narration of the life of the blues hero as a form of the blues. "Baldwin takes this use of music to its next level by presenting the novel itself as a blues song . . . In telling Arthur's story, Hall literally sings the blues."¹⁰

If we look at the blues at work in Baldwin's artist-novels, we see the emergence of a pattern. Sonny learns to express his blues through his music and with this act achieves salvation. The blues, in the forms of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, permeate Another Country. They serve as commentary on the lives of the artist-heroes in the novel. Actually the ways in which the artists respond to the

⁹ Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning (New York: Cambridge UP, 1960) 276.

¹⁰ Julie Nash, "A Terrifying Sacrament': James Baldwin's Use of Music in Just Above My Head." MAWA Review (7.2) 1992: 109.

blues indicate whether they will live or die. The blues operate as a cultural signifier and a survival technique. The artists use their talent to sing the blues and, in doing so, learn to cope with their problems. Hall Montana captures the essence of the blues when he describes one of his brother's early performances. "And yet, he sang. . .and there was something frightening about so deep and unreadable a passion in one so young. Arthur's phrasing was the key--unanswerable; his delivery of the song made you realize that he knew what the song was about" (Just 92). Yet, because Arthur does not explain what lies behind his song, a sense of ambiguity clouds his performance.

After making love to Crunch, his first male lover, Arthur gleans insight into the meaning of his song. "He was frightened, but triumphant. He wanted to sing (Just 209). He expresses his deepest feelings through his art. Love, a strong motivator for Arthur throughout his life, elicits various emotions within him with the strongest being a desire to sing. Love means acceptance to Arthur and this emotion liberates, at least temporarily, his artistic voice. The problem lies in Arthur's search for acceptance from others instead of looking inward. His status as an artist hero is tenuous until he learns to accept himself as a homosexual, Christian, gospel singer.

Understanding the essence of Arthur's song is the central ambiguous element of the novel. There are a few clues. Early on in his career, Arthur tells

his brother that his first sexual experience occurred when a man paid him for oral sex.

I never forgot that man . . . not so much because of the physical thing-- but-- . . . it was the way he made me feel about myself. That man made it impossible for me to touch anybody, man or woman, for a long time, and still, he filled me with a terrible curiosity. And, all that time, I was singing, man, I was singing up a storm . . . I've got to live the life I sing about in my song (*Just* 60-61).

It is suggested that the confusion and pain that Arthur experiences is expressed in his singing. Just as he is 'singing up a storm,' the implication is that this is Arthur's way of "confronting that storm inside." This scene is reminiscent of Sonny's confession to his brother. Unlike Sonny, Arthur doesn't receive understanding from his sibling; his confession is met with silence. With this confession Arthur is testing Hall. His brother's reaction causes Arthur to wonder if he is truly loved and accepted by his brother and father. Arthur sings in an attempt to understand his experience and how to handle it. Perhaps he sings to avoid this experience as well. Arthur's lover Jimmy gives some indications to the source of Arthur's melancholy.

Not all of the requisites for James Baldwin's artist-hero are met by Arthur Montana thus leaving us to question the source of his song. Much of the conflict

in the novel surrounds Arthur's journey toward self-acceptance in terms of his sexuality, not his art. His father, Paul, counseled him, "You can't love nobody you can't respect" (Just 292). Arthur Montana's continual inner conflict seemingly concerns whether or not others love and respect him. He will not success until he learns to look inward for the answers he seeks. ". . . Arthur began to sink beneath the double weight of the judgement without and the judgment within. . . he could not afford to live a lie" (Just 244). Attempting to live a lie is what kills Arthur.

Early in Just Above My Head the issue of legacy is evoked by Hall's son Tony who wonders, two years after his uncle's death, just what kind of man Arthur was. As an adolescent, Tony is in the process of coming to terms with his own sexuality and seems confused about how to deal with taunts that his uncle was a "faggot." "What was my uncle--Arthur--like?. . . A lot of the kids at school. . . they say--he was a faggot" (Just 36). David Bergman states that Baldwin defined faggots as "exclusively and effeminately homosexual."¹¹ Although I'm not sure if I agree with Bergman's assessment of Baldwin's use of this term, it is clear that Baldwin makes a distinction between a 'faggot' and a homosexual man. Hall's response reveals as much about himself as it does about Arthur.

