

Christian Gruber

Dr. Rutledge

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Influence of the 1960s on James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man"

James Baldwin lived from 1924-1987, and he was a prominent American writer for most of his life. He was black and gay, and his work reflects the tribulations that came from being such during the period in which he lived. "Going to Meet the Man" is a short story that Baldwin published in 1965. This story reveals both the racial and the sexual problems that the United States was facing at this time. Readers today know Baldwin as "the most visible gay African-American writer since the Harlem Renaissance" (Field 457). However, the readers during Baldwin's lifetime would have seen him in an entirely different light. In fact, by the late 1960s, "Baldwin bashing was almost a rite of initiation" (Field 466). Baldwin was not respected as a writer then in the same manner that he is now. In order to understand Baldwin's writing and the undertones of "Going to Meet the Man," one must look at the decade in which it was published—the 1960s.

The last recorded lynching in the United States happened in 1981. This is not a phenomenon that people see in the news today. However, Baldwin would have been 28 before the United States saw a "peaceful" year. The January 16, 1954 issue of *The New York Age* highlights "Tuskegee Institute's report that there were no lynchings in the United States during 1953. This marks the second straight year the nation has gone without a single death from mob violence. Last year was the first time it happened since Reconstruction" ("A Step Forward"). The Reconstruction Era ended in 1877, which means for 75 straight years, the United States saw a

consistent problem with mob violence. This is the environment that Baldwin grew up in, the environment that shaped his life and influenced his writing. A graphically detailed lynching is not something that many authors would read or write about today. For Baldwin, reading about such an occurrence would have been a fact of life, so it is unsurprising to see it in his work.

“Going to Meet the Man” was published in 1965, but it is uncertain when Baldwin set the story. If he set it in the same period it was written, it would have been a truly radical piece. By this point, active mob violence was becoming a less common incident to encounter in the media. The decline in mob violence was prompted by “the harsh light of publicity thrown on lynchings by the Negro press in America. Constant protests and agitation against lynchings were a prime factor in building American public opinion against mob violence. Also effective was the campaign for a federal anti-lynching law” (“A Step Forward”). By 1965, Baldwin would not have heard about lynchings as much as he did when he was growing up. Yet, he still chose to portray one in such graphic detail. This speaks more to the political climate of when this story was written than the history that gave Baldwin the influence and details.

A year prior to the story’s publication, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. This Act “ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin” (“Civil Rights Act”). Finally, the United States saw a change in the power between people. At its heart, “Going to Meet the Man” is a story about power. This can be seen on many levels. The first, and most obvious, is the inequality between white people and black people. The story begins with Jesse’s internal monologue on how he brutalizes black people. Facing a bout of impotence with his wife, Jesse rues the fact that he “could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it” (Baldwin 424). His version of courting a black girl?

Arresting her so he can use her to work out his sexual frustrations. Simply the fact that he *can* do this shows an uneven playing field.

After putting aside his fantasy of sexually assaulting a black girl, Jesse recounts his day at work to his sleeping wife. He tells his wife how he beat a boy, a “ringleader,” within an inch of his life. Even more harrowing than the fact that he beat this boy is the fact that he knows the boy, has some kind of relationship with both him and his grandmother. After beating the boy, Jesse has a memory of a previous encounter with him. The boy is the only person in the story who stands up to Jesse. The first time he does this, he is younger. Jesse is looking for the boy’s grandmother, Old Julia, but the boy refuses to tell him anything about her whereabouts. Jesse thinks the boy is being stubborn. He fails to realize the boy is respecting his grandmother, refusing to acknowledge a degrading parody of his grandmother’s name. The boy does this again when he is older and Jesse has just beaten him. He tells Jesse, “My grandmother’s name was Mrs. Julia Blossom. *Mrs.* Julia Blossom. You going to call our women by their right names yet” (Baldwin 427). Jesse sees this as the kid being mouthy and showing disrespect. He does not realize the boy is showing respect, just not to him. Jesse does the only thing he can think of to regain his power—he dreams of assaulting the boy’s unconscious body further and insults black women more than he already has.

