

SELF-REFLECTION IN JAMES BALDWIN'S NOVEL *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract: The primary objective of the present paper is to examine the use of narration in James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. This piece of research elaborates on the assumption that Baldwin's narration stimulates character development within the novel, especially John Grimes and his relationship with his stepfather, Gabriel Grimes, who struggles to unveil his inner self and spirituality. Moreover, the article emphasizes the importance of auto-narration in presenting different layers of experience and identity in Baldwin's debut work.

Keywords: narration, otherness, identity, conversion, spirituality

AUTOREFLEKSJA W POWIEŚCI JAMESA BALDWINA *GŁOŚ TO NA GÓRZE*

Abstrakt: Głównym celem artykułu jest zbadanie wykorzystania autonarracji w powieści Jamesa Baldwina *Głos to na górze*. Niniejsze badanie rozwija założenie, że autonarracje przyczyniają się do rozwoju postaci i eksploracji tematycznej w obrębie tej powieści. Biorąc pod uwagę kontekst historyczny i kulturowy, badanie eksploruje poszczególne perspektywy światopoglądowe Johna Grimesa i jego relację z ojczymem, Gabrielem Grimesem, odkrywając tym samym złożoność jego wewnętrznych zmaganiań i duchowej podróży. Poprzez zbadanie narracji, artykuł rzuca światło na jej znaczenie w ukazywaniu wielowarstwowej tożsamości oraz doświadczeń samego autora w jego pionierskim dziele.

Słowa kluczowe: narracja, inność, tożsamość, konwersja religijna, duchowość

1. Introduction

James Baldwin's debut novel conveys not only the complexities of characters but also gives a reflection on the American socio-cultural landscape in the 20th century. The novel is set against the backdrop of Harlem which is called a hub of African-American culture, where the author himself took an active part in the cultural and intellectual movements of the time (Natividad 2020). The narrative structure develops on

Sunday morning, portraying the lifetime of the Grimes family. John Grimes "is like Baldwin himself, a first generation Harlemiter, a child of the great black migration to Northern cities. Grimes and Baldwin are both sons of prideful, stiff-necked Pentecostal preachers who waste little affection on their offspring" (Courage 1989: 410). John, the central to the story, is a 14-year-old man struggling with the intricacies of his faith, identity, and expectations of his family. His state is strongly affected by Gabriel Grimes, his stepfather, who is a charismatic, but strong-willed man, bearing a heavy burden of the Pentecostal church's responsibilities. Their relationship is filled with conflicts, yearning, and the constant search for understanding between each other. The novel is enriched by the character of Elizabeth Grimes, John's mother. She experiences inner struggles with her identity, and life responsibilities of being a mother and being a wife.

The auto-narration forms a significant element that allows authors to express their experiences, feelings, and thoughts through the direct narration of stories from the self-perspective. Mammadova, an Azeri linguist, argues that in the auto-narrative texts, an author explores their identity, "giving wide space to certain meta-linguistic confessions" and "at the same time the author's identity is revealed through the alter ego" (2021: 71). This narration form plays a pivotal role in the creation of complexity and depth in literary texts. The auto-narrative is also an extraordinary way to explore identity, go into character psychology, and observe the relationships between the world and the individual. Furthermore, it provides readers with direct access to the internal monologue of the narrator, leading to a deeper understanding of character motivations, conflicts, and evolution (Bamberg 2013). Tuszyńska provides another definition: "The purpose of constructing auto-narration is to understand the past, to deal with a problem, get rid of trauma or to break a taboo" (2012: 299).

In this article, I analyze the role of auto-narration in the context of James Baldwin's novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. The thesis focuses on the third-person narration examination in the novel as a crucial element for unveiling the complexity of characters and themes, shedding light on the intricate interplay between narrative technique and the profound exploration of human experiences.

2. Socio-cultural context

The 20th-century America as a setting is not only a mere backdrop to the story, but a significant historical, cultural, and social element that had a deep impact on shaping individual vibrant characters in the book (Field 2009). First, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* is set in Harlem, a neighborhood of significant cultural, social, and political changes in New York City, during the 1930s. James Baldwin was born in 1924, he grew up and matured during the well-known dynamic period *The Harlem Renaissance* when the Afro-American community was experiencing a flourishing in literature, arts, politi-

cal activism, and music, engaging in the struggle for equality and civil rights at the same time (Boyd 2008). The time frame of the novel coincides with a deeply rooted era of racism and segregation and discrimination. It was a period when individuals actively sought a balance between traditional values and modernity. Furthermore, analyzing this social context helps to understand why the characters make specific decisions and how social events of that era influence them.

