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# Multi-ethnic America, Race and Gender in If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin

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**Multi-ethnic America, Race and Gender in**

*If Beale Street Could Talk* by James

**Baldwin**

Mémoire de Master 2

Présenté par

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Sous la direction de  
Corinne Duboin, Professeure des Universités

23 Août 2018

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## INTRODUCTION

“I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” James Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

Throughout American history, black people have been discriminated against. With the civil rights movements (1954-1968), African Americans, under the impulse of great political leaders such as Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, started to see their living conditions improve. A series of laws aiming at re-evaluating the status of African American people was passed, including the Voting Rights Act (1965) which protects African Americans from discriminatory practices in voting. However, although the Civil Rights Movement were a great step forward for African Americans, they remain precarious. Indeed, the seventies were marked by great tragedies of African American history with the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Robert Louis Kennedy and the imprisonment of Angela Davis. Racial segregation was legally abolished but African Americans still suffered from discriminations, exclusions, ethnic tensions and violence. Most of them still lived in harsh living conditions in ghettos and suffered from poverty and unemployment. Given the complexity of the situation, many black writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison decided to take the pen to denounce and expose these discriminations and show that African American writers were on equal footing with white ones. Art and writing became tools of expressions for black writers to express themselves and to denounce the racial injustices African Americans suffer from. Among them, James Baldwin, one of the great African American writers of the twentieth century became known. Born in a poor and religious family in 1924 in Harlem (New York), Baldwin died in 1987 in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France and is considered as one of the greatest African American writers of all time. He was the eldest of nine children. He was an illegitimate child and he never knew his father. His mother Emma Berdis Jones married his stepfather David Baldwin who was very harsh with him. Not only was James Baldwin black, he was also homosexual. This double alienation, as well as the murders of the political leaders make Baldwin aware of the fact that he could neither work nor live in the United States where the situation remain unchanged.

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<sup>1</sup>James Baldwin. “Collected Essays.” (The New York Times on the Web 1998). Retrieved on 11/07/2018, 12h50: [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/baldwinessays.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/baldwinessays.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).

Exile served as an escape and a quest for his own identity as he realized that he was different and understood what it meant to be an African American. Outside America, he could express himself freely as an artist. In Europe, Baldwin discovered a lot of people and discovered himself. He was first exiled in Paris from 1948 to 1957. Then, because of the social situation of America and in a context of racial segregation, he went back to the United States in 1957 and became a political activist of the Civil Rights Movement. The murders of political leaders, Martin Luther King, Malcom X and Medgar Evers who were also his friends, pushed him to exile again from 1970 until his death. James Baldwin was a militant, an essayist, a novelist and a social critic. His literary career can be summarized as follows: more than a dozen of essays, six novels, one short story, seven dramas and one poem. Baldwin is much more recognized by scholars for his essays which expose and denounce the reality of African American people in the United States. As a witness of his time, Baldwin was promoted spokesman of the African American community against his will. One must point out the fact that he was a novelist, a poet and a playwright. Baldwin's novels (mostly his late novels) were neglected by scholars for "their perceived lack of rigor<sup>2</sup>." One must argue that Baldwin's fictions are the illustrations of his essays. The African American author mixes personal experiences and novel form, literature and social history, realism and fiction. Indeed, James Baldwin was a victim of different forms of sexual and racial discrimination and categorizations linked to his identity. James Baldwin was discriminated against because he was black, homosexual, and an artist. He was nicknamed "Martin Luther Queen"<sup>3</sup> because he was involved in gay politics. He was also criticized for his approach of race based on love, recognition and acceptance of the self and the other which are rooted in his work, contrary to Richard Wright who had a more angry and violent voice. Baldwin's writing style is poetic, warm, refined. Because he suffered from his multiple identity, as a black homosexual and because he is the precursor of the queer theory, James Baldwin has always been considered as a masculinist writer.

Keith Clark declares "one cannot read Baldwin's oeuvre without placing him

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Robbins. "Consuela Francis, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963–2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"*"; Michele Elam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2017-1, document 8, Online since 14 March 2017, connection on 11 July 2018. Retrieved on 11/07/2018, 14 :02 : <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11969>

<sup>3</sup> Mehdi Derfoufi, " I'm not your Negro : Retour dans la lumière de James Baldwin, De l'autre côté », Online since 3 May 2017, connection on 15 July 2018: <https://delautrecote.org/2017/05/03/i-am-not-your-negro-retour-dans-la-lumiere-de-james-baldwin/>



squarely within a tradition of Black masculinist writers.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, because most of James Baldwin’s writings deal with the evolution of (black) male identity and focus on the male subject including, manhood and masculinity. However, one can assess that James Baldwin’s writing about identity is much more flexible and varied than pragmatic: “In fact, many readings of Baldwin’s fiction reveals him to be progenitor of many of theoretical formulations currently associated with feminist, gay and gender studies making it possible to raise questions central to current critical practice within these fields in the context of his works”, says Yasmin Y. Degout. She adds that “Baldwin ultimately reveals in his fiction how gender constructs are inseparably linked to race, class and other identity categories.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, identity is flexible for James Baldwin and it is the reason why he has always rejected categorizations. Baldwin was ahead of his time. He was one of the first African American authors to connect race<sup>6</sup> with gender and sexuality in his works. Chris Freeman explains that “James Baldwin was intersectional before there was a classification of intersectional.”<sup>7</sup> Intersectionality is at the basis of all Baldwin’s work and it is at the core of our analysis of his fifth novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). Before defining the concept of intersectionality, we will provide a short summary of the novel in order to familiarize the readers with the subject.

The novel is constructed around a simple plot and tells the story of a female protagonist, Clementine, nineteen-years old and narrative voice of the novel. She lives in Harlem, an area mostly populated by poor black people. She is in love with Fonny, twenty-one years old, but he is falsely accused of rape on a Puerto Rican woman. Clementine, with the help of her family, does everything to get Fonny out of prison despite facing injustices. The novel tackles with themes which have always pervaded Baldwin’s work. Obviously, there is love but also friendship, family, quest for identity, fight and resistance, racism, sexism... The novel shows how men and women are doubly

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<sup>4</sup> Clark Keith. “*Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson.*” Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004. p.31. Google Books

<sup>5</sup> Yasmin Y. De Gout. “Maculinity and (Im)maturity: The Man Child and Other Stories in Baldwin’s Gender Studies Enterprise”, in *Re-viewing James Baldwin*.p.134. Google Books

<sup>6</sup> In this analysis we decide to write and use race without quotations marks as the appellation race is valid and used without quotations marks by African American scholars and in the American and African American context.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Maushan D. “James Baldwin’s Sexuality: Complex and Influential.” Nbcnews.com, Feb. 07, 2017; <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/james-baldwin-s-sexuality-complicated-influential-n717706>

oppressed in the American society. Baldwin may be perceived as a precursor of intersectionality because of his personal life but also of his vision of race which cannot be separated from gender and sexuality. Intersectionality was initially theorized by the black feminist, Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989:

Consider an analogy for traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow another. If an accident happened in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, intersectionality refers to the situation of people who undergo simultaneously different forms of discrimination and oppression in a society. As a black feminist, Kimberlé Crenshaw devoted her theory exclusively to women. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, we intend to show that James Baldwin depicts the intersectionality of race and gender, of racism and sexism that affects both his male and female characters. “Race” is the most important theme of African American literature. Adding gender, brings a new dimension to the African American literary text. Twagilamana Aimable, in his work entitled *Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition* declares: the “concepts of race, gender, culture and history continue to engage African American writers in what I see as a continuous imagining, invention, or redemption of the African American Identity through writing.”<sup>9</sup>

In our study of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, we would like to demonstrate how Baldwin plays with racial and sexual stereotypes that have been placed on both men and women. Yet, most of the critics read *If Beale Street Could talk* as a sexist text: Catherine Rottenberg *calls* this book a “blatantly heterosexist” novel.<sup>10</sup> Rolland and David Murray declares: “Baldwin’s work continue to establish alliances with Black Power advocates through masculinist discourse was so transformative that eventually it compelled a revision of his long-standing critique of patriarchal social logics. [...] *If Beale Street*

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<sup>8</sup>Kimberlé Crenshaw. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. p. 149. pdf file

<sup>9</sup>Aimable Twagilamana. “Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition. Routledge, 1997.p. xxi.

<sup>10</sup>Catherine Rottenberg. *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time*. Place of publication not identified: State Univ Of New York Pr, 2013. p.157.

*Could Talk* is utterly phallic and patriarchal.”<sup>11</sup>

Though James Baldwin never claimed he was a feminist, we attempt to argue that *If Beale Street Could Talk* can also be read as a “revisionist text,” a feminist text, a text in which Baldwin gives voice to an African American female narrator living in a patriarchal society, for the first time in his fiction, as all the narrators of his other novels were men. He also shows that black women, like black men are also victims of white American patriarchal society. Interestingly, the novel was published in 1974, a period which is characterized by the growth of black feminism and black feminist discourse in the United States (1960-1970). It probably influenced James Baldwin for writing this novel.

Moreover, both male and female characters are victims of racism and sexism in the novel. Racism and sexism are two key concepts of our analysis. To understand Baldwin’s novel, one must define them. According to Britannica, racism refers to:

any action, practice, or belief that reflects the racial worldview—the ideology that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called “races”; that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural and behavioral features; and that some races are innately superior to others. Since the late 20th century the notion of biological race has been recognized as a cultural invention, entirely without scientific basis.<sup>12</sup>

If we refer to the definition given by Audrey Smedley, racism is a form of discrimination. It refers to the classification of people according to their ethnic belonging, the idea that one ethnic group is superior to another. In *Beale Street*, the characters are treated as inferior by American white society and represent the “other” because they are black.

Sexism refers to:

A prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls. Although its origin is unclear, the term sexism emerged from the so-called “second-wave” feminism of the 1960s through the ’80s and was most likely modeled on the civil rights movement’s term racism (prejudice or discrimination based on race). Sexism can be a belief that one sex is superior to or more valuable than another sex. It imposes limits on what men and boys can and should do and what women and girls can and should do. The concept of sexism was originally formulated to raise consciousness about the oppression of girls and women, although by the early 21st century it had sometimes been expanded to include the oppression of any sex, including men and boys, intersexual people, and transgender people.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> David Murray. *Matter, Magic, and Spirit: Representing Indian and African American Belief*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. p.32.

<sup>12</sup> Audrey Smedley. “Racism.” Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved on 11/07/2018, 14:15: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/racism>

<sup>13</sup> Gina Masequesmay. “Sexism.” Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved on 11/07/2018: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sexism>

In *Beale Street*, non-white characters are not only victims of racial oppressions but also of gender and sexual oppressions because their sexes are seen as weak, as instruments for domination and justification of sexual stereotypes.

James Baldwin fictionalizes and connects these two concepts. Both are symbolical and aim at deconstructing the character's identity. Our analysis will be based on the way James Baldwin constructs and uses his fiction, plays with racial and sexual stereotypes and symbols in order to expose and deconstruct racial and sexual prejudices. Our work also pays tribute to an author who is not very known in France, despite the fact that he spent most of his life in this country. It narrates the life of a misunderstood artist, who has not received the attention and recognition he deserved. Moreover, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is Baldwin's least studied novel because it was perceived as too simple. We intend to show that the novel is more complex than it appears, and that it is worth studying.

In order to answer these questions, we will base our reflection on literacy critics on *If Beale Street Could Talk* including Trudier Harris, a prominent scholar of the twentieth and twenty-first century. We also analyse Baldwin's interviews and essays which contribute to a better understanding of the novel. The analysis particularly relies on the feminists works on intersectionality such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, but also, the prominent sociologist W.E.B Du Bois and other scholars. Our analysis will be threefold.

First of all, we will analyze *If Beale Street Could Talk* as a heterosexual love story and we will explore the importance of love in the (re)construction of identity. Then we will examine how the blues connects race and gender in James Baldwin's fiction. Finally, we will consider the message James Baldwin gives on black family in the United States, the way he represents black family (black mothers and black fathers) based on racial and gender stereotypes to deconstruct and expose racial and sexual prejudices.

Secondly, we shall examine Baldwin's message on seventies' America. We will see how *Beale Street* can be read as a protest novel. We will also show how James Baldwin mingles reality and fiction and elaborates his discourse on the intersection of racism and sexism in multiracial America. Baldwin exposes the racial and sexual stereotypes that have been placed on black men and women in America. It also reveals the ways Baldwin advocates friendship and ethnic solidarity for the (re)construction of individuals, communities and America as a multi-ethnic nation.

