1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol2/iss1/6

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Keywords
Go Tell It on the Mountain, James Baldwin, African American Literature
A Reader’s Response to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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In the seventh grade class I visit on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, the students keep journals about their individual reading. A few weeks ago, the students were given the class period to exchange journals for reading and response. A few of the students gave their journals to me. I’ll never forget one student’s intriguing entry. It went something like: “I just finished the book __________. It was pretty good. I really liked it. I’m not sure why I really liked it, though. It didn’t have any metaphors, good descriptions, or [other literary terms] in it. But I liked it anyway.”

My written response to her entry reflected my own experience with the same feelings. I’d recently read a book to which I had the same reaction, and I had felt horribly guilty about it. It’s not an uncommon experience, actually. I often read a book that I honestly like and enjoy, and then I can’t find any “literary” reason to justify my response. I feel as though I shouldn’t even have read, much less appreciated a book without obvious literary merit. Sometimes, a literary work has formalist merit, and I find it enjoyable. I then justify my pleasure with the language I’m supposed to use, but then I’m stricken with the guilty thought: “Is this really what I enjoyed about the book?” Such was my response to James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

I enjoyed reading *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* I connected with it at the deepest and most ineffable level. This actually concerned me because the text itself was an assignment for my Literary Criticism
class. Since Literary Criticism is a required class where undergraduate English majors are expected to read and write about literature at the most critical level (often in a formalist style), I was certain that the amount of analysis I would have to perform in order to write formally about Baldwin’s book would ruin my enjoyment of it.

I often feel as though for any given text assigned to me in a class, two very different readers encounter the literature. First, the person whom Nancie Atwell calls the “good reader” approaches the text with a pen in hand and a writing/discussion topic in mind. Simultaneously, the emotional, irrational me reads the text fully, with mental and emotional connections forming through a process of engagement. As every English major knows, these connections are never “scholarly” enough to include in literature class discussion. Yet these connections proved too strong to ignore when I read Baldwin’s novel. As I read, I felt the secret, invisible reader overtake the “good reader’s” analysis, and I wondered how I would ever write about the novel for class.

Writing about Baldwin from the stance of a “good reader” would have been an act. It would have required me to squelch my personal reaction to the text in order to write the expected response. But good writing is never such a lie. Risking a rebellion against most of what I’ve learned as an English major, for my analysis of James Baldwin I threw off the mantle of the “good reader,” the “educated reader,” the “implied reader” and so on, and responded to the novel truthfully. When I wrote the following piece of criticism, I allowed the second reader, the one whose opinions get voiced to close friends or written in a journal or sometimes are ignored completely, to critique Baldwin’s novel.

My struggle between reading a text as an educated and faithful English major, looking like a “good reader,” and the hidden emotional connection I keep out of sight is paralleled in Go Tell It on the Mountain. In Parts II and III, Florence, Gabriel, John, and Elizabeth go into the church and pray. Their bodies are in the proper praying position,
their voices articulate the right words, and they sing and chant. But as
the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the characters are not, in
fact, praying in the traditional sense. They may look penitent, singing
the right words, but what goes on in their minds is not the prayer and
petition traditional within churches of American cultural backgrounds.
They certainly don’t pray “Our Father who art in heaven,” but neither
do they pray in their hearts the “Hallelujahs” that they shout. The mat­
ter of their prayers, the connection hidden from sight, is actually story.
Through stories of times past, haunting mistakes, judgment, and people,
they pray.

My initial response as I began reading the prayers was “This
doesn’t sound like a prayer!” But as I began to think of my own faith,
I realized that I pray in a very similar fashion. When I do not pray out
loud, my head is usually bowed. I might be on my knees, and my eyes
may be closed, but the prayer that is actually in my heart is not an “Our
Father who art . . .”, nor even a “God, please . . .” The actual prayer is
comprised of story. Stories of people I’ve met, of atrocities and evil,
and of incidences in my past become hauntingly real to me as I pray.
My heart cries out to God as my mind experiences these stories. This is
how I pray.