I know --before Jimmy--Arthur slept with a lot of people--mostly men,
but not always. He was young, Tony. Before your mother, I slept with

¹¹ Bergman 165.

a lot of women . . . mostly women . . . not always. I'm proud of my brother, your uncle . . . You should be, too. Whatever the fuck your uncle was, and he was a whole lot of things, he was nobody's faggot (Just 36-37).

The dashes connote hesitation and discomfort. Hall certainly never expresses his pride in his brother thus Arthur forever wonders if Hall is proud of him.

Sexuality, along with the theme of love, runs throughout Just Above My Head, but it is a slow, sensual, kind of attraction. Commitment is the focus of all of the couplings in the novel. No longer are we witnessing the quick, hot, passion of Another Country or the manipulative sexual conquests so prevalent in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Just Above My Head links sexuality with love, stability, and healing. Crunch heals Julia's wounds from her incestuous relationship with her father by making love to her. He helps Arthur by showing him that men, black men, can love each other. Crunch senses Arthur's need to be accepted and embraced for who and what he is. Their affair empowers Arthur. "Still, the step from this perception to articulation is not an easy one. He has faltered and turned back many times. And yet, he knows that, when he was happy with Crunch, he was neither guilty nor ashamed. He had felt a purity, a shining, joy, as though he had been, astoundingly, miraculously, blessed, and had feared neither Satan, man, nor God. He had not doubted for a moment that all love was

holy” (Just 443). But Arthur must be able to express this same blessed feeling in his musical career. Later Arthur achieves a sense of stability in his personal and professional lives through his union with Jimmy Miller.

Arthur endures the same struggle with his sexuality that connects the other artist figures in this study except for Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues.” And, like Baldwin’s other African-American artist heroes, he ultimately is unable to reconcile his feelings about homosexuality and this failure leads to his death. The only clues that we have as to the source of Arthur’s internal conflict are a few cryptic comments in which he refers to a hidden shame. Just before Hall becomes his brother’s manager, Arthur begins the painful journey of exposing his secret life as a homosexual. “. . . I’ve always been afraid. And I’ve stayed busy. And if you notice, I’ve kind of stayed away from you. Because I’ve always looked up to you, and I love you, and I wouldn’t be able to live, man, if I thought you were ashamed of me” (Just 61). The problem lies in Arthur’s inability to believe that his family truly loves him, homosexuality and all. At the end of his life, Arthur remains concerned about how his father and brother view him. “He wonders what I, his brother, Hall: what I think of him, really. He wonders if Paul, his father, is dead in the grave, because he was ashamed of his son” (Just 555). Arthur’s desperate need for acceptance by others leads to his demise.

Fear is a central element in the lives of all of Baldwin’s homosexual artist-

heroes. They must face their fears about acknowledging their artistic and sexual identities. Arthur's conflict is a personal one. His family and friends cherish and support him regardless of his sexual orientation. Arthur has unconditional love from those around him, but he does not realize it. Because he cannot stop judging himself, Arthur can't see that no one close to him is judging him. He fears their disapproval and the potential loss of their love. "In a sense, he feels obligated to tell the truth, both for our sakes, and his own. For it is perfectly possible, after all, that it is *his* judgment that he fears and not ours, that he reads *his* judgment in our eyes (Just 443). Herein lies the source of Arthur's fall. He is condemned by his own sense of morality. Arthur remains locked in a prison of his own design. Death is his only release.

Despite his commitment to expressing honesty in his singing, Arthur is ashamed of his status as a homosexual. Just as Baldwin derides Andre Gide for not coming "to terms with his nature" in his essay "The Male Prison," so too is Arthur Montana punished for the same crime in Just Above My Head.¹² "There was, in him, a secret place which could scarcely be entered--*a goddamn echo chamber!*-- he was to cry to me much later, where Arthur paced alone"(Just 210). Pacing indicates worry and concern. Trying to get inside Arthur Montana's echo chamber

¹² Baldwin, "The Male Prison," The Price of the Ticket (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) 102.

is a frustrating experience for the reader due largely to Baldwin's choice of Hall Montana as a first person narrator. There is so much about Arthur that Hall cannot possibly know. Arthur remains for Hall, and consequently for the reader, just above his head, ever present and yet forever out of reach.