Last but not least, we shall consider the way James Baldwin fictionalizes prison and prison experience, the way he uses prison as a site for intersectionality. We shall also examine Baldwin's discourse on sexuality, the way he connects sexuality with race as a symbol of power relation, but also how he represents sexuality as an assertion of the black characters' identities. In that sense, *Beale Street* may be read as a coming-of-age novel.

## I) Family Matters and Gender Relations

In this chapter, on first level of analysis we will attempt to examine *Beale Street* as a love story depicting a heterosexual love of a black couple, Clementine and Fonny. It develops the consequences of love and the absence of love on the male and female characters' black identities. Then, we will intend to tackle James Baldwin's work as a story of the blues.

### 1) Fonny and Clem: A Battle for Love

#### a) A Love Story

“Love takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I used the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace\_ not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”<sup>14</sup>

By way of introduction, James Arthur Baldwin explains to the reader that love is so powerful that it can reveal the inner self that one attempts to hide in the American society. Love as he explains, removes the mask of fear and dissimulation, a mask that the African American wears to fit into the American society. But wearing a mask implies not to know and reach who you really are. The concept of masking has become a recurrent theme in African American literature.

In Baldwin's works, love is the solution for the characters to reveal their real identities. Indeed, love is essential in Baldwin's novels, particularly in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) which depicts a heterosexual love between Fonny and Clem, the two protagonists of the novel. Jacques Cabau asserts that *If Beale Street Could Talk* is above all “a celebration of love... It is love better than revolt that cuts an opening in the repressive American system”.<sup>15</sup> Baldwin's latest novels, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979) make a literary break with his first writings. Baldwin's writing is now more refined and poetic. He interrogates the way racial and sexual discriminations not only divide the American society but have negative impacts on the characters' sense of self and identity.

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<sup>14</sup> James Baldwin. “The Fire Next Time”, *Baldwin Collected Essays*. New York (NY: The Library of America, 1998.). p.34.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Cabau. “Love Story in Harlem”. *L'Express*, November 17-23, 1975.

At the beginning of his writings, James Baldwin retraces the experience of internalised racism, which means racism towards members of a same ethnic group or oneself, and the impact of homophobia. In his latest works, Baldwin exposes the resistance of ordinary black characters in an oppressive system.

Baldwin is building his discourse around a love message to denounce all the ills that African Americans have endured and suffered from. As explained in the Oxford Dictionary, love is a strong feeling that one has for somebody or something. In *Le Roman*, Michel Raimond<sup>16</sup> explains that love is one if it is not the main theme in literature since the Middle Ages. Love is at the core of the plot: there are two lovers, obstacles, family conflicts, tensions, and social problems. Indeed, all these elements are to be found in *Beale Street*. By focusing his fiction around a love message, Baldwin inscribes himself into the literary tradition of love stories. Fonny and Clementine, are the African Americans' Tristan and Iseult or Romeo and Juliet.

Love implies reciprocity. Reciprocity, according to the same Oxford Dictionary, refers to the situation in which two people, or countries provide the same help for each other. Community and togetherness are important to face this racist and sexist American society and to build up a nation.<sup>17</sup>

Fonny and Clem are the two protagonists of the story. They love each other, and it is the love that they share that is going to be essential. To be more accurate, Baldwin captures the reader's interest with love as a symbol of resistance for the African American as an individual but also as a community. This fight is not only the fight of Clementine or Fonny, it is the fight of all the African Americans, and these symbolic fictional images are translated through the depiction of two contrasted families. The Rivers and the Hunts.

Moreover, for James Baldwin love can be associated with self-knowledge. It enables one to know oneself and thus shapes one's identity. It should be noted that in his essay entitled *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin states that "love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle; love is a war; love is a growing up."<sup>18</sup>

It is this resistant side of love which interests James Baldwin. And it is through the development of strong feelings that the characters will be able to reach their true selves.

He explains that love should be everyone's ideal, and human quest in life, to know

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Raimont. *Le Roman*. 2015. p.88-89.

<sup>17</sup> English Oxford Living Dictionary: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/love>

<sup>18</sup> James Baldwin. "The Price of a Ticket", *Baldwin Collected Essays*. New York (NY: The Library of America, 1998).

oneself. Love and identity are closely linked. Indeed, Cody Knipfer, an artist and a photographer wrote an article entitled “The Essence of Love and Identity in Romantic Relationships” in which he analyzes the writings of Monika Piazzesi, professor of Finance at the Stanford Graduate School of business, the philosopher Robert C. Salomon and professor Pauline Kollontai, professor of Higher Education, School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy, he discovered two main characteristics of love that affect people’s identity. Love “fulfills” and “transforms” the individuals.<sup>19</sup> His theory might be applied to Baldwin’s novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

Love is a difficult goal which can be achieved through resistance and struggle. It implies that without love one cannot fully identify him or herself. Baldwin’s strategy to explain to the reader of the power of love is to depict different images of love including the absence of love to make the reader aware of the consequences that it has in shaping or deconstructing African American identity.

*If Beale Street Could Talk* was first meant to be a political discourse from Baldwin but it turns out to be a love message. We must empathize here that both Baldwin and his stepfather were preachers. He concluded that his religious experiences were more personal than spiritual. James Baldwin was raised in a very severe religious atmosphere by his stepfather who mistreated him.

He abandoned his faith in Christianity due to the hypocritical aspect of it and because he thought that Christians were too selfish. For all that Baldwin was not an atheist, to a certain extent, he truly believed in the importance of religion and spirituality for the survival of humanity. This spirituality, according to Baldwin, should be advocated through familial bonds, union and community. The family theme is a leitmotiv in Baldwin’s novels, and it is more exemplified in *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

The American writer Joyce Carol Oates states that *Beale Street* is above all “a quite moving and very traditional celebration of love. It affirms not only love between a man and a woman but love of a type that is dealt with only rarely in contemporary fiction—that between members of a family, which may involve extremes of sacrifice.”<sup>20</sup> This first-person narrative is written from the point of view of a female protagonist:

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<sup>19</sup> Cody. “The Essence of Love and Identity in Romantic Relationships”. General Ramblings, May 2015: [www.reallycoolblog.com/the-essence-of-love-and-identity-in-romantics-relationships/](http://www.reallycoolblog.com/the-essence-of-love-and-identity-in-romantics-relationships/)

<sup>20</sup> Joyce Carol Oates. “If Beale Street Could Talk. The New York Times on the Web”. May 19, 1974: [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-beale.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-beale.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).



Clementine Rivers. First of all, when we read the novel, we immediately perceive that it is about a love story between two protagonists, Alonzo Hunt nicknamed Fonny and Clementine, nicknamed Tish or Clem. Indeed, the novel retraces the “Eros love” between the two protagonists from childhood to adulthood. They were called “Romeo and Juliet” (18) when they were children. The love story is set in Harlem, an area of New York which is mostly populated by poor black people. Clementine is in love with Fonny and cannot imagine living without him. We can see a progression in Fonny and Clementine’s relationship. They met when they were children. They are best friends and become lovers.

They both share a mutual love that makes them happy. The character of Clementine is interesting to point out as she is not as naïve as she is supposed to be, she will gain in maturity all along the novel. Indeed, she really knows what it means to love somebody or to be loved by somebody: “We knew our father loved us” (9) or when she said: “Now we knew that nobody loved us or now we knew who did” (26). For Fonny, the situation is much more complicated as he is in jail. Tish progressively realises that the absence of her lover is hard to endure because she is pregnant and is afraid to raise her child alone: “I always remember now, because he’s in jail and I love his eyes and every time I see him I’m afraid I’ll never see him again” (4). Despite the love that Tish shares with Fonny, she is aware that her life is made of doubts and uncertainties because she does not know when her lover will be released.

Fonny and Clementine’s relationship is idealized. Trudier Harris, professor of English at the University of Alabama states that in *If Beale Street Could Talk*: “love is a religion<sup>21</sup>”. Indeed, James Baldwin sacralises love by creating a sacred relationship: “When two people love other, when they really love each other, everything that happens between them has something of a sacramental air” (143). Love becomes the weapon to fight the devil and it is also a way to reach freedom. Fonny and Clementine’s first time clearly illustrates the connection between love, freedom, and knowledge:

The very first time Fonny and I made love was strange. It was strange because we had both seen it coming. That is not exactly the way to put it. We had not seen it coming. Abruptly, it was there: and then we knew that it had always been there, waiting. We had not seen the moment. But the moment had seen us, from a long way off – sat there, waiting for us – utterly free, the moment, playing cards, hurling thunderbolts, cracking spines, tremendously waiting for us, dawdling home from school, to keep our appointment (50).

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<sup>21</sup> Trudier, Harris. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987. p.160.

The way this passage is built is interesting to study. Indeed, this extract describes the protagonists' first time as a moment of grace and ecstasy. Their act is poetic, harmonious even musical and is filled with images. The use of the anaphor with the repetition of the word "strange", the chiasmus "We had not seen the moment. But the moment had seen us" and the personification of the word "moment" are meant to insist and strengthen their act. The very passage is crucial as both protagonists are experimenting and discovering sexuality, but they also discover themselves as lovers.

For Trudier Harris, in *Beale Street* love is spiritual. Indeed, Baldwin sacralises the love between Fonny and Clementine. This religious or spiritual depiction of love between the two protagonists, is not surprising as James Baldwin grew up in a religious family. Even though James Baldwin is very critical of Christianity, which he implicitly criticises in this novel, one must not ignore the fact that this novel is filled with strong religious images. This paradox is to be found in Baldwin's life. He was first a preacher himself until fourteen and the son of a preacher who progressively moved away from religious beliefs. The dichotomy of materiality versus spirituality in the novel can be interpreted by the fact that love is so powerful that it can transcend and elevate two protagonists as if they were in heaven. Through love and spirituality, Tish and Fonny are attempting to discover who they really are. Clem insists on the fact that love elevates and transcends people when it is true, she is referring to God's love. She clearly insists on the fact that "whoever loved us was not here (26)". It means that true love is not to be found on earth but only by connecting and communicating with God. But if you take this sentence in its context, we can perceive a criticism of religion too, as Clementine pronounced these words in the church to which Fonny's mother Alice Hunt belongs to. In fact, Clementine criticises fake love, a fake religion that is based on appearances and hypocrisy. This aspect will be developed later in this analysis through the character of Alice Hunt.

Clementine and Fonny are best friends, lovers and they also share a sister-brother relationship. This relationship strengthens the idea of religious love that Baldwin teaches and advocates in this novel through human bonds. Moreover, one must remind that the words "brother" and "sister" are usually words referring to men and women belonging to a religious community.

The author of *If Beale Street Could Talk* painted two opposed families who share different values. One can clearly identify Baldwin's message about love. In fact, he constructs a Manichean depiction of black family in his fiction. On one side, the Rivers

can be associated with goodness, positivity and optimism whereas the Hunts, particularly Fonny's mother Alice Hunt and her daughters Sheila and Adrienne, represent evil, negativity, and pessimism. Indeed, Clementine knows love and how to love somebody because she has been taught how to by her family, whereas Fonny's family is disunited. On the one side, Baldwin constructs a living together family and on the other side he depicted a broken one to show how love and the absence of love can impact and shape the protagonists' black identity. Clementine is loved by every member of her family contrary to Fonny. Indeed, in the novel Baldwin depicts what may be called "filial love". In other words, love that is conveyed through different members of a family. To be more explicit, filial love refers to the relationship between a child and his/her parents and siblings. Tish is loved by the members of her family, and this love is so strong, sincere and honest that it protects her from everything:

Maybe I used to like it, a long time ago, when Daddy used to bring me and Sis here and we'd watch the people and the buildings and Daddy would point out different sights to us and we might stop in Battery Park and have ice cream and hot dogs. Those were great days and we were always very happy – but that was because of our father, not because of the city. It was because we knew our father loved us. Now, I can say, because I certainly know it now, the city didn't. They looked at us as though we were zebras – and, you know, some people like zebras and some people don't. But nobody ever asks the zebra (9).