Interestingly, it is also how I read. My pen in hand, glasses on,
book in front of me, I look like the “good reader,” noticing and under­
lining key points, interesting metaphors, artistic language, and shock­
ing allusions. But this is not a true reflection of how I’m reading. The
underlying process of reading has little to do with what it looks like
I’m doing, just as the real process of praying has little to do with what
it looks like I might be “saying to God.” As I read, I encounter much
more than the words on the page. I encounter stories and biases ob­
tained from life experience, from other stories, and from education. As
I read Baldwin, instead of just meeting new characters, encountering
new experiences and ideals, or interesting myself in plot events, to a
great extent, I end up reading and remembering my own story, thoughts,
opinions, past reading, and people from my own life.
As each of the characters in Part Two “prayed,” my reading of the text mimicked their praying styles. As I read the prayers of Florence, Gabriel, Elizabeth, and John, my own stories, experiences, and faith issues came to haunt me in such a way that I was reading them more than I was reading the events printed in the text. A different piece of me was revealed and renewed in each one of the prayers. Perhaps that’s why I enjoyed this book so much. In a startlingly narcissistic way, I enjoyed this text, I derived great pleasure from this text, because I was really reading myself.

In Florence’s prayer, I encountered my own feminism. Feminist is not a title under which I have willingly labeled myself in the past, but I have come to realize that in recent months, I read texts, not just from a woman’s perspective, but from a feminist’s perspective. In the male-dominated military communities where I grew up, I had a reputation for being strong-willed (for a girl), but not necessarily an advocate for my sex. Since leaving home, however, I have been outraged at the way my opinions and thoughts have been treated at times, simply because I am a woman. My outrage greets me as I read about Deborah and Florence and their status as women in a definitively patriarchal environment. Despite my attempts to forget my feminist bias, I read more of it when I read Florence’s prayer than I read her own story.

In her prayer, Florence relived her own past, where Gabriel, her unworthy brother, took every ounce of respect and education she agonizingly desired. The passionate sense of injustice she felt when Gabriel was given every advantage she desperately desired overcame me as I read her story. My own stance as a feminist did not necessarily evolve from my own experiences. I began to view events and stories with a feminist’s eye when I felt that other women were deprived of advantages because of their status as women. After reading Florence’s story, I found myself asking whether my circumstances would favor me as much if I had a brother. I’m sure that my life would be greatly different. My father might never have taken me on all the adventures he did, including target shooting and camping trips. He might never have resorted to having his intellectual conversations and arguments
with me. Florence forced me to question how different my life would be if a brother had been born after me. The thought frightens me, and I would prefer to ignore it, but it stares me in the face the entire time I read Florence’s prayer.

As I read Florence’s story, another part of me became exposed to my own scrutiny (and, it seems, Florence’s). She didn’t want to marry a man who desired her to become his little wife and work for his household her whole life. In her circumstances, she didn’t have much of an option, and ended up settling for a man who satisfied her sexually but kept her in the poverty she despised. My circumstances are nothing like the severity of Florence’s, but as an independent (proud?) single woman, I wonder about my own unwillingness to enter a relationship. Are my motives similar to hers? Perhaps not exactly, but my fears of becoming like her overcome the dissimilarities. In her prayer and the story of her past, I encounter my own fears of being alone, shrinking under the severity with which she examines her own choices.

In Gabriel, Florence’s brother, the past meets me. In the prayers of Florence I encounter my own beliefs and fears, but as Gabriel prays, I encounter my own history. Gabriel’s history is hidden deep in his soul, and his hypocrisy encounters him full force when he prays. Memories of my past experiences wash over me as I read Gabriel’s prayer in the same way that Gabriel’s memories run over him as he prays in my reading. The memories are not concrete, but rather images and sensations: reminders of past experiences. Growing up in a very transient environment taught me to treasure my memories more than any possession. I guard them with the passion with which Gabriel guards his own faith. When they are brought to my consciousness, a great joy and anguish fills me. I tell them to others or write them down as though they are Gabriel’s divine revelations, which must not be lost.