Just as the boy James Baldwin was controlled the man that he became, it is clear that John Grimes, the protagonist in Go Tell It on the Mountain, shares similarities with Arthur Montana. The associations between both the characters and the novels document the major thematic patterns evident in much of Baldwin's fiction. Both John and Arthur embark on a quest for identity although Arthur's search is much more subtle. Florence, the name of Arthur and Hall's mother, is also the name of a sympathetic character in Baldwin's first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain. An obvious connection between the two characters is their relationship with the black church. John and Arthur ultimately embrace the church on their own terms, unlike Baldwin who left the church when he was seventeen. The most important conjunction between Go Tell It on the Mountain and Just Above My Head involves the black church and homosexuality. The linking of the church and homosexuality is clear in the relationship between John Grimes and Brother Elisha in Go Tell It on the Mountain and is embodied by gospel singer Arthur Montana in Just Above My Head. John Grimes' feelings toward a fellow worshiper, the young and handsome Brother Isaiah, are clearly more than platonic.

Herein lies the central problem of John's place in society, and Baldwin's as well: how does one validate a sexual and affectional identity that so profoundly challenges both church and society? Is salvation forever out of reach for us all, forever just above our heads, as a later Baldwin novel suggests, and thus never attainable?¹³

This is a central question raised by the mysterious Arthur Montana. One could argue that beneath this inquiry lies the cause of Arthur's fall. Unlike Rufus Scott and Leo Proudhammer, Arthur does not journey alone.

The mentor to the artist-hero is usually an older man. He initiates the artist hero into the worlds of sex and art. In Go Tell It on the Mountain Elisha, John's Sunday school teacher, shepherds John Grimes through the threshing floor experience. In "Sonny's Blues" Creole literally leads Sonny to the bandstand and serves as his protector in the emotionally charged and life threatening existence of a jazz musician. Arthur has three such mentors in Just Above My Head. Crunch, older and more experienced than Arthur, essentially helps Arthur to mature emotionally and sexually. Just as Creole, the older musician, leads Sonny to the bandstand in "Sonny's Blues," Elisha and Crunch function as guides to love for John Grimes and Arthur Montana respectively.

Although he is not a virgin, Arthur Montana finds a different sort of initiation

¹³ Dixon, Ride Out the Wilderness 132.

into the life of a homosexual in France with Guy Lazar, an older Frenchman. Away from his family and friends, Arthur seeks and retrieves a part of himself that he keeps hidden, a part of himself that only Crunch had seen. With Guy Arthur finds momentary happiness and freedom from the moral burden his religion has inflicted on homosexuals. “. . . [K]issing Guy, he had felt the weight of his past, of his experience, drop from him, so that he could be naked, he had known that he would have to pick it up again. He had not known that it would be heavier, made heavier by a night” (Just 466). Being in France and with a partner who is unashamed of his homosexuality frees Arthur to fully express his sexuality.

African American male homosexuals have been shadowy figures in African American literature. They have been present, but not always seen or acknowledged. By making the central character in Just Above My Head an openly gay man, Baldwin drops the veil of bisexuality that shrouded many of his previous artist-heroes. Although Hall Montana implies that Arthur has had sexual relations with women, Arthur never makes such a claim. With Arthur Montana, James Baldwin argues for the acknowledgment of African American homosexuals as members of the African American community. Yet Baldwin is not the first African American writer to address the concerns of homosexual artists in his fiction. Take, for example, the work of Richard Bruce Nugent, one of the last surviving members of the Harlem Renaissance. Before his death in 1989, Nugent's life was seemingly of little interest

to either readers or scholars. Only Joseph Beam's In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology contains a recent interview with the then 79 year old writer.¹⁴ Nugent is best known for his story "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" which first appeared in the only edition of Fire!!!, an eclectic journal that featured the work of young Harlem Renaissance writers and artists. "Smoke, Lilies" and Jade," written in a stream of consciousness style, follows a sensitive young African American man who quotes Oscar Wilde and longs to be an artist. Current reproductions of Fire!!! are available because in 1982 Bruce Nugent discovered his copy hidden among his belongings.