Tish is sure that love within the family is much stronger than love in society. She knows who loves her and who does not when she says: "It was because we knew our father loved us [...] the city didn't" (9). The opposition between love within the family and love in the society shows that Clementine is rejected from society and that her only support is her family. Then, she adds that people "looked at" them "as though" they were "zebras". The simile which assimilates Clementine to a wild animal shows that African Americans represent the "exotic other" or the outsider and that they do not exist as human beings. Baldwin often refers himself as an outsider when he was on exile in Paris. It is much more obvious to see that Clementine's family embodies love, and that her parents really love her. When she announces to her family that she is pregnant, they were all happy. Her father, her mother and her sister support her. Tish describes the relationship with her father: "I felt like a princess. I swear I did. He took me in his arms and settled me on his lap and kissed me on the forehead and rubbed his hand, at first roughly and then very gently through my hair. "You're a good girl, Clementine," he said. "I'm proud of you. Don't you forget that" (49). This passage shows a relationship which is intimate and strong, when she sits on her father's knees. She also sits on her mother's knees (22). She even claims that her daddy loves her more than he loves her sister

Ernestine (46). Clementine and her mother share a traditional relationship of a mother with her daughter. Sharon calls Clem “Little one” and “Little bit” (31-32). She comforts Clementine when she is crying: “she did touch me, she took me in her arms and she rocked me, and I cried” (33). And her relationship with her sister is similar: “Ernestine patted me on the back. Then, she took me in her arms. She had tears on her face. She smiled down at me – but she didn't say anything” (44). We clearly see that Clementine’s family, the Rivers, are the embodiment of love and are very supportive. The Rivers represent strength and continuity. Indeed, the name “Rivers” may be a reference to Langston Hughes Poem, “*The Negro Speaks of Rivers.*”<sup>22</sup> In this poem, Hughes uses the rivers as a metaphor of strength and continuity, values that characterize the Rivers family. Tish’s family also help her to construct her black identity. Indeed, her family taught her the values of love and resistance, of community and togetherness. Her mother raised her to be a good girl: “You got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive- ass shit. I sure hope I raised you better than that” (33). James Baldwin attempted to show that when love and mutual support are conveyed in a family, one is much more equipped to face difficulties. Indeed, Tish’s parents and her sister Ernestine help her to define who she is, to accept herself as a black woman living in a racist and sexist society. They endure, bear Fonny’s incarceration together as a united family. Clementine through love, gains more power to fight and resist the world she lives in. Her family is also a cocoon which protects her from the outside world.

On the opposite, Fonny does not share the same relationship with his family, particularly his mother and sisters who do not love him. In a 1973 interview, James Baldwin gave his vision of the black family:

The importance of the black family at this hour in the world’s history is to be an example to all those other dispersed all over the world because in a sense, the American Negro has become a model. In a very funny way the vanguard of a revolution which is now global, and it does with what you call the black family. My brother in jail, my sister on the street and my uncle the junkie, but it’s my brother and my sister and my uncle. So, it’s not a question of denying them, it’s a question of saving them (The Black Scholar 1973).<sup>23</sup>

Baldwin explains that the black family does not simply refer to an African American family, it refers to every black family in the world. What Baldwin wants to insist on, is the fact that having a united family is important because a family can “save”

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<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 11 Jan. 2018. Web. 14 Jul. 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Fred L. Standley, Louis H. Pratt. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Jackson, Miss: Univ. of Mississippi, 1996. p157

someone. Indeed, no matter who your “brother,” your “sister,” your “uncle” is, they remain your flesh and blood and you must accept them.

This paragraph reflects Fonny’s situation. Indeed, Fonny is in jail and receives no support from his family, particularly his mother Alice and his sisters Adrienne and Sheila.

He has no maternal figure to support him. Clementine highlights the importance maternal figures in the development of one’s identity: “It is very much harder, and it takes much longer, for a man to grow up, and he could never do it at all without women” (59). A woman is a “guide” (59). Fonny does not have this guide, to support and to love him. Alice Hunt, his mother and his sisters constantly criticize and judge him because he is incarcerated instead of supporting him. Clementine questions the fact that whether Fonny’s mother and father “ever made love” (15). This shows that Fonny and his family did not know love and how to love because they have not been taught how to, contrary to Clementine and her sister Ernestine.

The fact that Fonny and Frank did not receive any love from Alice Hunt (Fonny’s mother) impacts their identities as black men. Clementine clearly insists on that: “So, there they were, and they blamed it all on Fonny. Between the mother’s prayers, which were more like orgasms, Fonny didn’t stand a chance. Neither was Frank a match for these three hags” (37). It shows the consequences of the lack of love in a family and in the construction of the black masculine identity. Indeed, Frank and Fonny are scapegoats in this family because their identities as black fathers are damaged. A deeper analysis will be made later in our study devoted to the black male characters in the novel. Fonny is condemned to be in jail for a crime he did not commit. Baldwin’s message about Fonny is not as pessimistic as it seems. Even though Fonny is not loved by his mother and sisters, he is indeed loved by his father and above all by Clementine and her family, which is ironical. His identity is defined through the love he shared with Clementine. Fonny knows at least that Clementine loves him and this is a symbol of hope and of a possible bright future for him. The Rivers support Fonny even if he is in jail. It is Clementine’s mother, Sharon, who travels to Puerto Rico to find evidence to save Fonny. It is Ernestine who finds the lawyer Hayward who defends Fonny’s case. Thus, the Rivers become Fonny’s surrogate family.

To sum up, James Baldwin constructs two opposed families which may indeed be two ethical metaphors. On the one hand, the Rivers represents the goodness. Clementine in her family, finds solace, comfort and affection. The love that she received from her

family enables her to build her identity as a black woman and a future black mother. It also helps her to be more equipped to find her place in the United States, a place that is determined by racial discrimination and sexual prejudices. On the other hand, the Hunts family may embody evil, as they do not show any support for their son in jail and are blinded by selfishness and hatred despite being a religious family. By painting two different families, Baldwin clearly aims to show that love between a man and woman or with members of a family enables individuals to know who they are and who they are not. Baldwin implicitly criticizes religion and the fact that the believers are praying for themselves and their own interests, and this will be relevant when studying the character of Alice Hunt. *If Beale Street Could Talk* shows the fight and the resistance of African American characters. This fight and enduring process is conveyed through the use of the blues motif.

#### **b) The Story of the Blues**

By writing this love story, Baldwin connects the blues with black fiction. In that sense, he fictionalizes the blues. He transforms the musical blues tradition into prose. One may argue that Baldwin inspired himself from one of the greatest blues singers of the United States to write his novel. Indeed, the title is inspired from William Christopher Handy's song "Beale Street Blues" (1916).<sup>24</sup> Like the title of the novel, the title of the song refers to Beale Street, located in Memphis, Tennessee, a place in which it was said that the blues was born. Baldwin rewrites the blues through fiction. He also pays tribute to one of the main figures of African American culture. Through this novel, he inscribes himself into the African American oral tradition. (The word (verb) 'talk' is very significant here. Baldwin is a prophet, a spokesman of the African American community. As a prophet, he is obsessed with the quest for truth. *If Beale Street Could Talk* may be interpreted as If Beale Street Could "Tell the Truth." Interestingly, one can notice that most of his fictions are informed by a black oral literary tradition. Most of the titles of his fictions refer to the will to say or re-establish the truth and comes from the African American oral traditions: *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974).

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<sup>24</sup> William Christopher Handy (1873-1958), famous African American blues singer, nicknamed "The Father of the Blues."

*If Beale Street Could Talk* is poignant, poetic, expresses strong feelings and emotions. Baldwin utilizes the vernacular characteristics of blues music in his fiction. The sexual act between Alice Hunt and Frank is inspired from call-response oral tradition: “when you going to live your life to the Lord?” (16) Frank asks, Alice answers: “Oh, Frank, let me bring you to the Lord.” (16). Baldwin “signifies” on the blues by having recourse to parody. The latter is also a form of signifying. The concept of signifying has been developed by the scholar Henry Louis Gates in the *Signifying Monkey* (1988). For Gates, “Signifying presupposes an “encoded” intention to say one thing but to mean quite another.”<sup>25</sup> It is a form of double-voicedness. Baldwin ties the history of the blues and the African American experience. Gates explains that the concept of signifying and the blues are the two main tropes of African American literary tradition.

Moreover, Baldwin uses the blues to speak of black experience in the United States because the blues contains “the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate.”<sup>26</sup> And he added, “I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy.”<sup>27</sup> James Baldwin claims that the blues is paradoxical and ambivalent. It describes the pain of black experience, but it also expresses relief and joy. In fact, in this novel the characters, more precisely the protagonists, experience very strong feelings. They move from doubt, pain and despair, to hope, joy, and even ecstasy. Both extremes are characteristics of the blues.

According to Robert Detweiler, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is a “blues lament”<sup>28</sup>. A lament is a poem or a song coming from oral literature that expresses a sense of loss, grief, sorrow and mourning. This explains the two unbalanced sections of the novel: The first part, “Troubled about my soul” narrates the characters sufferings, their resistances and their fights against injustices and ostracism. The second section “Zion” represents hope. It has no conclusion probably because James Baldwin wanted to highlight the fact that the history of black people is still a big issue in America. The expression “blues lament” is surprisingly used here as an oxymoron because the blues comes from the

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<sup>25</sup> Henry L. Gates. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. p.82.

<sup>26</sup> James Baldwin and Randall Kenan. “The Use of the Blues”. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York, NY: Vintage Internat, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> James Baldwin, and Randall Kenan. “The Use of the Blues”. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York, NY: Vintage Internat, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Detweiler. “Blues Lament, A Review of *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin”. <http://www.nathanielturner.com/ifbealestreetcouldtalk.htm>

secular black tradition whereas the lament comes from the Bible. Baldwin mixes secular and religious images in his novel to highlight his progressive withdrawal from religious beliefs.

The blues is part of African American history, culture, heritage and identity. The blues is a folk music which has been invented by African Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century firstly in the south. In the 1960's, the blues became one of the most important popular music in the United States taking its roots in slavery.

Blues songs are lyrical rather than narrative. They express strong feelings rather than telling a story. It may explain why the plot of the novel is very simple. It is a story of a pregnant woman who leads a struggle to make the father of her unborn child free. Indeed, what matters most for Baldwin seems not to be the plot itself although the plot enables the reader to understand the story. He focuses more on the construction and the evolution of the characters, and their feelings, their capacity of resistance, their despair, and their joy. Baldwin utilizes the blues for the development of the plot, to structure the novel, to construct his characters, the themes and the style of the text.

It is interesting to notice that here again, the themes mentioned in the novel are recurrent themes in blues songs. In the book entitled *American Music: A panorama, concise edition*, Lorenzo Candelaria and Daniel Kingman<sup>29</sup> said that "some blues speak of nameless depression, work (or lack of it), poverty, crime, prisoners of crime, prison, addiction and prostitution."<sup>30</sup> In her review entitled *James Baldwin's Blues*, (1982), Marlene Mosher argues that James Baldwin is "melding the blues and the novel form".<sup>31</sup> She adds that Baldwin "writes blues"<sup>32</sup> and that the hero has the capacity to fight the restrainers. Fight and struggle are major themes in *If Beale Street Could Talk* through the Rivers family which is the embodiment of resistance. Interestingly, the river in William's Christopher Handy's song *Beale Street Blues* may be a metaphor of the Rivers family in the novel. Indeed, the river in the song and the Rivers family maybe the symbols of freedom, of continuity and strength. In the song, William Christopher Handy, nicknamed the "Father of the blues", repeats "Because the river's wet and Beale's done gone dry."

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<sup>29</sup> Lorenzo Candelaria and Daniel Kingman. *American Music: A Panorama, Concise Edition*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104

<sup>31</sup> Marlene Mosher. "James Baldwin's Blues." *CLA Journal* XXVI, no. 1 1982: 120.

<sup>32</sup> Rosa Bobia. «*If Beale Street Could Talk: The French and American Criticism of James Baldwin's "Prison Parable"*», *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* [Online], Writers, writings, Homage to James Baldwin (Dossier by Benoît Depardieu), Online since 01 January 2005, connection on 17 July 2018: <http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/609>



This line shows a contrast. On one side, the river represents life, strength and freedom whereas Beale Street represents death, sterility and weakness.

To be more accurate, *If Beale Street Could "talk"* there would not be any discriminations in the United States. Baldwin means that Beale Street could not talk and say "I" because the American system prevents black people to do so, to tell the truth.