The most obvious exertion of power in “Going to Meet the Man” is the lynching of the black man at the end of the story. White power can be seen not just in the act itself, but how they go about it. This is no mere meting out of justice; these people are gathered for entertainment. They arrive with their food, ready to have a good time. Even Jesse’s mother is concerned about her appearance for the event. Who is she trying to impress? The black man she knows is about to be hanged? The mother is treating this violent outing as no more than a social visit. At the

lynching, the white people are not content to just let the man die. They want to prolong his suffering. Jesse, not entirely certain of what is happening, must watch the events unfold from his father's shoulders. He observes the black man and "knew that he heard him scream... The cry of all the people rose to answer the dying man's cry. He wanted death to come quickly. They wanted to make death wait: and it was they who held death, now, on a leash" (Baldwin 434). This passage reveals that the white people have the ultimate power in this story: the power over life and death.

Past his problem with impotence is what Jesse views as the cause: problematic black people. He blames black people for everything that seems to be wrong in his life. He cannot go use a black girl for sex because some black people might have the audacity to kill him while he is in the act. Working for a mail-order house is difficult for him because he is forced to see the squalor in which black people live like animals. He also deems them too stupid to realize they are being cheated. Jesse is playing the blame game in a major way, attributing his misfortunes and inconveniences to the black people he encounters in his life. The reader sees a sort of self-righteousness in Jesse when he "felt that he would like to hold her, hold her, hold her, and be buried in her like a child and never have to get up in the morning again and go downtown to face those faces" (Baldwin 425). He wants to stay within the "sanctuary" of his wife and avoid black people, but he cannot do this because his work is too important. He is on a righteous path, "protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves" (Baldwin 428). Jesse is insisting that black people make his life harder and keep him from doing what he wants to do, failing to realize that he fills the same role for black people.

In this story, the reader sees how blacks are treated and how a white man (Jesse) thinks about them. Despite the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been passed a year before this

story was published, black people still had to fight against prejudices in order to attain equality. Just a few years later, “[t]he Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed in 1966, proselytizing a well-crafted message of potent masculinity and patriarchy” (Field 462). Masculinity is at the heart of “Going to Meet the Man.” The story begins with a man unable to perform in bed, goes on to detail the excitement he feels from mistreating blacks, and ends with the castration of a black man. At the center of all this masculinity is the idea of sexuality. In order to understand why sexuality is such an important part of this story, one must look at Baldwin’s life and how his sexuality would have influenced his writing.

Despite the radical change happening in the United States at this time, Baldwin did not have it easy. To be black was one thing, gay another. The author “has been self-described as a short, effeminate black kid who was routinely teased and beaten up (in Harlem and Greenwich Village), perilously vulnerable as he was to a virulent homegrown racism and homophobia” (Blint and Field 743). Americans were fighting for civil rights, but they were concerned with African-Americans, not gay people. In fact, gay people’s rights did not rate much at all until the gay rights movement in the 1970s. Baldwin himself was dismissed as a strong voice in the civil rights movement because of his homosexuality. People thought that because he was gay, he was not powerful. In this, people can see the issues that have existed for quite some time between sex and power.

The idea of sexuality permeates “Going to Meet the Man” from the story’s very beginning. Jesse is unable to perform in bed, which suggests a loss of power. He blames black people for the inconvenience, then goes on to ruminate on how he finds black people to be much more exciting. Jesse gets his thrills not only from forcing black girls, but also from the fact that he is able to “*pump* some white blood into you every once in a while—your women” (Baldwin

428). He has the gall to claim that black people are lucky that he does this to them. Considering his upbringing, it is unsurprising that Jesse would face problems regarding sex. In a memory, Jesse is on the way home with his parents, and his dad talks about how he and his wife will be intimate when they get home. Jesse is privy not only to this conversation, but the sounds of their coupling later that evening. At a young age, he is exposed to sex. However, it is not until the lynching that he sees a true connection between sex and power. The white people do not just hang the black man—they castrate him. The phallus is the ultimate symbol of masculine power. The white people exert their power over the black man not just by lording life and death over him, but by robbing him of his masculinity and identity.

Sexuality is such an important part of “Going to Meet the Man” because of Baldwin’s own problematic sexual history. As previously mentioned, Baldwin saw discrimination because of his sexuality, despite the fact that the United States was undergoing many important changes at the time. For Baldwin, his “sexuality...was ‘very personal, absolutely personal. It was really a matter between me and God’” (Field 459). Baldwin’s stance on his own sexuality is interesting to consider within the context of this story, where sexuality is anything but personal. Perhaps this is yet another commentary on the faults of society during this period. Baldwin felt his sexuality was personal because, as a gay man, he still was not largely accepted. He felt no compunctions portraying heterosexual relationships in his short story because these types of relationships were accepted. Sex again becomes equated with the notion of power, or Baldwin’s lack thereof. The heterosexual white male is the one who holds the power in this story, so his sexuality is the one that is depicted.