Nugent was close friends with Wallace Thurman, one of the more interesting figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Thurman's little known 1932 novel Infants of the Spring not only exposes the shenanigans of some members of the artistic community of Harlem, but also examines the experiences of African American gay artists through its two main characters, Raymond Taylor and Paul Arabian. The events of the novel take place in Niggeratti Manor, a Harlem brownstone filled with artists and would-be artists. Perhaps because Infants of the Spring focuses on Raymond's efforts to write a novel, his homosexuality is never openly discussed. Raymond's homosexuality is presented as a natural trait and he has a little discussed relationship with a white man during the course of the novel. Paul Arabian, Raymond's friend and a flamboyantly

¹⁴ Charles Michael Smith, "Bruce Nugent: Bohemian of the Harlem Renaissance," In The Life, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986) 209-220.

gay young man, is a precursor of today's snap queens. Richard Bruce Nugent was the inspiration for the character of Paul Arabian in *Infants of the Spring*. Paul's opening lines establish his personality. Speaking to a white man who is visiting Harlem for the first time, Paul announces his romantic intentions. "Have you ever been seduced? . . . Don't blush. You just looked so pure and undefiled that I had to ask."¹⁵ Paul presents what is Thurman's, and perhaps Baldwin's, view on sexuality. After revealing his past sexual experiences with both men and women, Paul refuses to declare a preference. "I really don't know. After all there are no sexes, only sex majorities, and the primary function of the sex act is enjoyment. Therefore I enjoyed one experience as much as the other."¹⁶ Paul Arabian, a lover of all things beautiful, is the moral center of the novel. *Infants of the Spring* ends with Paul's death which both Mae Henderson and Dorothy West describe as the symbolic end of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁷ He is the one character in *Infants of the Spring* who is secure in his identity as an African American homosexual and an artist. James Baldwin never comes to this kind of resolution in his presentation of African American homosexuals who are artists.

Despite their struggles to present the African American homosexual artist in

¹⁵ Thurman 20.

¹⁶ Thurman 47.

¹⁷ See Mae Henderson's "A Portrait of Wallace Thurman" and Dorothy West's "Elephant's Dance."

a positive manner, James Baldwin and Wallace Thurman are derided for their efforts. Citing Paul Arabian as an example, at least one contemporary reader finds Thurman's novel Infants of the Spring lacking in its portrayal of homosexual men. "Despair and self-destruction, Thurman seems to say, are the fate of the openly gay male artist."¹⁸ The continuing negative response to the presentation of homosexual characters in their work attests to the challenges that Baldwin and Thurman continue to face as writers.

Baldwin's protagonists are generally conflicted about their sexuality as evidenced by their bisexuality. Their indecision about their sexual identity transfers itself to their work. Sexuality, like the production of art, is an expression of the essential self. One must be committed to exposing oneself if one is to be successful. Certainly Rufus Scott's confusion about his inability to resolve his deep feelings for Eric and Leona leads him to commit suicide in Another Country. Hall Montana, by carefully revealing his own bisexual activities, articulates James Baldwin's views toward sexuality. In "Here Be Dragons" Baldwin asserts that we are all androgynous by virtue of our ability to love. "We are, for the most part, visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our sexual equipment. But we are all androgynous . . . because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other--male in female,

¹⁸ David Blackmore, "That Unreasonable Restless Feeling': The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen's Passing African American Review (26.3) Fall 1992, 481.

female in male, white in black and black in white.”¹⁹

The tenderness and passion described in the male couplings in Just Above My Head are unmatched by other writers of Baldwin's generation. The close, intimate bond between men, a key theme in the novel, fuels the production of art. In some cases it is not clear if some of the relationships become sexual or not and it really doesn't matter. Singing and traveling together create a strong connection among all of the members of the gospel quartet and ultimately the four young men share intimate relationships among themselves. Crunch and Arthur begin as friends and fall in love. Peanut and Red “did not think of Crunch and Arthur as lovers . . . but as two cats who had something very deep going for each other: in the same way that Red was Peanut's heart.”(Just 211). The homosexual relationship is not openly proclaimed and so goes unchallenged. The relationship ends when Crunch has sex with Julia Miller to `save' her from her lecherous father. Later in the novel Arthur and Jimmy, Julia's younger brother, share a marriage. The ease with which their relationship evolves and is accepted by their family and friends is a remarkable achievement.

The fourteen years that Arthur and Jimmy live, travel, work, and love together is unique in fiction. For this reason I am baffled by recent discussions of homosexuality in Baldwin's works that focus only on Giovanni's Room and Eldridge

¹⁹ Baldwin, “Here Be Dragons” The Price of the Ticket 690.