Gerard Herzhaft, a French novelist, historian, musician and a specialist of the blues explains that by becoming "blue," the black singer says "I" for the first time in the history of African Americans in the United States, he tells his vision of the world, his feelings. By saying "I," the singer affirms his/her humanity which was denied by the segregationist system.<sup>33</sup> This is an act of individual and collective resistance and assertiveness of identity. Indeed, as explained earlier, Baldwin mixes the blues form and the novel form. The blues is the expression of personal feelings, of a personal story. Baldwin gives voice to a female protagonist through Clementine who told about her journey, her blues story in Beale Street. In other words, the blues connects the characters with their identity. Interestingly, the novel shares common points with the slave narrative in its form: a mixture of fiction and autobiography, a poetic epigraph: "Mary, Mary, what you going to name that pretty little baby? The incipit of the novel deals with the birth of Clementine "I know that I was christened Clementine" (3). Slave narratives usually depict "separated" families (The Hunts) and make a reflection on slavery. Baldwin inscribes his fiction into the African American literary tradition.

Houston A. Baker Jr, an American educator and literary critic analyses in his seminal work, *Blues Ideology, and African American Literature* (1984), the blues as a "dominant African American idiom both as a synthesis of traditional and modern black response to life and as a vernacular paradigm for African American culture."<sup>34</sup> Baker describes the blues as matrix or a "womb, a network, a fossil bearing rock, a rocky trace of a gemstone's removal, and a principal metal in an alloy, a mat or plate for reproducing print or phonographs records."<sup>35</sup> The blues is at the core of Baldwin's novel through cultural references, experiences of deep and ambivalent personal feelings but also orality.

The blues is a code, a code of African American culture, the culture of the orality.

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<sup>33</sup> Médiathèque décines.fr : « Le blues » : <https://www.mediatheque-decines.fr/sites/default/files/pdf/le%20blues.pdf>. Translated by Rivière Sébastien.

<sup>34</sup> Yamini Chauhan. "Houston Baker, Jr.: Another sun person heard from." "'New Criterion' 'Invalidated site: Teach out, Terry. (1993). Oct. 17, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Houston A. Baker. *Houston A. Baker, Jr. Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature.*, 1984. p.3

Thus, language becomes very important for Baldwin because it tells the truth. Jacques Lacan speaks of “full speech” to refer to a speech full of meaning, of truth, which is symbolic, which transforms the subject when the speech is pronounced<sup>36</sup>. Baldwin aims at linking the experience of the blues, with the subject and its community and its race to describe the reality of his African American people in his fiction. The blues are symbols in the novel. Baldwin uses the blues as metaphors, to the development of the plot, themes and characters:

She put on a Ray Charles record and sat down on the sofa. I listened to the music and the sounds from the streets and Daddy's hand rested lightly on my hair. And everything seemed connected – the street sounds, and Ray's voice and his piano and my Daddy's hand and my sister's silhouette and the sounds and the lights coming from the kitchen. It was as though we were a picture, trapped in time: this had been happening for hundreds of years, people sitting in a room, waiting for dinner, and listening to the blues. And it was as though, out of these elements, this patience, my Daddy's touch, the sounds of my mother in the kitchen, the way the light fell, the way the music continued beneath everything, the movement of Ernestine's head as she lit a cigarette, the movement of her hand as she dropped the match into the ashtray, the blurred human voices rising from the street, out of this rage and a steady, somehow triumphant sorrow, my baby was slowly being formed (41).

The blues represents a spirit that connects the family together. This passage is filled with the lexical fields of music: “I listened to the music,” “sounds,” “street sounds” and “Ray's voice,” “piano,” “the sounds,” “listening to the blues,” “the sounds,” “the music,” the “movement” (repeated twice), “human voices.” All the sounds are in harmony, the music not only gives a rhythm and a unity to the passage, with the numerous enumerations and the repetitions, it also strengthens the cohesion and the unity of the Rivers Family. This paragraph is constructed as a mathematical formula, there are additions which are represented by the enumerations and the result which is characterized by the “formation” of the baby at the end of the passage. The blues gathers and structures all these elements. It unites the Rivers who by their union, their sense of community and togetherness will protect the baby. It is as if each member of the family, Clementine, her father Joseph, her mother Sharon and her sister Ernestine, were one. The lexical field of the body, “the hair, the hand and the silhouette”, stresses this idea of unity. Each part of the body represents a member of the family.

The blues is used as a symbol that connects the closely-knit family with the history of their community: “this had been happening for hundreds of years, people sitting in a room, waiting for dinner, and listening to the blues” (41).

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<sup>36</sup> Jacques Lacan. *Séminaire I*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1975.p. 125. Translated by Rivière Sébastien.

Tish's mother, Sharon, wanted to be a blues singer in nightclubs. The encounter with Victoria, the alleged victim of the rape, and Sharon in a nightclub is also symbolic:

This is a nightclub, and so the music is – "live." Sharon's days with the drummer come back to her. Her days as a singer come back to her. They do not, as she is to make very vivid to me, much later, come back with the rind of regret. She and the drummer lost each other – that was that; she was not equipped to be a singer, and that was that. Yet, she remembers what she and the drummer and the band attempted, she knows from whence they came. If I remember "Uncloudy Day" because I remember myself sitting on my mother's knee when I first heard it, she remembers "My Lord and I": And so, we'll walk together, my Lord and I. That song is Birmingham, her father and her mother, the kitchens, and the mines (151).

This passage connects Sharon with her past as a blues singer. It also connects the narrator Clementine with her childhood. It is interesting to notice that the verb "remember" is repeated four times. This anamnesis process is one of Baldwin's main goal in his writing. His manuscript entitled "Remember this house" (Remember written Re/member) suggests the act of rebuilding a destroyed house and symbolically rebuilding through the act of remembrance, one's past, identity and history. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison deals with the concept of rememory through Sethe, the protagonist of the novel. Sethe explains Morrison's concept:

Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place\_ the picture of it\_ stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there inside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.<sup>37</sup>

Rememory is not just a concept about the past, it is a concept that affects the present. In *Beale Street*, Sharon recalls of her past in Birmingham in the South where she comes from. Thus, rememoring becomes an act of self-knowledge, self-understanding and resistance. The blues enables Sharon and the other characters of the novel to remember and reconstruct their past and connect it with the present.

Through the act of rememoring, Sharon, not only connects the present with her past as a singer, she also realizes that she "was not equipped to be a singer and that was that." Sharon knows that she cannot be a singer but at least she knows that she is a mother. James Baldwin explains through Sharon's trip in Puerto Rico how Sharon who identifies herself with the stereotypical image of motherhood manage to be a free and emancipated woman and mother. She is no longer the "angel in the house" but a woman and a mother of action. In that sense, James Baldwin redefines black motherhood in the United States.

The blues connects the characters with their past and enables them to discover and

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<sup>37</sup> Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. Masaryk University. 1987. p. 17-18.

reconstruct their identity in order to move on.

Indeed, the colour blue is a symbol in James Baldwin's novel. It is relevant to see that the colour blue is often associated with the colour black in the book. In fact, Baldwin signifies on the colour blue as a metaphor of the blues which binds the characters with their identity and blackness. We see here a new dimension in Baldwin's use of the blues. The blues enables one to speak of "race." In 1929, the famous jazz singer, Louis Armstrong sang "What did I do to be so black and blue?" in which he says: "I can't hide what is in my face," "My only sin is my skin" and of course the repetition of the rhetorical question "What did I do to be so black and blue?" Indeed, the singer associated blackness, the colour of their skin to a curse from God. It refers to the curse of Ham which was an episode from the Bible with the myth of Noah. It is the curse that Ham's father, Noah, placed on Canaan after Ham sees his father naked and drunk in a tent. The curse of Ham has been used to justify racism and the enslavement of people of African descents (believed to be the descendants of Ham.)

In the novel, the colour blue is linked to the characters' blackness, and black identity. When Fonny and Clem go to church, Clem describes the way Fonny was dressed: "Fonny came, looking absolutely miserable, with his hair all slicked, with the part of his hair so cruel that it looked like it had been put there with a tomahawk or a razor, wearing his blue suit" (18). In the church Clem wears a "blue dress" with her hair "straightened" and a "blue ribbon" (23) in it. Fonny wears a "blue suit" and a "blue tie" (23). A sister in the church, "was dressed in blue, dark, dark blue and was wearing a "matching blue hat."" (25). The colour blue enables Clem and the other characters to be conscious of the colour of their skins. Indeed, Fonny and Clem undergo physical transformation (Fonny has his hair slicked and Clem's hair is straightened) to fit in the church or symbolically to resemble white people.

James Baldwin pervades his novel with blues images. The references to William Christopher Handy and Langston Hughes' poem allow James Baldwin to inscribe himself into an artistic, literary and cultural African American tradition. Baldwin story is a blues lament, the story of Clementine who moves from different states of human being as an individual in an attempt to assert her identity as both black and woman: she laughs, cries, mourns, is happy, loses hope and then hopes again. The blues translates also the capacity for Tish and her family to resist to the ostracized American system and stay united. It also connects the characters to their past characters, their blackness, their black identity, and

gender.

## 2) Black Mother Figures

In this part, we will use the concept of intersectionality coined by the prominent feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw, to refer to the different means in which the intersection of race and gender leads to the deconstruction of the female characters identities as black women or black mothers. We will see how James Baldwin depicts two types of black motherhood (the Hunt and the Rivers) and the relationship between identity and power relation. Baldwin exposes the stereotypical images shaped since slavery to denounce racial and sexual oppressions that African American mothers/women suffered from.

As Andreia Thaxton-Simmons said: “historically, Black women have had to take care of their children, someone else’s children, clean the house, and be the attentive wife.”<sup>38</sup> During Slavery, African Women were brought to America to serve as breeders of children. They become a key figure of the black family. The role of the mothers was much more important than the role of fathers. Women are very important in Baldwin’s novels, particularly in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Indeed, most of the characters in this novel are women. Baldwin creates a matriarchal society in the novel in an attempt to fight against the patriarchal American society of the seventies. According to the Moynihan report, African American families were forced into a matriarchal structure because of the shifting roles of African American men and women following the Civil Rights gains in the 1960’s.<sup>39</sup>

Women are indeed central in Baldwin’s novel. There is the female narrator of the story Clementine with her sister, Ernestine and her mother, Sharon. There are also Fonny’s mother Alice and her daughters Sheila and Adrienne but also the “rape victim,” Victoria Rogers. Not only are these female characters numerically more present than the male characters, they also dominate the narrative. By focusing more on female characters, Baldwin redefines the American patriarchal society. This society shifts from a patriarchal to a matriarchal one.

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<sup>38</sup> A. Thaxton-Simmons. *Rewriting the Mother Figure in Selected Novels by Contemporary African American Women*. no date. Florida State University, 2012. p.6.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan. *The Negro Family. the Case for National Action*. 1965: Washington. p. 78. pdf file.

James Baldwin's fiction is built around dichotomies and ambivalences. On the one side, there are the Rivers family and on the other side, there are the Hunts. The female characters also highlight this dichotomy. Sharon, Ernestine and Clementine represent positivity and optimism whereas Alice Hunt, Sheila and Adrienne are the absolute opposite. We will see how and why Baldwin constructs two opposed images. We will examine how and why the female characters are stereotypes, women who need male figures and male support in the novel. Sharon, Ernestine and to a lesser degree Clementine are mother figures, free of guilt, but still in a state of inferiority in relation to the male characters, Alice Hunt is a character through whom Baldwin criticizes the alienation of Christian church. James Baldwin wanted to expose and denounce this in the novel.

African American women have always been considered to be inferior to white mothers because of their lifestyle which has been impacted by race, gender and class. The image of the mammy, the matriarch and the welfare mother are part of white stereotypes towards black women. Since slavery, black mothers were subject of racial and sexual oppressions and violence. The mothers were removed from their children. Baldwin reminds the reader through stereotypes the way black family functions, that black female characters remain dependent and cannot fully build their identity without a man or a male figure. However, we argue that some women in the novel manage to emancipate despite these stereotypical images. Trudier Harris, states that: "no woman in the novel is complete without the intellectual or emotional support of a man or a male figure, on either a real level or a symbolic one."<sup>40</sup> These women doubly suffered because of their "race" and their gender within the family and thus they fail to shape their identity as women and mothers, but this oppression had impacts on the development of love relationships with their children (Clementine and Ernestine on one side and Fonny, Sheila and Adrienne on the other side.)

