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The Loss of Identity: A Close Reading of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*

In James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* published in 1963, Baldwin exhorts his audience of both black and white Americans to tear down the barriers of racism at the height of the Civil Rights movement in America. The book is divided into two essays "My Dungeon Shook" and "Down at the Cross". The book was released at a time in which tensions between white and black were still very high and though segregation was still in place at the time of the book's publication, it would not be in place for much longer. It wasn't till July of 1964, that Congress signed the Civil Rights act to end segregation in America. The first essay, "My Dungeon Shook" is the shortest of the two yet is packed with many radical and at the time, very controversial ideals. Yet, Baldwin's motive for writing this essay is not to overtly tackle the issue of segregation nor does he aim to point fingers at either race, but it is instead to gain a new perspective and view the issue of race and racism from a different viewpoint in order to understand the actions of white Americans.

In the first essay, Baldwin touches on various concepts however perhaps the most prevalent throughout the text is that of acceptance and understanding. He claims that it is important to remember that black people should under no circumstance feel that they need to gain the acceptance of white people. He goes on to state that "There is no reason for you to be like white people, and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*" (Baldwin 8). He then proceeds to completely "flip the script" and claim that "the

really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*” (Baldwin 8). This notion would have seemed almost blasphemous at the time as the idea that black people should come to accept their white “brethren” with “love” was outrageous considering the oppression that blacks were experiencing at the hands of white people. By stating that black people must lovingly accept white people, Baldwin establishes logos and sets the foundation for the following passages in which he demonstrates the causes of why white people often act the way they do.

Knowing that his readers will not immediately agree with his notions, Baldwin seeks to establish pathos to better reach his audience at an emotional level. Baldwin, having already radically suggested that black people should lovingly accept their fellow white brethren, goes on to show that in order to do so, one must look at the underlying factors of their actions. He states that white Americans are “in effect, still trapped in a history they don’t understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it” (Baldwin 8). This statement alone, had it been released in today’s modern world might have been flagged or become a subject of the ever so present “cancel culture” Baldwin however, uses this quote to demonstrate that white people are not naturally spiteful or racist, but rather; confused. This is an aspect of racism, that is often overlooked even in the present day. Throughout the history of this nation, white people have always been the foreigners, though they themselves with the passage of time, have considered themselves the “natives.” Baldwin uses metaphors and examples to further exemplify this stating: “Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame” (Baldwin 9). He goes on to say that having seen the stars aflame “You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature” (Baldwin 9). Using this metaphor, Baldwin demonstrates how white people felt during the Civil Rights movement. Therein lies the

perspective that Baldwin attempts to demonstrate to the black community; the fact that white America is in fear.

According to the Oxford dictionary, fear is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “the emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger, or by the prospect of some possible evil.” It is this “danger” that according to Baldwin has gripped white America. He states that “In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity” (Baldwin 9). In her 2016 book entitled *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, Catherine Palczewski defines identity as “the physical and/or behavioral attributes that make a person recognizable as a member of a group” (Palczewski et al. 169). Identity is thus an immensely important characteristic to one’s self and when this notion is challenged or taken away, it can result in aggressive backlash. Baldwin states that the reason for which why white people think themselves superior to black men is “the loss of their identity” (Baldwin 9). By showing his audience, in this case predominantly black people, that a white person is not solely to blame for the actions of his race as a whole. As stated prior, Baldwin argues that white Americans have a construed view of their own history as well as that of their nation’s. This in combination with their fear of the loss of their identity, Baldwin suggests, has led white people to conjure up the outrageous notion that black people are inferior to them. By portraying white Americans as the sort of “culprits of their own inadvertent doing”, Baldwin utilizes the rhetorical appeal of pathos in order to prove that black people should learn to understand and accept white people. Though Baldwin is not asking the black community to pity the whites, he is however, asking that they look at the civil situation from their point of view.

As seen throughout Baldwin’s essay, he often uses the rhetorical appeals to further demonstrate his motive for writing the essay however these aren’t the only rhetorical devices

found throughout the essay. One of the prominent rhetorical devices he uses, is that of symbolism which can be found within the name of the essay itself; “My Dungeon Shook.” Towards the ending of the essay, Baldwin in his closing remarks, gives reassurance to his nephew that he in fact comes from a long line of poets. One of whom stated: “*The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off*” (Baldwin 10). This quote can be interpreted as being a reference or symbolism of the story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16:26 which tell of their miraculous escape from prison. In the Bible story, Paul and Silas after having wrongly been arrested and thrown in jail, were liberated by a mighty earthquake that “shook the dungeon” and freed the apostles. Another possible interpretation is the releasing of white people’s history. Baldwin states that in order for white Americans to understand their own history, they must first be released from it. It is possible that the miraculous releasing of the Biblical story of Paul and Silas, symbolizes that of the releasing and realization that white America as a whole might have in the near future. Though this might seem like a stretch, it is interesting to see the possible connections that can be made.

Authors will often arrange and present their ideas in certain ways to better reach their respective audience. Such is the case in Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook.” By formulating the essay in a letter-like format, Baldwin is able to develop a more personal relationship with the reader. This lends itself well to the subject material as had it been presented in a more scholarly fashion; the reader might have been less inclined to read the work itself. It also allows for more personal subject material to be discussed being that it is a narrative between an uncle and his nephew. Had it been a letter addressed to a lover or a wife, the subject material would have been presented in a very different manner. By using the relationship of an uncle and nephew, Baldwin

achieves a scholarly almost sermon-like quality to the essay as it bids the reader to heed the advice of the elder, even if the reader does so subconsciously.

One of the biggest benefits of the essay itself is its brief length. Amassing to solely 10 pages, the text is both short and to the point yet filled with many introspective keen insights into the discussion of race and points of view. Had the essay been longer, the subject material, though immensely important especially given the year of its publication, would have dragged on thus disengaging the reader. By keeping the essay just above 10 pages, Baldwin succeeds in writing a piece that is both dense yet at the same time approachable and attractive. Though the second essay is also important and presents various themes which had not been truly addressed prior such as the idea of Christianity and religion in African American communities, Baldwin could have just as easily only released the first essay and published it as its own separate work.

Released on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* was an immensely popular work that garnered him much critical acclaim, yet one wonders what he would have thought had he seen the recent social issues that have plagued our society in recent years. Perhaps he himself also thought the same thing of his time. Yes, slavery had come to an end 100 years prior, but black people were still not accepted nor viewed as equal by white America. Even now, though segregation has long since been abolished, hate crimes and police brutality towards black people are far from nonexistent. Perhaps if everyone, both white and black or of any race, were to pick up and read a copy of "My Dungeon Shook" and heed the instruction of "Uncle James", racism would be seen in a more non-polarizing light and though society will perhaps never fully rid itself of racism itself, one would learn to view it from different viewpoints and perspectives; something that is so desperately needed in this day and age.

Works Cited

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