I also encounter other stories in Gabriel. In addition to memories of personal experiences, memories of literature I have read have a tendency to lead to emotional and intellectual connections with text while I read. The stories that most freely enter into my reading of Go
Tell It on the Mountain are the poems and stories I remember from African American literature. Those aspects of Gabriel's past that are too foreign to my experiences to make a connection to my past make a connection to another character from my own literary experiences. Because literature is an important part of my life, this has a deep impact on the way I experience the text. If Gabriel's story interacts readily with other texts, it becomes a part of me I cannot ignore, and will interact with my life and reading in the future.

As Elizabeth, Gabriel's wife, prays her sad story, I shamefully admit that I find myself reading the men who have influenced my life. It shouldn't be a shameful admission, but since I just revealed my feminist stance with my criticism of Deborah's prayer, I feel as though to say that Elizabeth reminds me of men is to contradict myself. But, regardless of my previously stated bias, past male friends and boyfriends encounter me in the pages of her narrative. These men have had an impact on the way I see things, and this became most obvious as I encounter Elizabeth's prayer. Elizabeth's remembered relationship with Richard, John's father who was seemed hopelessly lost from the beginning, reminds me of people whom I have loved who seemed beyond saving. These are the people who meet me most often in reading and in prayer.

Fittingly, John, whose story and prayer frame the narratives of the others, represents my college years. In Part I, his birthday, he ventures off on his own and allows himself to go into a forbidden movie theater and entertains secret thoughts to completion. His birthday discovery of free thought parallels my entrance into college where I discovered free thought in reading. Since entering college, I, like John, have allowed myself to entertain thoughts to completion. If, while reading, an interesting thought demands my attention, I'll put aside my reading for a moment, and finish the thought. In doing so, I try not to say, "Stop thinking! You're supposed to be reading!" I also try not to say restraining phrases left over from high school: "Don't go down that road," or "Don't allow yourself to entertain that philosophy." Even though I still find these restrictions in oral conversation, in the reading
conversation I am free to follow the train of thought to its destination. It’s why I’m such a slow reader. But it brings great meaning to the reading in which I engage. John’s experiences in Part I seem to parallel this well. John’s conversion experiences in Part III, the day after his birthday, represent the result of this.

Entertaining thoughts to completion is dangerous. Willingness to put my whole self into discovering truth means going through a lot of “darkness” until I “see the light.” This applies well to the maturing of my Christian faith in college, and is also inextricably related to the maturing of my World View. As I develop philosophies (Hegelian “syntheses”) I have to first tread through the frustration of not knowing, not understanding, and nearly despairing because I feel so alone in it. Finally, in what I have come to acknowledge as “true learning,” I reach the light. This is true in my faith, as well as in my reading.

When I first encounter a book, it holds a plethora of mysteries. Once I realize the book has merit, I commit myself to gaining something from it, no matter what fires I am forced to struggle through in order to attain that purpose. I plunge into the depths of the story, allowing myself to be enveloped by its difference, its “darkness.” I encounter myself in the pages, for good or for bad, and then I’m forced to examine my own ideas while in the depths of the book. At the last page (but not the end of the story), I find myself completely overwhelmed by what I have seen. Eventually, however, as I process, write, and decipher my own thoughts, I come to a light, a euphoria of knowing and learning which is, in truth, why I read.

In Go Tell It on the Mountain, I descended into the depths of the book, reading prayers and encountering myself. As I continued to read, Baldwin’s novel completely overcame me, becoming one of the only books I have ever been able to read while losing all the distractions of the world around me. In this paper, I began deciphering what this means to me, what I have learned about life, and what I have learned about myself. That’s the euphoria of the light.
I often feel as though literature that I don't encounter in this way has a negative, rather than positive, effect on me and the way I read. The "good reader" sometimes restrains me from submitting myself to the engagement that results in "true learning." I finished *Go Tell It on the Mountain* with the euphoria of the experience of the text: the real conversion I seem to have gone through. Now, the "good" formalist reader stands like the skeptic, like John's father, daring me to call my experience real, simultaneously implying that it's not. As I finish this decidedly untraditional critique, I wonder how real or acceptable my experience is to the critical world of which I am now a part. John became a part of the church through an experience he felt was real, but the acceptance of his father was evasive. His father cast the same critical eye that the "good reader" now casts on me.