### **a) Nurturing Mother Figures**

James Baldwin creates two opposed families and two conceptions of black motherhood. Sharon and Ernestine are very supportive in Clementine's quest to get Fonny out of prison and represent the mother figures in the novel. Sharon is idealized and represents the perfect mother. The mother-daughter relationship is constructed around a

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<sup>40</sup> Trudier Harris. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987. p.161.

love atmosphere. Sharon gives Clementine pet names, “Little one” and “Little bit” (31-32). She gives her daughters a good education and teaches Clementine what it means to be a woman: “I sure hope I raised you better than that. If you was a bad girl, you wouldn’t be sitting on that bed, you’d long been turning tricks for the warden” (33). She represents the resistant and enduring side of the blues. She reassures her daughter Clementine when she cries “then she did touch me, she took me in her arms and she rocked me, and I cried” (33). She reminds Clementine to be a strong woman:

“Tish”, Mama said, “you a woman now. You got to be a woman. We are in a rough situation\_ but, if you really want to think about it, ain’t nothing new about that. That’s just exactly, daughter, when you do not give up. You can’t give up. We got to get Fony out of there. I don’t care what we have to do to do it \_ you understand me, daughter? (96)

Indeed, Sharon is a woman of action, she is the one who has been chosen to go to Puerto Rico to find evidence to prove Fony’s innocence because she is an experienced woman, a mother who knows life and its hardships. Clementine’s sister Ernestine said: “Obviously a man can’t go, and God knows Frank can’t go. That leaves Mama.” (121). Ernestine also plays this role in the novel. Indeed, like Sharon, Ernestine is also reduced to a nurse figure. She is called “Sis” by Clementine which shows her respect and affection to her sister. Ernestine works in a settlement house with kids. Ernestine may be called an “othermother” who establishes the link between Sharon (the mother) and Clementine (the daughter). The “othermother” is a concept which has been developed by the feminist Patricia Hill Collins. They are women “who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed like Sharon, Ernestine is also a woman of action as she is the one who has found the lawyer Hayward. It is her who also decided to send Sharon to Puerto Rico.

Indeed, at first sight Sharon and Ernestine are mother figures who support and help Clementine to build her identity as a woman and a future mother but Sharon, Ernestine and to a lesser extent Clementine are just reduced to the stereotypical image of black “mammies” by the American society. Indeed, Baldwin shows the role of black women in the families. He reproduces their roles in black family: women need male figures to function or to live as women and mothers. Female characters cannot fully construct their black identity if they have no male figures to support and assist them. Baldwin plays with the different stereotypes that have been placed on black women.

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<sup>41</sup> Patricia Hill Collins P. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2014. p.178

Sharon is described as a “black mammy”. Harriet Elizabeth Beecher Stowe, in her novel entitled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) uses also this image of the mammy through the character of Aunt Chloe. Interestingly, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*<sup>42</sup> was Baldwin’s favourite novel when he was a child and also the book he severely criticized in his essay “Everybody’s protest novel”.<sup>43</sup> In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the character of Aunt Chloe is a good, faithful woman and an excellent cook. She takes care of the children. In fact, one may notice that some parallels can be drawn between Aunt Chloe and the character of Sharon Rivers. When describing her mother’s physical appearance, one can notice that Sharon “may not be beautiful to look at” (27), that she “started to put on a little weight” (27). This image of the “mammy” or the “angel in the house” like Coventry Patmore said in his poem, is also strengthened in Baldwin’s novel by the fact that Sharon is always in the kitchen: “she closed the door and I heard her in the kitchen.” (34), “Sharon now came in the kitchen (83). Women have to sacrifice their lives for men if they want to have a family and an economic stability. Sharon stated when speaking about the relationship that she had with the drummer that she knew she “wasn’t woman enough to help the man to give him what he needed” (27). As previously mentioned, Sharon had always wanted to become a singer but “though she had a voice, she wasn’t a singer; that to endure and embrace the life of a singer demands a whole lot more than a voice” (27), Clem declared. James Baldwin explains that Sharon has trouble to be independent and emancipate in the American society and to fulfil her dream because of the oppressions she suffers from, due to the intersection of her race and gender

In fact, being a woman and mother represents an important role for the female characters in the novel. Sharon and Ernestine are responsible of their acts, free of guilt. Baldwin rewrites the image of “mammy figures” during slavery which may be called “the new mammies”, as Sharon and Ernestine are very active in the novel as they participate to get Fonny out of prison.

However, the so-called American Dream praised in the United States with the so-called equality of opportunity has turned into an American nightmare for black women who had to face the hard realities of the American society. Sharon who wanted to become a blues singer had to work as a “barmaid” (27), which shows here again that she is reduced to this state of servility and cannot emancipate in this society because she is black and a

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<sup>43</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*. “Everybody’s Protest Novel”. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.



woman.

Thus, marriage represents hope for African American women to have an economic and social stability: “They got to New York and he helped her get settled in a rooming house, and he went to the Y. And he came to get her the next morning, for breakfast. Within a week, he had married her and gone back to sea and my mother, a little stunned, settled down to live.” (30) Indeed, marriage is very important for African American women because it represents security, comfort, economic, social stability and future. Clem speaks of “dream of safety” to refer to marriage (87). Ernestine, on the contrary, is not married and is criticized for that: “Oh shut up,” Sharon said. “Wish God you’d get married to somebody, then I’d be able to bug you half to death, instead of the other way around” (88) to whom Ernestine replied: “I don’t think I’m ever going to marry. Some people do, you know Mama? and some people don’t” (88). It is interesting to see here that Ernestine does not have the same conception of marriage than her Mother Sharon and Clementine. Indeed, contrary to Sharon and Clementine, Ernestine has no male figure to support her. She is independent and decides to help Fonny being released from prison. This may also be seen as a form of submission from Ernestine too. Ernestine said: “The only trouble is that sometimes you would like to belong to somebody.” (89) Indeed, Ernestine shows the submission of African American women to men, but she tries to hide it. Ernestine wears a mask. She pretends to be fully satisfied. Clem declared that her sister thought that her father loved Clem more than her. Ernestine cannot fully build her identity because she did not receive love. When Clementine declared:

Sis was always in front of that damn mirror all the time, when we were kids. She was saying, I don't care. I got me. Of course, this only made her come on stronger than ever, which was the last effect she desired: but that's the way we are and that's how we can sometimes get so fucked up. Anyway, she's past all that. She knows who she is, or, at least, she knows who she damn well isn't (47)

The passage reveals the identity crisis that the characters suffered from, through the metaphor of the mirror. The mirror shows the characters’ introspection. Indeed, even though Ernestine works with kids, she is unmarried, and does not have someone who loves her or someone to love. The metaphor of the mirror brings the characters to wonder who they are or worse what they are in this society. Ernestine tries to build her identity and to emancipate herself but still needs male figures, and act for men. To find her place in the society, she has to submit to it. To help Fonny, Ernestine asks the help of a white lawyer: “Arnold Hayward is the lawyer. Sis found him for me through the settlement house, which has been forced, after all, to have some dealings with lawyers” (39-40).

Indeed, Ernestine depends on the lawyer's advice to act. Hayward asks Ernestine to find someone to find evidence in Porto Rico. She has to sacrifice her own life as woman to get Fonny out of prison. Baldwin explains that black women had to abandon their sense of womanhood and femininity and be submissive to male figures.

Baldwin's traditional depiction of women reduced to nurses, aims at showing the hierarchy that is established within the African American community and in the American society. Indeed, Baldwin shows that black female characters are reduced to servants and depend on their male counterparts to deconstruct racial and sexual prejudices made on them. Through the use of fiction, Baldwin attempts to rewrite, expose and also denounce the history and the evolution of African American women and their status in the American society. Sharon and Ernestine are mammy figures but are women of actions and have free will. However, Alice Hunt, Sheila and Adrienne are caricatures and represent religious hypocrisy and selfishness.

### **b) Selfish Mother Figures**

While James Baldwin depicts, mother figures who are considerate, women taking care of their families and who taught Clementine the values of love and resistance in a racist and sexist society, Baldwin also creates careless mother figures such as Fonny's mother and sisters, Alice and Sheila and Adrienne who embody the "bad women", bad mothers or matriarchs. Patricia Hill Collins explains that black women were described as being bad women because they cannot liberate themselves from this image of "strong women" that has been shaped since slavery.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned earlier, Baldwin builds his narrative around a binary scheme that is highly influenced by two religious images: good and evil. Obviously, when reading *If Beale Street Could Talk*, the reader clearly perceives that Alice, Adrienne and Sheila are mere caricatures. They are "buffoons."<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Alice Hunt is described as a "sanctified woman" (12) which is clearly not reflected in her attitude. James Baldwin depicts Alice Hunt and her daughters in a stereotypical way in order to criticize the alienation of religion. Indeed, Alice Hunt and her daughters do not like anybody but themselves. They are selfish characters who act

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<sup>44</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.*, 2014. p.77.

<sup>45</sup> Trudier Harris. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987.p129.

only for their own interests but not for others contrary to the Rivers who embody solidarity and togetherness. Alice Hunt does not show any support for Fonny because she does not like him; “she didn’t really love Fonny” (18-19) because Fonny is much darker than them, Clem declared. Sheila and Adrienne constantly criticize their brother for his being in jail which they see as the result of his lack of education. Sheila blames Fonny saying: “if he’d done his reading and his studying when he should have, he wouldn’t be in there” (23). They also criticize Clem for her lack of education. Alice, Sheila and Adrienne adopt a snobbish attitude because they think they are superior within the family but also within the African American society as they believe in god and think they are “god chosen” (69), but also because the colour of their skins is lighter than Fonny and Frank’s. Tish declares that “the sisters weren't as beautiful as the mother and, of course, they'd never been young, in Atlanta, but they were fair skinned – and their hair was long. Fonny is lighter than me but much darker than they, his hair is just plain nappy and all the grease his mother put into it every Sunday couldn't take out the naps.” (p19) Alice Hunt, Sheila and Adrienne are mulattoes, biracial, which justify their supposed superiority.

Mrs. Hunt represents the matriarch because she condemns and blames Fonny rather than supporting him. Marilyn V. Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett declared that “the matriarch is the mammy gone badly, a failed mammy, because she has spent too much time away from home, has not properly supervised her children, is overly aggressive, and emasculates the men in her life”<sup>46</sup>. Indeed, Alice Hunt fits this definition. She is a harsh woman who finds solace in the church rather than taking care of her children and exercising her mother’s responsibilities. She is a selfish character which is in contrast with Sharon who abandoned her career as a blues singer to take care of her family. The fact that the character of Alice Hunt did not play her mother’s role had an impact on her children’s lives. Fonny is in prison, Sheila and Adrienne may be prostitutes whereas Clementine works in a perfume centre and Ernestine with the kids. In fact, by depicting two opposed portrayal of a mother, Baldwin shows the importance and the impact that this responsibility has on the children’s lives and futures. By leaving her children aside,

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<sup>46</sup> Marilyn Yarbrough with Crystal Bennett, Cassandra and the "Sistahs". the Peculiar Treatment of African American Women in the Myth of Women as Liars Journal of Gender, Race and Justice, 2000: [http://racism.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1277:aawomen01a&catid=72&Itemid=215](http://racism.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1277:aawomen01a&catid=72&Itemid=215)

Alice Hunt condemns them. It means that Baldwin uses love as a concept that integrates the characters in his/her society.

James Baldwin also satirizes religion and religious hypocrisy through the characters of Alice, Sheila and Adrienne. Although the author grew up in a religious setting, he criticizes organized religion. Alice Hunt belongs to the Sanctified Church whereas the Rivers Family are Baptists: “Watching people get happy and fall out under the Power is always something to see, even if you see it all the time. But people didn't often get happy in our church: we were more respectable, more civilized, than sanctified. I still find something in it very frightening: but I think this is because Fonny hated it” (22-23). Baldwin criticizes the religion that Alice Hunt practiced, a religion that is extravagant and based on appearances. Physical and social appearances are very important aspects for Alice and her daughters. Indeed, Alice uses religion as a way to show her clothes and her physical appearance. Alice Hunt wears religion as a mask which hides her blackness and her true self. By putting a veil on her identity, she refuses freedom and accepts servility.