Cleaver's attack on Baldwin in Soul on Ice. Even Hall Montana can see that the freedom that Arthur experiences in his relationship with Jimmy has a positive effect on his art. "I mean that Jimmy's presence in Arthur's life, Jimmy's love, altered Arthur's estimate of himself, gave him a joy and a freedom he had never known before, invested him with a kind of incandescent wonder, and he carried this light on stage with him, he moved his body differently since he knew that he was loved, loved, and therefore knew himself to be both bound and free (Just 538). The intertwining of love and freedom is important. Arthur feels free from judgment with Jimmy for they share the same secret passion, the same secret sin.

In his study of gay self-representation in American literature, David Bergman devotes the beginning of his chapter "The Agony of Gay Black Literature" to, of all things, Eldridge Cleaver's denunciation of James Baldwin.²⁰ One wonders why gay, black literature must be "agony" and why the work of African American lesbian writers is ignored. Bergman argues that the predominance of bisexual characters is a sign of Baldwin's "discomfort" with homosexual issues.²¹ Bergman's discussion of gay black literature is interesting in that it focuses primarily on Baldwin and secondarily on Alain Locke and Countee Cullen and because he ignores Baldwin's later works. The incorporation of a discussion on "Here Be Dragons" and Just Above

²⁰ Bergman 163-164.

²¹ Bergman 165.

My Head would have altered Bergman's argument.

Just Above My Head, James Baldwin's last novel, shows a progression in his thinking on the issue of homosexuality. Hall's confession of past homosexual activity and the long-term, open relationship between Arthur Montana and Jimmy Miller are signs of a more inclusive vision on Baldwin's part. In "Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Portraits of Homoerotic Love in Giovanni's Room, Yasmin DeGout describes Baldwin's "personal ambivalence" about male same sex unions by showing that homoerotic love is presented as both "natural" and "deviant."²² Although DeGout's essay is illuminating in terms of her reading of Giovanni's Room, I am curious as to why she chose not only one of Baldwin's earliest novels but also a text with essentially no African American characters for her examination of homoerotic love in James Baldwin's fiction.

With the exceptions of the unions between Eric and Yves in Another Country and David and Giovanni in Giovanni's Room, all of Baldwin's homosexual unions in fiction involve African American artists. Race adds a new dimension, one that is not present in the writer's depictions of homosexual relationships between whites. Baldwin's African American male homosexuals often see their acceptance of their sexual orientation in terms of a life or death struggle. They encounter difficulty in reconciling their sexuality and their art. Rufus Scott of Another Country and Arthur

²² DeGout 426.

Montana of Just Above My Head are just two examples. Rufus' demise is linked to his inability to accept all the facets of his sexuality. His relationship with Eric Jones is something that Rufus tries to forget and never quite succeeds. "For the act of love is a confession . . . and Eric had discovered, inevitably, the truth about many men, who then wished to drive Eric and the truth together out of the world" (AC 212). Just Above My Head can be read as Arthur's attempt to accept his homosexuality. Arthur is seen as being in flight from those whom he thinks judge him. His death signals his inability to accomplish this goal.

For African American gay men, James Baldwin's presentation of loving relationships between homosexuals is affirming and inspiring. As Reginald Shepherd says in In The Life, an anthology of writing by black gay men, "too often my identity has been an absence, a list of the things I am not or a list of the things I should not be."²³ It is important to note that Arthur is presented as a son, brother, uncle, lover, and friend. Significantly, Arthur Montana does not fit any of the stereotypical images of homosexual men. Despite his engagement in some brief sexual escapades, Arthur's sexual and romantic life, much like that of his mostly heterosexual brother, is shown as being as monogamous and long-term. Considering that the decade of the 1980's brought a plethora of "entertainment" vehicles which ridiculed and stereotyped

²³ Reginald Shepherd, "On Not Being White," In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986) 48.

gay black men (particularly Fox Television's "In Living Color," Spike Lee's film School Daze, and George Wolfe's play The Colored Museum), Baldwin's presentation of African American homosexuals as being other than freaks or drama queens is revolutionary.

