



SEXUALITY AND BLACK EXPERIENCE IN JAMES BALDWIN'S TELL ME HOW LONG TRAIN'S BEEN GONE

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Abstract

James Baldwin's novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* is his attempt to recreate, as an artist this time, the tragic condition of the Negro, in America. He has not been successful; this is a simpleminded, one-dimensional novel with mostly cardboard characters, a polemical rather than narrative tone, weak invention and poor selection of incident. The construction of this novel is theatrical, tidily nailed into a predictable form. The relationship between the two brothers is always moving and sometimes heartbreaking. The family life is honestly portrayed. Here in the streets of Harlem, in the dark bedrooms, the dangerous hallways, the chanting churches, Baldwin is at his best.

Leo as a child is an interesting and alive character. Unfortunately, the novel next moves into the phony milieu of the theatrical world, and we get Leo as an important actor who pauses that the kiss he plants on a nurse's forehead will probably keep her from washing. The theater as background for a serious novel so earnest in tone is simply not right. Baldwin's greatest weakness as a novelist is his selection or creation of incident. Time and again his conclusions are not justified by narrative action. Too many of his characters are mere cardboard.

Tragedy calls out for a great artist, revolution for a true prophet. Six years ago, James Baldwin predicted the black revolution that is now changing our society. His new novel, "Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone" is his attempt to recreate, as an artist this time, the tragic condition of the Negro, in America. He has not been successful; this is a simpleminded, one-dimensional novel with mostly cardboard characters, a polemical rather than narrative tone, weak invention and poor selection of incident. Individual scenes have people talking too much for what the author has to say and crucial events are "told" by one character to another rather than created. The construction of the novel is theatrical, tidily nailed into a predictable form.

It becomes clearer with each book he publishes that Baldwin's reputation is justified by his essays rather than his fiction. It may be that he is not a true or "born" novelist. But it must be said that his essays are as well written as any in our language; in them his thought and its utterance are nothing less than majestic. He has, also, the virtues of passion, serious intelligence and compassionate understanding of his fellow man. Yet it would seem that such gifts, enough for critics and moralists and other saintly figures, are not enough to insure the writing of good fiction. Novelists are born sinners and their salvation does not come so easily, and certainly the last role the artist should play is that of the prosecutor, the creator of a propaganda novel. A propaganda novel may be socially valuable ("Grapes of Wrath", "Gentlemen's Agreement"), but it is not art.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is written in the first-person singular, the "I" person, perhaps the most misused, most misunderstood technique today, from its irrelevance in Mailer's *The Deer Park* to its crippling effect on Styron's thought and style in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. It doesn't do Baldwin any good here because the "I" person should never be used in a novel of social protest, which this is. Why? Because it doesn't work.

To be specific, the "I" person should be used in either of two ways (geniuses are excused): either to narrow the focus, to let the main character telling the story filter everything through his own articular vision of the world and of himself; and to get away with it he has to be someone with a special version - nutty or eccentric, not balanced, (Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* is a good example.) or the "I" person should be a minor character telling us about a main character who is basically unexplainable and perhaps would be unbelievable if presented in the third person ("The Great Gatsby").

What the "I" person cannot be is a bore, or a moralist in a straight out polemic way. In Baldwin's book the "I" person hero is both. His name is Leo Proud hammer; he has risen from the slums of Harlem to become the most famous Negro actor in America and the opening chapter has him suffering a massive heart attack on stage. We get flashbacks covering his life while he is being given emergency first aid and then while he is recovering in the hospital. The flashbacks are done in thin theatrical fashion rather than novelistic technique, and this doesn't help.

The flashbacks showing Leo Proudhammer as a child growing up in Harlem are the most successful sections of the book. His alienated, bitterly religious father (who appears often with slight variation in Baldwin's fiction) and Leo's brother Caleb are the only characters who come alive. Leo loves Caleb, and when the white society humiliates Caleb, arrests and beats him



before the younger brother's eyes, Leo is traumatized. When Caleb is released from prison and runs away to California, Leo feels deserted and the effect on him is disastrous. He succumbs to all the seductions of the ghetto street and finally becomes the kept boy of a pimp gangster. Fascinating material but Baldwin just tells us what happened to Leo in a few lines; he doesn't show us, doesn't create it.

And this is exactly where the use of the "I" person technique could have been effective. Still, the relationship between the two brothers is always moving and sometimes heartbreaking. The family life is honestly portrayed. Here in the streets of Harlem, in the dark bedrooms, the dangerous hallways, the chanting churches, Baldwin is at his best. Leo as a child is an interesting and alive character. Unfortunately, the novel next moves into the phony milieu of the theatrical world, and we get Leo as an important actor who pauses that the kiss he plants on a nurse's forehead will probably keep her from washing.

The theater as background for a serious novel so earnest in tone is simply not right. Not here anyway. Leo is 19 years old when he escapes Harlem and moves to Greenwich Village, sharing living space with a young, white, unmarried couple. Barbara is a pretty girl, Kentucky bred; Jerry is an amiable fellow of Italian parentage. By this time Leo is bisexual, but his relationship with the young couple is completely innocent. All three of them are concerned only with becoming actors and they finagle their way into the straw-hat dramatic workshop of a famous theater guru, whose characterization is done with deadly wit.

Inevitably, Barbara and Leo become lovers. Jerry is terribly hurt but understands. Barbara and Leo have their troubles with the natives of the straw-hat village, and finally this and other pressures make them split up. They remain close friends as they climb the ladder of success. In fact, Barbara is on stage with Leo when he suffers his heart attack 20 years later, and she helps nurse him back to health. Leo finally finds happiness with a young black militant named Christopher. Barbara seduces Christopher because she wants to recapture the young Leo (I think), Leo forgives them both (Christopher has an equally classy excuse), and everybody remains friends and lovers. Christopher takes Leo to some black-power meetings and Leo agrees that the blacks must get guns. Finally Leo, completely recovered from his heart attack, is again in the wings waiting for his cue, ready for work he loves.

Ready for life! If this makes the book sound like soap opera, that's exactly right. White Barbara, white as snow, is right out of a slick magazine, flat as cardboard. At the end of the book Barbara tells Leo she has always loved him and will always continue to love him. Her lines are extravagant, theatrical; she will always come to him when he calls. Barbara gives this speech at the age of 39; she is rich, she is famous, she has been presented as a reasonably intelligent woman. She has known Leo for 20 years.

And yet we are asked to believe that the only man in the whole world she can love forever is a Negro homosexual actor. This is a romantic condescension equal to anything in "Gone with the Wind," in that Baldwin does not recognize a parallel revolution, the feminine against the masculine world. In the conception of Barbara's character, in the underlying-devotion speech, Baldwin glorifies a sexual Uncle Tom. Baldwin's greatest weakness as a novelist is his selection or creation of incident.

Time and again his conclusions are not justified by narrative action. Too many of his characters are mere cardboard. There are scenes that are simply echoes of the literature of the thirties, and they were cornball even then. It is possible that Baldwin believes this is not tactically the time for art, that polemical fiction can help the Negro cause more, that art is too strong, too gamy a dish for a prophet to offer now. And so he gives us propagandistic fiction, a readable book with a positive social value. If this is what he wants, he has been successful. But perhaps it is not time for Baldwin to forget the black revolution and start worrying about himself as an artist, who is the ultimate revolutionary.

Works Cited

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