Thus, religion does not become the mask of love but of hatred for Alice because of her supposed superiority. Religion makes her blind and encloses her into a world which is far from being reality and a state of enslavement. She must rely on religion and male figures to feel in secure. Her sexual act with Frank illustrates her submission:

I can still hear that sound, like something heavy, with silver inside it, dropping heavy wherever she laid it down. I'd hear her say, The Lord sure blessed my soul this evening? Honey, when you going to give your life to she Lord? And, baby, he'd say, and I swear to you he was lying there with his dick getting hard, and, excuse me, baby, but her condition weren't no better, because this, you dig? was like she game you hear two alley cats playing in she alley. Shit. She going to whelp and mee-e-ow till times get better, she going to get that cat, she going to run him all over the alley, she going run him till he bite her by the neck – by this time he just want to get some sleep really, but she got her chorus going, he's got to stop the music and ain't but one way to do it – he going to bite her by the neck and then she got him. So, my Daddy just lay there, didn't have no clothes on, with his dick getting harder and harder, and my Daddy would say, About the time, I reckon, that the Lord gives his life to me. And she'd say, Oh, Frank, let me bring you to the Lord. And he'd say, Shit, woman, I'm going to bring the Lord to you. I'm the Lord. And she'd start to crying, and she'd moan, Lord, help me help this man. You give him to me. I can't do nothing about it. Oh, Lord, help me. And he'd say, The Lord's going to help you, sugar, just as soon as you get to be a little child again, naked, like a little child. Come on, come to the Lord. And she'd start to crying and calling on Jesus while he started taking all her clothes off – I could hear them kind of rustling and whistling and tearing and falling to the floor and sometimes I'd get my foot caught in one of them things when I was coming through their room in the morning on my way to school – and when he got her naked and got on top of her and she was still crying, Jesus! help me, Lord! my Daddy would say, You got the Lord now, right here. Where you want your blessing? Where do it hurt? Where you want the Lord's hands to touch you? here? here? or here? Where you want his tongue? Where you want the Lord to enter you, you dirty, dumb black bitch? you bitch. You bitch. And he'd slap her, hard, loud. And she'd say, Oh, Lord, help me to bear my burden. And he'd say, Here it is, baby, you going to bear it all right, I know it. You got a friend in Jesus, and I'm going to tell you when he comes. The first time. We don't know nothing about the second coming. Yet. And the bed would shake and she would moan and moan and moan. And, in the morning, was just like nothing never happened. She was just like she had been. She still belonged to Jesus and he went off down the street, to the shop (16-17).

This passage is pronounced by Fonny when Clementine asks him whether his parents ever made love or not. Indeed, the sexual act between Alice and Frank is a mere caricature and a parody. James Baldwin clearly mocks at religion in this passage. Alice Hunt is not the sanctified woman that she claimed to be. Baldwin mixes religious and sexual images to shock the reader. When reading the passage it is as if a rite of exorcism was described but also a violent sexual scene which resembles a rape. Many terms referring to religion and sex that aim at strengthening this antithetical image can be listed: there are numerous references to Jesus or the Lord in this passage: “the Lord sure blessed my soul”, “give your life to the lord”, “bring you to the lord” “come on, come to the lord”, “Oh, Lord help me to bear my burden”, “you got a friend in Jesus.” All these religious images are in contrast with sexual images: “his dick getting hard,” “she’d moan,” “got her naked” and the verb “moan” is repeated three times. It is interesting to see that Baldwin parodies the scene and makes it more theatrical than narrative. He clearly mocks at religious hypocrisy and selfishness embodied by the character of Alice Hunt. But reducing this passage to a mere contrast between sex and religion would be an error. Indeed, this passage not only opposes religion and sex it also opposes men and women. Gender relation is used here to show the hierarchy which is established between an African American wife, Alice or a female figure, an African American husband (a “material male figure”) and God (a “spiritual male” figure). Not only is Alice submitted to Frank, she is submitted to the Lord too. This double alienation aims at enclosing African American women into a state of dependence and servility. The use of the imperatives and the passive forms are meant to reify Alice Hunt making her both an object of submission and a sexual object. Alice Hunt is dehumanized and loses her identity in this passage. She is referred to the pronoun “she” repeated several times in the passage, but also to the terms: “honey”, “baby” “woman”, she is compared to a naked “little child”, “black bitch”. It is interested to see that she is not named contrary to Frank. The reader has access to the portrayal of Alice Hunt through a male gaze which shows how African American women are perceived by African American men in the black family. In this passage Frank is associated to the All Mighty, a Lord, a patriarch which dominates Alice. Indeed, Frank dominates Alice sexually. There are phallic symbols: “his dick getting hard”, verbal violence “black bitch? You bitch. You bitch. You bitch”, physical violence “he’d slap her, hard, loud.” All these elements contribute to reduce women to a mere

object and to reinforce men's power and domination. Alice Hunt is oppressed because of the intersection of her race and gender, she is also sexually oppressed.

As Sharon represents the mammy figure, Alice Hunt embodies the "Jezebel" in the novel, a term used by Ernestine to define Clementine. Marylyn V. Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett also define this stereotype:

The second stereotype of African American women is that of Jezebel. Jezebel "is the promiscuous female with an insatiable sexual appetite." In Biblical history, Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab of Israel. Jezebel's actions came to exemplify lust. Subsequently, the name Jezebel has become synonymous with women who engage in lewd sexual acts and who take advantage of men through sex. Jezebel is depicted as erotically appealing and openly seductive. Her easy ways excused slave owners' abuse of their slaves and gave an explanation for Jezebel's mulatto offspring. This inability to be perceived as chaste brought about the stereotype of dishonesty. In other words, African American women were not, and often are not, portrayed as being truthful and, therefore, they could not be trusted. Throughout history, our court system has also exploited the myth of Jezebel. The courts have used this image to make racism and sexism appear natural. The sexual myth of Jezebel functions as a tool for controlling African American women. Consequently, sexual promiscuity is imputed to them even absent specific evidence of their individual sexual histories. This imputation ensures that their credibility is doubted when any issue of sexual exploitation is involved.<sup>47</sup>

As mentioned in this definition, the Jezebel stereotype, represents the woman who is thirsty for sex. In the long excerpt that was quoted earlier in this analysis, there is a passage which shows that Alice Hunt is a Jezebel figure : "She going to whelp and mee-ow till times get better, she going to get that cat, she going to run him all over the alley, she going run him till he bite her by the neck – by this time he just want to get some sleep really, but she got her chorus going, he's got to stop the music and ain't but one way to do it – he going to bite her by the neck and then she got him" (16). Indeed, Alice is described as a Jezebel by Fonny. In this passage Alice Hunt is presented as a character that is "erotically appealing and openly seductive". Alice is addicted to sex but at the same time depends on Frank and the Lord. Interestingly, Frank is presented as the victim as if Alice Hunt forces him to have sex with her whereas in the passage, we clearly see that Alice is an object. James Baldwin plays with the reader with the way he creates the character of Alice Hunt. She is depicted in a derogatory way so that the reader cannot feel sympathy with her but at the same time the reader notices that she is just a victim of the racist and sexist African American society who turns women into sexual objects. The narrator, Clementine represents also this ambivalence that the female characters represent, she tries both to emancipate but at the same time is submissive to the male characters.

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<sup>47</sup> Marylyn Yarbrough and Crystal Bennett Crystal. *Mammy Jezebel and Sistahs*, 1999: [http://racism.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1277:aaawomen01a&catid=72&Itemid=215](http://racism.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1277:aaawomen01a&catid=72&Itemid=215)



### c) **Clementine or the Difficulty of Becoming a Mother**

“To try to tell a story from the point of view of a pregnant woman is something of a hazard. I tried to avoid it, but she’s the only person who can tell the story.”<sup>48</sup> (James Baldwin)

*If Beale Street Could Talk* is Baldwin’s only novel among his six ones to be written from the point of view of a female narrator. This is a first-person narrative. Clementine, the nineteen-year-old pregnant woman is the narrative voice of the story. In a 1972 interview Baldwin declared: “A writer is always more or less in his book. You try to keep yourself out, or you try not to distort, not to let your prejudices distort. *In Beale Street*, for instance, the girl is telling the story. You can say I’m the girl (Clementine), or the boy (Fonny) or their unborn baby.”<sup>49</sup> He added “She’s a girl from the streets, as I’m a boy from the streets.” According to Gerard Genette, a homodiegetic narrator is a narrator who is a character of the story.<sup>50</sup> Clementine is both the narrator and a protagonist of the story. Thus, she represents the “heroine-narrator”. The reader sees her evolution of the story, learns about the other characters of the novel through her eyes. Tish’s narration is simple, she speaks with concrete images.

The fact that Clementine embodies both the heroine and the narrator of the story contributes to the realism of the text. Indeed, what Baldwin wants to stress on is the fact that no matter who tells this story, a boy or a girl, Tish’s voice represents the voice of a female narrator, as well as the voice of James Baldwin a committed writer and the collective voice of the African American community. From the point of view of Clementine who is both victim of racism and sexism, Baldwin uses his pen to expose, denounce, and criticize the multiracial American society. By giving voice to an African American young woman, Baldwin gives more credibility to his story, reinforces the despair and victimization of African American people, black women in particular, so that the reader can identify with the heroine and see the living condition of African American women in America. The reader feels sympathy for Clementine, wants her to get the father of her child out of prison. This may be one of the reasons why the novel has an optimistic ending. Fonny is free and the child is born. Clementine represents the urban African American woman of the seventies.

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<sup>48</sup> James Baldwin and Fred L. Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Jackson, Miss: Univ. of Mississippi, 1996.p.109

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.109

<sup>50</sup> Lucie Guillemette and Cynthia Lévesque. « Narratology », in Louis Hébert (dir.), *Signo*[online], Rimouski (Quebec), 2016: <http://www.signosemio.com/genette/narratology.asp>. Retrieved on 19/07/2018

The incipit gives us information about the novel. We learn about the genre of the novel which belongs to African American literature. The novel is a realistic novel depicting a love story between two black protagonists. It begins in media res and sets the atmosphere of the novel. Clementine and Fonny are in quest of their identities. Indeed, the plot of the story is used as a tool by James Baldwin to expose the identity crisis that the characters undergo. Not only does Clementine aim at finding solutions to free Fonny and to give a better future for her unborn child, she also aims at finding who she is as a woman, a wife, a mother and also in regard to the racist and sexist society she lives in. Already in the incipit, the problem of identity is questioned and is attempting to be solved throughout the novel:

I look at myself in the mirror. I know that I was christened Clementine, and so it would make sense if people called me Clem, or even, come to think of it, Clementine, since that's my name: but they don't. People call me Tish. I guess that makes sense, too. I'm tired, and I'm beginning to think that maybe everything that happens makes sense. Like, if it didn't make sense, how could it happen? But that's really a terrible thought. It can only come out of trouble – trouble that doesn't make sense. (3)

Clementine questions the ambiguity of her identity given by baptism. She becomes the metaphor of the unnamed slave who has been given a name by his/her master. Indeed, when reading the incipit, one can see a parallel with the slave narrative form. A slave narrative is an account of the life of a fugitive or former slave. It has been considered as a controversial type of writing because it is both biographical and fictional. The aim of the slave narrative is for slaves, to write themselves into presence or human beings.

This dichotomy between history and fiction can be found in this novel. It shares similarities with slave narratives because of the way it is structured: It has a poetic epigraph: “Mary, Mary, what you going to name that pretty little baby?”, the novel begins with the narrator speaking of his birth: “I was born”, in the novel Clem said: “I was christened”, it also deals with families being broken: The Hunts family, and there is reflection on slavery. Clementine is disoriented as she can only define herself through the eyes of the other: “People call me Clem.” The act of looking at the mirror symbolizes the introspection of the narrator in search for her identity and humanity. There is a double conflict between Clementine with society which considers her as inferior, and with herself. Indeed, Baldwin refers to the black duality that Clementine is victim of in the novel. This concept of dualism has been coined by W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused



contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

Indeed, Du Bois, through the concept of double consciousness describes the fact that a person has the feeling to have more than one single identity which makes him/her difficult to assert his/her identity. It refers to the way one sees oneself through the eyes of other. He explained that African Americans lived in a society where they were not considered as equals and continued to suffer from the stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream culture. In that sense, double consciousness forces African Americans to view themselves from both cultures: black and white, which Du Bois calls two-ness. Having several identities lead to the loss of one's identity and humanity. Clementine and other black characters constantly question their identity and their status regarding the white American society, in which black people stand for the "the other".

The homodiegetic narrative enables the reader to wonder about the value of the pronoun "I" for the black female characters. By looking at the mirror, they are searching for a response to the question "who I am?" both in terms of gender and "race" in a society that discriminates black women. But the response cannot be found through the mirror as the reflection of myself is not myself. The pronoun "I" becomes thus a collective "I" which represents not only Clementine as an individual but also the narrator as a member of the African American community. Tish's voice may be the voice of every African American who has lost their identity and who tries to reconstruct it.