James Baldwin's honest exploration of human sexuality in his work has encouraged the current generation of gay, black writers to express themselves through literature. The combination of homosexuality and art celebrates freedom from racial and sexual stereotypes. Before his untimely death, Joseph Beam, the late editor of In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology, contributed some pieces to his last project Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men, among which is an essay on James Baldwin. Beam reflected on what Just Above My Head meant to him as a black, gay man. "In Just Above My Head, in plain view of the black family, it was possible for two black men to be lovers, and be political, and be cherished for who they were . . . Because he could envision us as lovers, our possibilities were endless."²⁴

The demise of Arthur Montana leads me to question if Baldwin actually saw the possibilities of the gay, black man as limitless. Although Arthur achieves a long lasting union with a man, he seems uncomfortable with his homosexuality. Arthur

²⁴ Joseph Beam, "James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother," Brother to Brother, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991) 185.

Montana personifies a dominant concern in much of Baldwin's work: the reconciliation of the spiritual self with the sexual self. "But readers are brought back to Baldwin's central dilemma: how to reconcile an aberrant sexuality with a religion that condemns it as sin."²⁵ But is this Baldwin's predicament as well? Emmanuel Nelson's reading of James Baldwin's novels as autobiographical "struggles for self-acceptance" is just one response.²⁶

Baldwin's African American homosexual characters suffer a more tortuous route toward a recognition and acceptance of their sexuality than his white characters. The combination of racism and homophobia thwarts Rufus Scott's relationship with Eric Jones in Another Country. It is only in same race couplings that homosexuals find lasting commitments in Baldwin's works. In Another Country Eric feels that his younger, French lover will outgrow him, yet the two men remain committed to each other. The subtle subplot of Just Above My Head surrounds Arthur's attempts to accept his homosexuality and the fact that his sexual preference does not affect his family's love for him. Despite their seemingly ideal relationship, Arthur and Jimmy are separated when Arthur dies.

Arthur Montana's attempts to reconcile his spirituality with his personal beliefs

²⁵ Dixon, Ride Out the Wilderness 136.

²⁶ Emmanuel Nelson, "The Novels of James Baldwin: Struggles for Self-Acceptance," Journal of American Culture Vol. 8 (Winter 1985): 11-16.

are not unprecedented in African American literature. From William Wells Brown's 1853 novel Clotel: Or the President's Daughter to Alice Walker's 1982 novel The Color Purple African American writers have struggled with a theology used by slave owners to justify their bondage and their own desire to believe in a higher calling. This conflict leads to either a rejection of Christianity as conventionally practiced or to a reworking of spirituality. Baldwin's three years as a child evangelist irreversibly alters his views on Christianity as practiced in the African American church. The innate theatricality of the church and the resulting hypocrisy leads Baldwin to leave his ministry. "Being the pulpit was like being in the theater."²⁷ If, as Sondra O'Neale asserts, Baldwin's works mirror the experiences of African Americans with Christianity, then his flight from the church should not be seen as a break with religion.²⁸ In Go Tell It on the Mountain, the African American church becomes a place where John gains the self-confidence to begin to define himself. But John's stay in the church will be brief because Baldwin's Black church demands conformity to its notions of masculinity and femininity. In Just Above My Head Arthur's participation in the church leads to his formation of a gospel quartet. He realizes his artistic goals with the support of the congregation.

²⁷ Baldwin "The Fire Next Time" Price 347.

²⁸ Sondra A. O'Neale, "Fathers, Gods, and Religion" Perceptions of Christianity and Ethnic Faith in James Baldwin" Critical Essays on James Baldwin (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988) 127.

Although the church represents the cultural and historical legacy of the African American community in much of Baldwin's works, in this his last novel, the mood has changed. Throughout Baldwin's works there is a questioning of allegiances to particular churches or ministers. The quartet of exhorters and singers in "Sonny's Blues" is described as being no different from the prostitutes who watch them from afar. Early in Just Above My Head Hall Montana hints that the church failed Arthur and helped to bring on his demise. James Baldwin's ongoing critique of the kind of Christianity practiced in urban churches is exposed in Just Above My Head: ". . . [T]he people don't have any spirit, that their religion ain't nothing but noise and show: they've lost the true religion" (Just 16). Despite his talent, it is suggested that the church, that place where Arthur sought salvation, rejects him. Certainly his mother, Florence Montana, blames the members of their congregation of her son's death. "[S]he feels that the people in the church, when they turned against him, became directly responsible for his death" (Just 16).