The auto-narrative approach refers to the character's spiritual sphere. African-Americans were profoundly influenced by Christianity in the 1930s, particularly in the Harlem community (Boyd 2008). Gabriel Grimes, the pastor of the Pentecostal church, holds a position of spiritual authority within the community and religion shapes characters' identities and influences their life choices. The religious landscape of Harlem becomes a stage for spiritual exploration, providing characters with a framework to confront their inner struggles and seek redemption.

The cultural and social context of Harlem in the 1930s intricately interweaves with the first-person auto-narration employed by Baldwin in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (Courage 1989).

3. Auto-narration as a Characterization Tool

In *Go Tell It On The Mountain* the utilization of auto-narration emerges as a potent literary device that propels the narrative forward and serves as a nuanced tool for character development (Courage 1989). Each character's narrative voice becomes a canvas for the exploration of their past experiences, traumas, and aspirations grappling with questions of race, religion, and societal expectations and James Baldwin's life itself.

John Grimes, a central character, is modeled after Baldwin himself (Fabre 1974). His otherness is placed upon different areas, intellectual, physical, and sexual. In addition, John strikes with the Harlem world where religion is the priority, and everything that is outside Harlem is defined as evil (Fabre, 1989). In *Go Tell It On The Mountain, Part 1, The Seventh Day* John's perspective is privileged. The action starts on his fourteenth birthday when he contemplates his precociousness, ugliness, and smallness. These feelings have arisen in his mind through his stepfather's attitude, Reverend Gabriel Grimes, who blames John for all the family's unfortunate events and escalates his rebellious approach to his son. John, in the day of his birthday, realizes that he does not want to follow his stepfather's path and does not accept life as a preacher.

...and it was said that he [John] had a Great Future. He might become a Great Leader of His People. John was not much interested in His people and still less in leading them anywhere, but the phrase so often repeated rose in his mind like a great brass gate, opening outward for him on a word where people did not live in the darkness of his father's house, did not

pray to Jesus in the darkness of his father's church, where he would eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to the movies as often as he wished. In this world John, who was, his father said, ugly, who was always the smallest boy in his class, and who had no friends, became immediately beautiful, tall, and popular. People fell all over themselves to meet John Grimes. He was a poet, or a college president, or a movie star; he drank expensive whisky, and he smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package." (Baldwin 2001: 21)

The day of John's fourteenth birthday is a time when he starts to see his uniqueness. The crucial moment is the class when students learn and practice the writing of the alphabet. When John has finished writing on the board, the principal suddenly comes into the room and praises him.

'You're a very bright boy, John Grimes,' she said. 'Keep up the good work.'
Then she walked out of the room.

That moment gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon at least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding; that he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself; and that, perhaps, with this power he might one day win that love which he so longed for. This was not, in John, a faith subject to death or alteration, nor yet a hope subject to destruction; it was his identity, and part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father. (Baldwin 2001: 20)

The final section of the novel, *The Threshing-Floor*, points out John's religious transformation. To demonstrate it, Baldwin incorporates biblical imagination into this surrealistic episode, as John experiences a fire trial for his soul and the Lord speaking to him (Fabre 1989). In the end, God's voice wins and John accepts Gabriel's view of God as a weapon, but only to counter his stepfather's rudeness. His position in the novel makes him one of the most tragic adolescents in African American literature.

James Baldwin created John Grimes to embody his stepfather, David Baldwin (Fabre 1989). He never met his biological father, and he even never learned his name. When John was born, his mother, Emma Berid Jones, had been living a solitary life. When James was a 3-year-old boy, she decided to marry David Baldwin, a Baptist preacher and a factory worker as well. Gabriel Grimes does the same professions, he is a Baptist preacher and a factory worker, "...his father had gone to the factory, where he would work for half a day" (Baldwin 2001: 23). He brought into their marriage his son, 9 years old elder than John, and then, David and Emma had eight children together. James never hides his hatred towards his stepfather and the children who were born after he married Emma. He never called them as "siblings", he stressed that he has eight half-brothers and half-sisters, but they cannot be described as his real siblings (Zgierski 2019). He also emphasized that in his family home, he had always been the only one and no one can be compared to his true relatives.

James devoted a lot of time and effort to caring for his half-brothers and half-sisters (Zgierski 2019). He was the eldest one and most of the family responsibilities were carried by him, washing clothes, feeding, and putting children to sleep. That is why he was often called as "Father James" (Zgierski 2019). David treated James with no respect, he was much harder on James than on his other children (ESME). Baldwin described him as "a monster in the house" (ESME), and when David died, Baldwin was nineteen years old and he commented, "had died insane, poisoned with his racial bitterness".