To define who she is, Clementine needs a masculine figure to support her and to shape her identity. In other words, her identity is shaped through the relationship she has with Fonny and Joseph. Clementine highlights the importance of the male/female relationships and seems to accept the established social and gender hierarchy. Throughout the novel, Clementine attempts to become a woman both physically and psychologically in a patriarchal American society. Clementine states: "I was not yet a woman" (58). She questions what it means to be a black woman in the American society. She realizes that it is more complicated for a black woman to survive in America: "And, in this fucked up time and place, most women, feel, in this warmth and energy, a threat. They think that they feel locked out" (58).

Indeed, Clementine points out the fact that a woman needs a man to help and support her. She remains submissive: A woman “must watch and guide” but a man “must lead, and he will always appear to be giving far more of his real attention to his comrades than he is giving to her (59).” “A woman is tremendously controlled by what’s the man’s imagination makes of her literally, hour by hour, day by day; so, she becomes a woman” (58). This passage echoes the passage when Fonny asks Joseph if he can marry Clementine. Clementine declares: “We the women, were out of it now, and we knew it (86).” Baldwin insists on the supposed masculine superiority in America because of the fact that men have always been considered as the “stronger sex” whereas women are “the weaker one.”

Clementine cannot live without Fonny or her father because they support and protect her. In that sense, Clementine submits to black male characters to find her role in her family and in the society.

Through Tish, James Baldwin denounces gender oppressions and stereotypes that African American women suffer from. Tish explains that an African American woman can only be seen as a mother figure and the man plays the role of the guardian or the protector for African American women.

Through Tish’s voice, Baldwin explains that a woman has no free will and autonomy. Writing through the point of view of a female character is a strategy used by the author to give credibility to the character of Clementine as a female voice, victim of the patriarchal society. It is also an act of freedom because she says “I”. She is the spokesperson of all the African American women in the United States who suffer from a double oppression based on both race and gender from both white and black men. Indeed, black women represent the other, oppressed by the dominant patriarchal culture. In her essay entitled *The Second Sex*<sup>51</sup> the philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir explained how society constructs a woman. De Beauvoir explores the different steps of a woman’s life stating that a woman is both oppressed and free. She can use her body as a symbol of freedom but can also be oppressed by it. In that sense, Tish’s pregnancy can be interpreted as a burden as the character of Tish evolves in a patriarchal society in the novel. For the philosopher the concept of “woman” is a male concept as men are subjects and women are objectified. It means that a man defines a woman and not the opposite. For Clementine, the situation is much more complex, because she is an African American

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<sup>51</sup> Simone De Beauvoir. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.

woman.

In the novel, for security and comfort, black women accept their submission. They must rely to their male counterparts to act. One must not forget that even though the novel is a first-person narrative written from the point of view of a female character, Tish, the plot is centered on a male character, Fonny. James Baldwin constructs the African American women around two stereotypical images created by American society to show that these images enclose the female characters into a state of subordination and imprisonment. Thus, the evolution of the female characters in the novel becomes a vicious circle as Clementine and Ernestine like their mother Sharon are condemned to become “mammy figures” whereas Sheila and Adrienne like Alice Hunt have no choice but to become “Jezebels. Baldwin may be considered as a proto-feminist as he denounces the stereotypes that have shaped African American women since Slavery.

Baldwin states that race and gender are social constructions based on white prejudices. “Whites” create “Blacks” just as “men” create “women.” These constructions force black female characters to submit to the society for integration. Submission becomes form of accomodationism. All the female characters need men or a father figure to help and protect them. It will be interesting to see how Baldwin depicts the black male characters in his fiction.

### **3) Black Father Figures**

This section aims to see why James Baldwin has always been considered as a masculinist writer by scholars. How does James Baldwin construct the black male characters, manhood and fatherhood, and depict their relations with the black female characters? Even though black male characters attempt to assert their masculinity and manhood by playing the role of patriarchs in the families, they failed in asserting their black male identity, their status as “black fathers” and “black men” in a society where black men are reduced to be less than men. This analysis will attempt to demonstrate and explore the changing gender position of black men who become victims of the American society.

#### **a) Black Patriarchs**

From 1940s to 1970s African American literature was mainly a male dominated field including famous authors like Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright. James Baldwin is

said to be inscribed into what is called the black masculinist writing traditions for most of the scholars. As a homosexual dealing with the question of sexual identity in his essays and fictions, he can be one of the precursors of gay literature. His writings aim at reconstructing and reconsidering the black male subject. The themes of manhood, masculinity, fatherhood were very important for James Baldwin for he was homosexual and never knew his father. His relationship with his stepfather, a Baptist preacher, was very difficult. However, in the documentary, “*I’m not your Negro*”<sup>52</sup>, the reader discovers that James Baldwin’s father was harsh with him because he wanted to protect his family from the outer world, the corrupt American society. At the age of fourteen, James Baldwin decided to undertake a religious career because of problems linked to his sexual identity, the racist oppressions he experienced but mainly because of a major problem: the absence of a father. Baldwin finds refuge in religion, solace in the Lord, a spiritual Father for him just like Alice Hunt in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Throughout his life, James Baldwin was indefinitely in quest of a new father figure. At the Frederick Douglass’s school for instance, he met Countee Cullen, a prominent poet of the Harlem Renaissance<sup>53</sup> who was a French teacher and a literary advisor for the English department. James Baldwin and Countee Cullen shared things in common: Both were illegitimate children, the sons of pastors, they were both physically unattractive. Countee Cullen became Baldwin’s first father figure. Beauford Delaney, an African American homosexual painter, the son of a pastor like James Baldwin, a prominent figure who was respected and admired within the community of artists concentrated in the Greenwich Village, becomes a model and another father figure because he was one of the first African American who managed to live as a black artist. Another prominent and important father figure who played a major role in Baldwin’s career was Richard Wright, the most famous African American Writer of the forties. Wright became a mentor for Baldwin because he had a beneficial effect on Baldwin’s writing’s activity. Richard Wright asked Baldwin to write sixty pages of the novel Baldwin was working on: *In My Father’s House* (the former title of his first novel: *Go Tell it on the Mountain*). To sum up, James Baldwin had had several father figures in his life who helped him in different ways to construct his identity as a black male writer. Thus, masculinity becomes a recurrent theme in Baldwin’s works. It refers to the position or the role

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<sup>52</sup> Raoul Peck, James Baldwin, Rémi Grellety, Hébert Peck, Alexandra Strauss, Henry Adebajo, Bill Ross, Turner Ross, Aleksei Aigi, Samuel L. Jackson, Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, Dick Cavett, George W. Bush, and James Baldwin. *I Am Not Your Negro*, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Cultural, artistic and literary movement of the twenties that advocated “racial pride” through intellect, art, culture, music and literature.

of men in a gender order (man/woman). In an African American context, the definition is much more complex as African American men do suffer from multiple forms of discriminations. While masculinity in general has a positive sense, referring to men as masters or leaders, black masculinity is negatively connoted in a racist American society. Since slavery, black males have always been stereotyped and have seen their gender contested by white men. Black men are described as violent, sexual predators, delinquents, lazy, ignorant, child-like, angry, over-sexed, crazy and animalistic. During slavery, black men's role was to make children. The husbands were reduced to be assistants, companions and sex partners in a matrifocal black community.

Black men were emasculated and were unable of taking on their role as men and fathers. In Baldwin's novels the male characters Frank, Joseph and Fonny are ambivalent characters who desperately attempt to assert their gender role in their families but fail to do so. James Baldwin constructs his male characters as figures of patriarchy within the family. They are presented as leaders and protectors and father figures. It means that Baldwin rewrites black masculinity.

Frank is Fonny's father, Joseph is Clementine's father and Fonny is the father of Clementine's unborn child. Indeed, Frank wants to help Fonny being free and Joseph wants his daughter to be happy. Joseph reassures Clementine: "you got to see him every day Tish. Every day. You take care of Fonny. We'll take care of the rest. All right?" (161). Frank is idealized by his son Fonny, Fonny knows that his father loves him: "I'll always love my daddy because he didn't leave me" (17). Despite the fact that *If Beale Street Could Talk* depicts paternal love, Baldwin paints the male characters as phallic symbols to expose the role of black fathers in the family. Michele Wallace, an African American feminist develops the concept of masculinity in her book entitled *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* published in 1979 in which she explains that black men reinforce black women's oppressions by encouraging black women's submission. In her book, she defines the concept of black machismo quoting Baldwin's essay *No Name in the Street*:

And so, by whatever means, Baldwin had finally seen the light, arrived at the theoretical premise that made the Black Movement, a vehicle for Black Macho: Black males who stressed a traditionally patriarchal responsibility to their women and children, to their communities\_ to black people\_ were to be considered almost sissified. The black man's sexuality and the physical fact of his penis were the major evidence of his manhood and the purpose of it.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Michele Wallace. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. London: Verso, 1990. p.62.

Indeed, in the novel the black fathers represent the patriarchs who try to take care of their wives and children by asserting their manhood. In the family gathering, Frank, asserts his gender role. Indeed, the scene becomes an act of domination and assertion of his black masculinity. Frank does not hesitate to rebel against his own wife, to show his authority:

"I don't know," Frank said, "how God expects a man to act when his son is in trouble. Your God crucified His son and was probably glad to get rid of him, but I ain't like that. I ain't hardly going out in the street and kiss the first white cop I see. But I'll be a very loving motherfucker the day my son walks out of that hellhole, free. I'll be a loving motherfucker when I hold my son's head between my hands again and look into his eyes. Oh! I'll be full of love, that day!" He rose from the sofa and walked over to his wife. "And if it don't go down like that, you can bet I'm going to blow some heads off. And if you say a word to me about that Jesus you been making it with all these years, I'll blow your head off first. You was making it with that white Jew bastard when you should have been with your son. (65-66)

This passage shows, Frank's anger towards religion. By getting angry, Frank is asserting his masculinity as a father but also as a man. He "rose from the sofa and walked over to his wife." Frank stands up while Alice is sitting showing that Frank wants to be the leader. The male sex becomes an instrument that strengthen the characters' masculinity. The relationship between Clementine and Fonny is also constructed on the same gender scheme. Clementine feels Fonny's sex jerks against her (51). She feels his sex "stiffening and beginning to rage against the cloth of his pants and against [her] jawbone" (77). She felt his long black heavy sex throbbing against [her] against her navel (78). Indeed, Fonny is the leader and dominates Clementine sexually. Baldwin shows the way African American men need to show and prove their sexuality and masculinity. By asserting their sexuality within their families, black male characters attempt to demonstrate that they exist as men.

The sex act between Alice and Frank, analysed earlier, also reveals that God (Jesus) may also be a spiritual patriarch. As previously mentioned, James Baldwin considered God to be a spiritual substitute of his absent father. In the novel Alice Hunt is alienated by the Lord who controls her actions.

Moreover, Joseph is also described as a patriarch in the novel but his role in the Rivers Family is different. Baldwin insists on the importance of male/female relationship in the development of identity. The relationship between Joseph and Clementine is worth studying:

My father's chest shook with laughter, I felt his chest rising and falling between my shoulder blades, and this laughter contained a furious joy, an unspeakable relief: in spite of all that hung above our heads. I was his daughter, all right: I had found someone to love and I was loved, and he was released and verified. That child in my belly was also, after all, his child, too, for there would have been no

Tish if there had been no Joseph. Our laughter in that kitchen, then, was our helpless response to a miracle. That baby was our baby, it was on its way, my father's great hand on my belly held it and warmed it: in spite of all that hung above our heads, that child was promised safety. Love had sent it, spinning out of us, to us. Where that might take us, no one knew: but, now, my father, Joe, was ready (49).

Baldwin uses a biblical image to describe the relationship between Clementine and her father as the Virgin Mary and Joseph, the son of Jacob. The passage illustrates the daughter/father relationship and the importance of paternal filiation in the construction and development of Clementine's identity. When Clementine said: "That child in my belly was also, after all his child too, for there would have been no Tish if there had been no Joseph". This sentence may reveal the transmission of love from a father to her daughter but also from a future grandfather. Clementine also states that she is still a virgin and a child, and as a child she needs to be assisted:

And it was absolutely astonishing to me to realize that I was a virgin. I really was. I suddenly wondered how. I wondered why. But it was because I had always, without ever thinking about it, known that I would spend my life with Fonny. It simply had not entered my mind that my life could do anything else. This meant that I was not merely a virgin; I was still a child.