Baldwin uses Julia Miller, the child evangelist, as a symbol of the hypocrisy of the church. As a child Julia does not truly understand the sermons that she preaches or the lessons that she seeks to impart from her pulpit. And yet it is Julia who preaches Baldwin's sacred text: "Set thine house in order." The irony of Julia's text is that her own house is in disorder. The show businesslike aura that surrounds Julia during her time in the pulpit is presented with a cynical air. In Baldwin's hands

religion becomes a cancer which attracts liars and cheats and tears families apart. Julia's status as the primary breadwinner in her family allows her to eclipse her mother in her father's eyes and her brother in her mother's eyes. With this text Julia becomes the link between Just Above My Head, Baldwin's last novel, and Go Tell It on the Mountain, his first. I disagree with W.J. Weatherby's assertion that Just Above My Head continues the story in Go Tell It on the Mountain with different characters.²⁹ While Mountain is essentially a Bildungsroman, Just Above My Head tells the story of maturation of its three main characters: Hall Montana, Julia Miller, and Arthur Montana.

The contrasts and similarities between the experiences of Northern African Americans and their Southern counterparts are more pronounced in Just Above My Head than in any of James Baldwin's other works of fiction. Baldwin examines the migration experience in Go Tell It on the Mountain and in Just Above My Head. The Montanas, like many Harlem residents, are migrants from the South. These new "immigrants" bring with them their religion and their Southern culture. Baldwin finds the experiences of former Southerners to be ripe with possibilities. His new arrivals are similar to those of Rudolph Fisher, a Harlem Renaissance writer known for his comic depictions of the reactions of Southerners to life in the North. Baldwin, by having a Northern gospel quartet perform throughout the South in Just Above My

²⁹ Weatherby 373.

Head, makes the experiences of African American Southerners seem all the more deplorable and, at the same time, heroic. Baldwin argues that the North is as racist as the South.

Arthur dies at thirty-nine, the age at which both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. die. Surely this is not a coincidence as Baldwin was acquainted with both leaders. All three men, Arthur, Malcolm, and Martin, face terrors in their lives and are ultimately killed by these forces. Religion plays an important role in the lives of all three men. They are also linked by a shared commitment to honesty. The political dangers, social concerns, and direct action that contribute to the demise of these leaders also lead to Arthur's death. They challenge the socially accepted notions about their worthiness as human beings through their actions.

Women figure prominently in **Just Above My Head**, especially Julia Miller, a former fashion model and child evangelist. James Campbell and David Leeming, both recent Baldwin biographers, concur that Baldwin increasingly uses women as autobiographical figures in his fiction. Baldwin's reflections of his time in the pulpit mirror Julia's. "Anyway, very shortly after I joined the church, I became a preacher--a Young Minister--and I remained in the church for more than three years...This was the most frightening time of my life, and quite the most dishonest, and the resulting

hysteria lent great passion to my sermons—for a while.”³⁰ Trudier Harris contends that “with Julia, there are more possibilities for good and evil, more possibilities for good and evil, more possibilities for decisions to be made out of individuality and necessity, not out of expectations and church and regulations.”³¹ Although I do not consider Julia to be a superior figure as Harris does, she does retrieve her sense of self and a serenity that the other characters lack. Yet Baldwin seems uncomfortable with Julia as a personality. Despite Baldwin’s attempts, Julia never comes across as being female and she remains, at least for me, a shadowy figure.

With the publication of Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Alice Walker’s The Third Life of Grange Copeland in 1970, the decade marks the emergence of the African American female novelist in the consciousness of American readers. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, and Jesse Fauset experienced renewed (and in some cases, new) interest in their works and lives. From that time until now the fiction of African American women writers has been hailed by critics while old heroes such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin have been cast aside. Despite the recent Library of America publication of Richard Wright’s works, only Ralph Ellison continues to experience considerable critical attention.³² Contemporary

³⁰ Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time” Price 345.

³¹ Trudier Harris, Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 165.

³² Most recently Jerry Watt’s Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph
(continued...)

writers such as Charles Johnson and John Edgar Wideman receive critical acclaim while African American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Alice Walker are extremely popular with readers. With a focus on his use of the artist as a hero, James Baldwin could be added to this list.

