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## JAMES BALDWIN: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITER AND A SOCIAL CRITIC

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**Abstract:** James Baldwin offered a vital literary voice during the era of civil rights activism in the 1950s and '60s. He was the eldest of nine children; his stepfather was a minister. At age 14, Baldwin became a preacher at the small Fireside Pentecostal Church in Harlem. In the early 1940s, he transferred his faith from religion to literature. Critics, however, note the impassioned cadences of Black churches are still evident in his writing. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, his first novel, is a partially autobiographical account of his youth. His essay collections *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time* were influential in informing a large white audience.

**Keywords:** Racism, Liberation Movement, Civil Rights, Protest Novel.

### Introduction

James Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York. He is an African-American author and social commentator (1924-1987). Literary critic Harold Bloom characterized Baldwin as "among the most considerable moral essayists in the United States". His essays, collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), explore intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in the Western society of the United States during the mid-twentieth-century. Some of Baldwin's essays are book-length, including *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). An unfinished manuscript, *Remember This House*, was expanded and adapted for cinema as the Academy Award-nominated documentary film *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016).

Baldwin's novels, short tales, and plays fictionalise key personal issues and difficulties set against the backdrop of complicated societal and psychological influences. Masculinity, sexuality, racism, and class all intersect to produce complicated tales that reflect some of the most significant political movements for social change in mid-twentieth-century America, such as the civil rights movement and the gay liberation movement. Baldwin's characters are usually, but not exclusively, African Americans, and his writing regularly features homosexual and bisexual males as protagonists. These characters frequently encounter internal and external impediments in their pursuit of social and self-acceptance. Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, was published in 1956, far before the homosexual liberation movement.

In 1947, James Baldwin began his literary career with book reviews in the *Nation* and *New Leader*, and he gained prominence with an article on black-Jewish ties and a commentary short fiction.

In 1948, he relocated to Paris in search of greater personal independence. He analyses Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* in his article "Everybody's Protest Novel."

James Baldwin raises concerns in the essay on the use of fiction to argue for social change. He released his first novel, "Go Tell It to the Mountain," in 1953. The novel, set in Harlem, remembered his battles with his Stepfather and his youth. His essay book, "Notes of a Native Son." Commented on America's racism. Baldwin's 1956 book "Giovanni's Room" is widely regarded as one of the most daring portrayals of homosexuality in American literature at the time.

A lengthy tour to the South resulted in highly rhetorical pieces that were published in "Nobody Knows My Name" in 1961 and "The Fire Next Time" in 1963, both of which established Baldwin as a major American essayist and leading opponent of racism. Between these two works, "Another Country" was published in 1962 and quickly became the best-selling novel dealing with problems of race, love, and sexuality. Baldwin's international popularity was cemented by these three works. The press pursued him as he moved between houses in France, Turkey, and the United States.

His second novel, "Giovanni's Room" (1956), chronicles the sad love story of two men—a white American wanderer and an Italian bartender in postwar Paris's bars and hôtels particulars. The theatrical plot—in which each guy truly murders the object of his affection—creates, in miniature, the emotional, operatic tone of Baldwin's later, cumbersome works, most notably "Another Country."



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In 1964, his contentious play "Blues for Mister Charlie," depicting the most heinous acts of the Civil Rights movement, played on Broadway for 150 performances. Baldwin introduced racial conversation to America, bringing an awareness of the turmoil's psychological subtleties and repercussions, particularly in his earlier novels and articles. James Baldwin benefited from his complex sense of self as an artist, an African American, a gay, and a religious man due to his high intelligence, distinctive literary talent, and his commitment to love, peace, and reconciliation despite the fury and bitterness generated by racism. His finest work continues to provide clear insights into probably the most explosive period of American social issues to this day. The narrative of two brothers is told in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." They learn to understand one another in a way that shows the two sides of two African-American lives through its central characters. The novel's narrator assimilates as far as possible into white culture but continues to experience the agony of institutional racism and the limitations put on his potential.

Baldwin's creative career spans more than three and a half decades, with several novels, essays, short stories, plays, and interviews in his canon. To keep our message focused, we gave our authors specific but broad limitations to work within and picked a single piece as a unifying theme: "A Letter to My Nephew." Baldwin talks frankly and shows his disgust with racism in America in the letter. He writes from personal experience and as a witness to the ways in which racism has wrecked loved ones' lives. He presents racism not as an enigmatic unknowable entity hovering over the country, but as a crime, then identifies and dissects its perpetrators. Baldwin's condemnation is not without rebuttal, and his rebuttal is every bit as startling and humane now as it was almost sixty years ago.

Baldwin's protest literature validates rather than challenges the dominant cultural forces in society, which is why purportedly subversive and revolutionary works have become an accepted and reassuring element of the American scene. Keeping the issue safely entrenched in the social arena eliminates the need for reflection. Baldwin compares the goal of the protest novel to that of white missionaries in Africa. He laments the fact that society is able to convince oppressed people that they are inferior to their oppressors. People often forget that both the oppressed and the oppressor are "bound together" by the same beliefs.

Furthermore, Baldwin viewed *Native Son* as a "continuation, a complement to that legend" of blacks "it was written to destroy," and *Bigger Thomas* as "Uncle Tom's descendent, flesh of his flesh, a portrait so diametrically opposed that, when the books are read together, it appears as though the contemporary negro author and the dead New England woman are locked in a deadly, timeless battle." To accept the premise that we can overcome the effects of racism simply by infusing race with a different moral meaning, whether to symbolise the oppressed's inherent virtues or to justify their self-destructive impulses, "black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, longing for the other's slow and exquisite death." In the essay's concluding and most notable sentence, he writes: "The protest novel's failure is in its rejection of life, in the human person, in its denial of his beauty, fear, and force, in its insistence that only his classification is real and cannot be overcome."

Baldwin's reviews and essays for *The Nation* and other publications are examples of verbal dexterity and critical insight. They set the basis for the issues he would later discuss in his essays: conflicts between blacks and Jews; black stereotypes in movies; and the influence of poverty on daily life. Simultaneously, he was creating a writing style—one that combined a full-throated preacherly cadence with the astringent obliquities of a semi-closeted queen.

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