David Baldwin never believed in James's passions and talent (ESME). His father's bitterness drove the small boy to libraries, where he was reading lots of books voraciously. James was also a smart pupil and teachers considered him "gifted", which is also reflected in John's Grimes character. James was aware of his natural talent and intelligence, and he recalled once, "I knew I was black, of course, but I also knew I was smart. I didn't know how I would use my mind, or even if I could, but that was the only thing I had to use." (Sheppe 2010). When Baldwin was nine years old, he wrote his first play that was staged at school under the teacher's supervision. Later on, the small boy was offered to see a real play at the theatre, but his stepfather refused to let him go. Although David's decisions were indisputable, Emma overruled him, and James managed to see the play. She also had a strong influence over David and commented "it would be not very nice to let such a kind woman make the trip for nothing." (Baldwin, 2012). Encouraged by his teacher, he wrote his first article *Harlem-Then and Now* when he was 13 years old which was published in the school magazine. Despite being highly gifted, Baldwin did not like his school due to racial discrimination and peer pressure.

Secondly, James Baldwin deliberately implies a sexual motif in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (Cederstrom 1984). In the first section of the book *The Seventh Day* a young John recalls numerous situations when he has seen his mother and stepfather having sexual relations.

And his mother and father, who went to church on Sundays, they did it too, and sometimes John heard them in the bedroom behind him, over the sound of rat's feet, and rat screams, and the music and cursing from the harlot's house downstairs. (Baldwin 2001: 15)

While having dreams about his mother and father, he feels some desires in his body, it is shown in the preface of the first part of the book "*I looked down the line, and I wondered*" (Baldwin 2001: 11). In the first section of the book John wakes up and wonders about the unusual silence of this Sunday morning. He stares at the yellow stain on the ceiling which "slowly transformed itself into a woman's nakedness" (Baldwin 2001: 17) Then which is clearly shown that he masturbates, "He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his

earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak." (Baldwin 2001: 20).

Moreover, John feels guilty for having those thoughts and he finds his aspirations in Brother Elisha, an older adolescent church mentor who guides him (Fabre 1989). Elisha is Gabriel's nephew and a young preacher in Harlem church. John's attraction towards Elisha is driven by a few factors, Elisha is a young handsome man who is a preacher, he is exceptionally gifted, but not proud (Rosewall 2019). Another preacher in the church, Father James, believes that holiness is the only way to be redeemed and he claims celibacy until marriage. On Sunday, in front of the entire congregation, he accuses Brother Elisha of "walking disorderly" (Baldwin, 2001: 24) with Ella Mae, and according to him they "were in danger of straying from the truth by plucking the unripe fig from the tree too early" (Baldwin 2001: 24). Although they had been spending time innocently, they never met again. This example shows that there is a strong division between religion and relationships, and shows the oppressive nature of the Pentecostal church. John realizes that religion does not enhance friendships and builds borders between people (Rosewall 2019). Elisha's case bonds John with him even stronger, both of them have been excluded from the community/closest ones, and suffer from injustice in life which has no balance between religion and their views.

According to Freud, abnormal parental relationships, mostly with a father, are typical for the period through which every person goes on their way to homosexuality. It can be observed that John undergoes a "regular" process on his way to homosexuality, especially when he rejects his stepfather and argues that "[John] would not be like his father" (Baldwin 2001: 18). Secondly, his original father, Richard, has never been present in John's life and he knows nothing about him. In addition, Elisha is the embodiment of the masculine role model that John lacks and had been looking for.

James Baldwin worked on *Go Tell It On The Mountain* for 10 years (Fattah 1996). The long period was filled with his sexual ambivalence, many unstable love affairs, and problems with understanding his own identity. Probably, it was a time of Baldwin's coming-out when finally he accepted himself as homosexual (Fattah 1996). Through opposing different sexual images, once the naked woman, and then the attraction to Elisha, a reader notices an ambivalent approach. In addition to this, Baldwin presents John as a person who hides his sexuality, so as Baldwin does. We find out that "he [John] was afraid to think of it" (Baldwin 2001: 16). John's silence results from the Pentecostal church's doctrine, which does not allow any sexual exhibition.

4. Conclusion

The third-person omniscient narrator in *Go Tell It On The Mountain* is not only a storytelling tool, but also a crucial factor in conveying the profound themes of the

novel. This type of narration shows John's transformation from the religious crisis that has been created in the first part of the novel, to his ultimate conversion on the threshing-floor in the final part (Spirk 2015). This structure of the text is a deliberate device. In the first part of the book, *The Seventh Floor*, John is presented as a young 14-year-old boy who discovers his sexuality. Although he was born in a religious community, he seeks disconnection from it. The second part, *The Prayers of The Saints*, focuses on unconscious historical and familial conditions which happen in John's life and eventually, make him work towards salvation. (Spirk 2015: 3). The whole structure culminates in the final section, where he reaches Salvation, but he has to leave his personal feelings to a more collective purpose.

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