Just Above My Head received a mixed reception. The many typographical errors and other lapses in Just Above My Head suggest a lack of attention given to the manuscript by Baldwin's editor and publisher. "Richard Marek was delighted to receive the manuscript of Just Above My Head and to find that 'it was completely straightforward. I did no editing whatever on that.'" ³³ Some reviewers such as Darryl Pinckney found the novel too long and go on to denounce Baldwin of not fulfilling their expectations.³⁴ Richard Gilman's statement that Just Above My Head is "a novel stuck halfway between life and art, with none of the originality or fatefulness of either" subtly accuses Baldwin of taking an autobiographical approach to writing fiction.³⁵ In The New York Times Book Review John Romano openly yawns for the early Baldwin. "Baldwin the essayist, Baldwin the author of 'The Fire

³²(...continued)

Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life examines how Ellison's ideological stance regarding art and the responsibilities of African American artists helped to influence and engage African American writers and intellectuals who follow in his wake.

³³ Weatherby 376.

³⁴ Darryl Pinckney, "Blues For Mr. Baldwin" Critical Essays on James Baldwin, eds. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988)161.

³⁵ Richard Gilman

Next Time,' would have had more to say about the police, about Atlanta, about the street."³⁶ Yet by pointing out what they see are weaknesses in the novel, these critics miss what is the true subject of this novel and most of Baldwin's fiction: the journey of the artist.

As we've seen in "Sonny's Blues," "Previous Condition," "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," Another Country, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the artist's hunt for life in James Baldwin's fiction often becomes the flight from life. This flight takes a less obvious form in Just Above My Head. It is more internal and more personal. As I assess Arthur Montana as Baldwin's final artist-hero, I am troubled by the lack of a definite statement. I wonder what is at the core of Arthur's being: what motivates him to sing? At the end of the novel there is much about Arthur Montana that remains a mystery. The sense of melancholy in the novel emanates from him: "Arthur, who simply, finally, saw it coming, saw that he couldn't avoid it, had been running toward it too long, had been alone too long, didn't trust, really any other condition. Jimmy came too late"(Just 546). Perhaps Baldwin suggests that death is the price Arthur pays for not accepting himself. Arthur does fall, perhaps too late. His descent is a physical one brought on by a fatal heart attack.

³⁶ John Romano, Review of Just Above My Head New York Times Book Review

This study has traced James Baldwin's exploration of the artist as a hero in fiction. I approach Just Above My Head wondering if Baldwin's last vision of the artist matches the potential of Sonny or continues the descent of Leo Proudhammer. The promise of Sonny in "Sonny's Blues" has not been fulfilled by any of Baldwin's African American artist heroes. Sonny's courage in "confronting that storm inside" is surpassed by his ability to transform that storm into art. He not only redefines himself as an artist but is comfortable with his new identity. No other artist-hero in this study achieves this level of success. In Another Country Rufus Scott commits suicide and in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Leo Proudhammer is emotionally and spiritually dead. Eric Jones in Another Country comes closest to achieving the level of harmony in his professional life that Sonny does. Eric's success is richer for he manages to bring honesty not only to his art but also in his personal relationship. Yet, as a white man, Eric has one less burden to face. The hope for Arthur Montana to succeed is high, but his failure is assured because he cannot love and accept himself as a gay man. In "Previous Condition," "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Baldwin focuses on actors who are in flight from their racial identities. They fail to achieve honest expression in their art because there is no integrity in their personal lives. Another Country takes this premise one step further by juxtaposing an artist who commits suicide rather than face the facts of his life with another whose quest for truth in his

life and art inspires those around him. "Sonny's Blues" presents the portrait of the ideal artist whose success is directly related to his articulation and confrontation of his private fears.

By disregarding his obvious preoccupation with the artist-figure and demanding that James Baldwin continue in the unwanted role of the moral conscience of the country, reviewers and readers deny him the freedom that white artists take for granted, the freedom that Langston Hughes demands in his 1926 manifesto, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose . . . We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."³⁷ Fifty-three years after the publication of Hughes' essay, James Baldwin was still fighting to preserve his vision of his mission as an artist through his repeated use of the artist as a hero in his fiction. He continued, like Langston Hughes and his predecessors, to climb a racial mountain.

³⁷ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," The Nation (June 1926) 694.

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