With the civil rights movement and the impending gay rights movement, things in America were moving forward, which raises the question: why would Baldwin choose to write

such a story at this time? “Going to Meet the Man” delivers several messages to the reader. To appreciate the full weight of the political message Baldwin is sending, one must return again to his personal life. Baldwin was both gay and black, which put him in an interesting position. He was considered a sort of outcast among his own people. While his writing had prospered until this point, “[i]n the mid-1960s in particular, Baldwin came under increasing attack by a new generation of radical black American writers...who criticized his writing—and in particular his fiction—for not being sufficiently politically engaged” (Field 460). Baldwin, instead of engaging his critics, did what not many writers would—he actually changed how he wrote. Baldwin’s writing shifted dramatically during this period. His “writing style, especially in his essays, took on a sermonesque tone, an eloquent, but powerfully stated moralism and castigation of Western white supremacy” (Lapenson 200). Baldwin’s writing changed to take on a much more political stance.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not pass until Baldwin was 40 years old, which means most of his life had gone by before the United States saw a change in the treatment of black people. The shift in Baldwin’s writing occurred for many reasons. Yes, he was heavily critiqued by fellow writers, but “[a]s an African American living in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Baldwin [came] to the realization that he must individually take on the reality and responsibility of race in America” (Lapenson 202). For Baldwin especially, this undertaking would have been necessary because he was a black person who actually had a voice. People were used to reading his publications, knew of him as an African American writer. Using his voice, however, was dangerous. When Baldwin lived, “an African American who chose to challenge the racial status quo was certainly risking much, possibly her or his life” (Lapenson 206).

Baldwin made the conscious effort to change his writing to appease his critics, and he also called into question the political injustices he witnessed every day.

As previously mentioned, the United States saw some quiet years in the 1950s with no reported mob violence. Why, then, did Baldwin choose to make a political statement with a story about a lynching? An anti-lynching law was proposed, but it never passed. In fact, “calling for an anti-lynch law nonetheless was a wonderful way to get publicity...Everytime somebody asked for an anti-lynch law, they just laughed and laughed” (Herndon 9). To southern politicians, anti-lynching laws were a joke. They did not have to concern themselves with such laws because “murder has been against the law ever since the nation was founded” (Herndon 9). Imagine how infuriating this must have been for black people, especially activists. For politicians, the people who control so much of others’ lives, lynchings were something to laugh at. They did not realize that others considered these violent occurrences to be a vital part of their history.

While it is unlikely that Baldwin ever witnessed a lynching, the two previously mentioned newspaper articles prove that lynchings are something he would have encountered in the media. Baldwin chose to talk about such a disturbing practice because “the racist violence in the south, the practice of lynching that ‘Going to Meet the Man’ unflinchingly details, is a state-inspired action. The mob is not the other of the law but one of its creations” (Patell 359). By writing about and speaking against lynching, Baldwin is writing about and speaking against the law. Or rather, the lack of law, because it is surely a lack of true and just law that allows for such practices to take place. Baldwin may have never witnessed a lynching firsthand, but his work “does justice to the traumatic constitution of the United States by refusing to oversimplify, by meeting the often disturbing complexities that testify to the warping of our foundational

traumas” (Patell 360). Baldwin could not sugarcoat his work because doing so would say that actions such as lynchings *can* be sugarcoated, when this is simply not the case.

“Going to Meet the Man” is a short story written by James Baldwin that takes the reader on a “stomach-turning journey into the interior world of a racist southern sheriff and the childhood memory of watching a lynching that organized his very being as such” (Patell 357). In order to understand the gravity of this story, one must look at the time in which it was written. Baldwin’s personal experiences are seen to be a heavy influence on this work. This short story has many layers to it, layers that a reader might not be able to delve into without knowledge of Baldwin’s history and the political climate at the time this story was published. Baldwin clearly reflects his era, and knowing about this era is vital to understanding his work.

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