Yet, James Baldwin sacralized male/female relationships within the Rivers family but this relationship is based on a hierarchy in which black male characters are leaders and black women are followers. Clementine insists on this aspect when she declares that: "[A woman] must watch and guide, but [a man] must lead." (59) What is interesting to point out is the fact that the black male characters try to show a form of strength and masculinity in the families because their masculinity as black men has always been denied since slavery in the American society. By doing so, Black men in the novel reconstruct their identity as men and fathers. Joseph does play his role of father in the novel when Sharon goes to Puerto Rico, Joseph replaces her and decides to take care of Clementine alone whereas Frank fails to play this role as his son Fonny is still in prison when he commits suicide at the end of the novel.

Black male characters attempt to reconstruct their masculinity by constructing a black form of patriarchal structure within their families where women remain marginalized and placed in an inferior position. But even though the black characters assert their gender role in the families, Baldwin depicts a matriarchal society rather than a patriarchal to deconstruct the gender roles and hierarchy that has been established since slavery. Despite being black patriarchs in their families, the male characters fail to fully assume their father responsibilities. They are powerless, frustrated and are overtaken by the events. The concept of Black masculinity is questioned in the novel as the black male



characters fail to assert their masculinity in the American society. The depiction of the black fathers is highly inspired by James Baldwin's own life. James Baldwin portrays his stepfather as angry and powerless. This ambivalence fits the depiction of the black male characters in the novel. Joseph, Frank and Fonny want to show to the female characters their strength and masculinity just like David Baldwin shows his authority to James Baldwin. But this severity reveals a form of powerlessness.

### **b) Weak and Tragic Father Figures**

Though black male characters are presented as figures of patriarchy, they are not as strong as they claim to be. Just like Baldwin's black female characters, black male characters are constructed in an ambivalent manner. James Baldwin plays with the portrayal of black male characters who appear as strong phallic symbols at first sight but are reduced to mere victims of American society that ostracizes them. Their masculinity is damaged, even denied. Indeed, like the female characters, the black male characters are stereotypes showing how black men were perceived by the American society. They are "Mandingoes". The Mandingo theory was first introduced since slavery. Slave owners thought that African men were animals and savage people. In her article entitled "The Mandigo Theory", Thuy-Anh explains that this stereotype presupposed that African men actions were motivated by their sexual instincts. These assumptions were used, like all stereotypes to assert White-male supremacy. Moreover, African men were supposed to be well-endowed that caused the fear from white men to be less sexually attractive to white women.<sup>55</sup> African American men do suffer also from intersectionality as they are emasculated or castrated, they are considered to be less than men because of their former slave status. They do suffer from racism also because they are black. The concept of intersectionality can thus be applied to the father figures in the novel. Their social position as black men leads them to a sense of weakness, powerlessness and frustration. Indeed, Joseph works on the docks (35) and Frank also works but fails to have Fonny released and make Clementine happy. As men, Joseph and Frank feel that they should be the most active characters in Fonny's liberation. On the contrary, it is Sharon, a woman, who goes to Puerto Rico in order to find evidence to free Fonny. Sharon ironically reminds Joseph that he is "the man of the house." (43) Indeed, in the novel, the black characters' masculinity is questioned and denied. The sculpture that Fonny gave to Sharon illustrates well the emasculation of black male characters. In fact, in Baldwin's fiction, black men do suffer from gender oppressions too

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<sup>55</sup> Thuy-Ann. "The Mandigo Theory". Thuyanhle.wordpress, 11 March 2012: <https://thuyanhle.wordpress.com/2012/03/11/the-mandigo-theory/>



Fonny gave Mama one of his first pieces of sculpture. This was almost two years ago. Something about it always makes me think of Daddy. Mama put it by itself on a small table in the living room. It's not very high, it's done in black wood. It's of a naked man with one hand at his forehead and the other half hiding his sex. The legs are long, very long, and very wide apart, and one foot seems planted, unable to move, and the whole motion of the figure is torment. It seemed a very strange figure for such a young kid to do, or, at least, it seemed strange until you thought about it. (35)

Interestingly, the sculpture reflects the black male characters in the novel. The masculinity of the black male is damaged. The sculpture represents a naked black hiding his sex, his masculinity. It suggests the lack of privacy. The nakedness suggests the powerlessness of the male characters in the novel. The sculpture reminds Clementine of her daddy. The immobility of the sculpture evokes the immobility and the incapacity of the male characters to act. Fonny made this sculpture when he was a child to explain that African American's destiny is already written since the early age: Black males are castrated.

Furthermore, Fonny gives the sculpture to Sharon as if he was asking her for help. One must remind that Fonny did not receive love from his mother, and by giving the sculpture to Sharon may be interpreted as a cry of despair. Fonny contrary to Clementine, is not equipped to face the realities of the American society as he did not receive love from his mother but managed to construct his identity because of the love that Clementine and Sharon give. When Clementine needs a father figure to construct her identity, to know who she really is, Fonny sees in Sharon and Clementine mother figures that he has never had. Like Clementine, he suffers also from an identity crisis:

Today, I went to see Fonny. That's not his name, either, he was christened Alonzo: and it might make sense if people called him Lonnie. But, no, we've always called him. Fonny. Alonzo Hunt, that's his name. I've known him all my life, and I hope I'll always know him. But I only call him Alonzo when I have to break down some real heavy shit to him (3).

This passage echoes with the one concerning Clementine. Indeed, Baldwin's use of mirror effects shows that both black characters suffer from a sense of two-ness. It shows that African American men and women share a common fate in America.

Moreover, black males are much less involved in the narrative compared to the female characters, as though they were secondary characters in the plot. Male characters usually appear together in the novel, they are syntactically tied together: "Joseph and Frank" (122), as though they were one single character. This shows that all black male characters share a common fate.

Black male characters are powerless because of the mechanism of the American system. Male characters are thus narratively dominated, even absent. They are voiceless.

Tish said that her father “was trying to speak, he wanted to speak; but he couldn’t”. (44). The male characters are thus trapped in a tragic dilemma. They are torn between the will to act and their incapacity to act. They are disempowered. Disempowerment refers to the deprivation of power and authority to make the characters weak, unimportant and inoffensive because they are discriminated against. It leads to the male characters’ tragic fate. Alcohol becomes an escape for the black fathers. Frank and Joseph are sitting in a bar drinking, trying to find a solution to release Fonny.

American society criminalizes African American men for attempting to do what is “normal.” As men, they have to work extra time to provide the money for Fonny’s defense. Moreover, the fathers had to steal money to save Fonny. Joseph is caught stealing from the docks. Frank is also caught stealing his employer who threatens to fire him. Fonny is in jail. Baldwin explains that crime and criminality become a domain where the black male characters can exercise their role of fathers. Black fatherhood is linked with the idea of imprisonment whether it is physical or mental.

But even though the depiction of the black fathers is rather pessimistic, Baldwin creates two “categories” of black fathers. Those who survive and those who perish. Joseph and Fonny are survivors in the novel unlike Frank. At the end of the novel Frank commits suicide: “Frank had been found, he told us, way, way, way, way, up the river, in the woods, sitting in his car, with the doors locked, and the motor running” (197). Suicide is a leitmotiv in Baldwin’s fiction. In her article entitled “Retreat from Experience: Despair and Suicide in James Baldwin’s Novels”, Sarah Beebe Fryer argues that: “throughout his novels Baldwin presents major and minor characters who struggle to overcome their profound sense of isolation in a hostile culture and establish sufficient pride in themselves and their achievements to combat the seemingly relentless threat of despair.”<sup>56</sup> In Baldwin’s fictions, his characters commit suicide because they are vulnerable and victims of the racist American society and fail in completing their quest.

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<sup>56</sup>Sarah Beebe Fryer. “Retreat from Experience: Despair and Suicide in James Baldwin’s Novel. The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Vol.19, No. 1. (Spring, 1986), p.21: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1315010?read-now=1&seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1315010?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

They become scapegoats and martyrs because they are desperate and powerless. Thus, the act of killing oneself becomes an act of freedom for the black male characters. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Richard cuts his wrists because he was accused for a crime he did not commit. In *Another Country*, Rufus falls into depression by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. Francis, a secondary character kills himself because he was a drug addict in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. In *Beale Street*, though Frank's suicide at the end of the novel, is an act of despair from a character who is a victim of racial injustice, the act should be interpreted as a sacrifice, the sacrifice of a father for his son.

Thus, there is an understatement, the suicide is not mentioned by James Baldwin as if it was not important. In fact, Baldwin focuses more on love relationships, the love that can transcend stereotypes and categorizations. Speaking of love, the disempowerment of Frank who fails to make Fonny free may be explained by the love he did not receive from his wife Alice Hunt:

"I guess," Frank says, finally, "I love Fonny more than I love anybody in this world. And it makes me ashamed, man, I swear, because he was a real sweet manly little boy, wasn't scared of nothing – except maybe his Mama. He didn't understand his Mama." Frank stops. "And I don't know what I should have done. I ain't a woman. And there's some things only a woman can do with a child. And I thought she loved him – like I guess I thought, one time, she loved me." Frank sips his drink, and he tries to smile. "I don't know if I was ever any kind of father to him – any kind of real father – and now he's in jail and it ain't his fault and I don't even know how I'm going to get him out. I'm sure one hell of a man." (125-126)

Frank did not manage to play his role of father with Fonny and seems to put the blame on Alice Hunt who did not love anybody. Indeed, Baldwin explains that love is a vehicle that builds gender relationship and identity. Without love one cannot survive. It is the absence of love which leads to Fonny's incarceration and Frank's suicide. For James Baldwin motherhood and fatherhood are interdependent. As a man, Frank cannot be a maternal figure for Fonny. This passage is much more dramatic as Frank claims that he was not "a woman" and "a real father" for Fonny. James Baldwin stresses the importance of motherhood and fatherhood in the development of a child's identity. He explains that the disunion of black families leads to the children's loss of identity. Fonny creates his own family to define who he is. He sees in Clementine and her family a substitute for his own one.

Moreover, as Frank is considered to be less than a man in the society he lives in, he cannot teach Fonny the values of manhood. The absence of love from a mother and the disempowerment of a father affects Fonny's sense of self. Because of the mechanism

of the American system, black families participate to their own demise and downfall. To be more accurate, Frank and Fonny are doubly oppressed, they are “strangers” in their own family and in the society, they are lost and have no support:

And Frank had started drinking. I couldn't blame him. And sometimes he came to our house, too, pretending that he was looking for Fonny. It was much worse for him than it was for Fonny; and he had lost the tailor shop and was working in the garment center. He had started to depend on Fonny now, the way Fonny had once depended on him. Neither of them, anyway, as you can see, had any other house they could go to. Frank went to bars, but Fonny didn't like bars (37).

Frank, like Fonny is in search of a home. The home here, is used as the metaphor for the search for identity and belonging. Frank is disempowered again, as he finds escape by drinking alcohol. Fonny becomes like Frank as both of them are disempowered and are looking for who they really are. Frank had been caught stealing money in his job. This is also a symbol of disempowerment and loss of masculinity.

Frank's death is symbolical in the novel. It represents the sacrifice of an African American man who has been lynched by his own community and in the society. In other words, Frank may be perceived as a scapegoat of the African American community: “Interestingly, the word “death” is not used at the end of the novel. Baldwin's use of euphemism may be interpreted as a symbol of freedom and a will for the writer to focus more on the birth of the child than on the death of Frank. We can read at the end of the novel: “the baby cries, cries, cries, cries like it means to wake the dead” (197). Baldwin uses two contrasted images: death and life. Frank's death may be the metaphor of the older America, it represents the past and despair whereas the birth of the baby may be the symbol of rebirth, hope and the reconstruction of a new America. It represents Baldwin's process of rebuilding a possible united American nation. Frank stands for the past and the baby represents the present and the future.

Although black male characters are disempowered, some are survivors because they received love. Fonny knows that Clementine loves him and is loved by her family; it is this love which will give him strength not to give up. Joseph and his family are the embodiment of love and resistance. Love enables to construct the black fathers and the children's identities if they receive it, if not, they cannot survive, and are bound to death.

Black male and black female characters are ambivalent. Although black males attempt to assert their identity and masculinity as men and fathers in the families, they fail to fully play their role of patriarchs because of their blackness. Joseph represents strength and resistance because he is loved by the members of his family but has not an active role in the novel, contrary to the female characters Ernestine and Sharon. Love

enables Joseph to protect his family but also to resist and survive in White American society. On the contrary, Frank represents weakness and disempowerment as he tries to act but is unable of acting because of the lack of love he has experienced. Frank also tries to assert his masculinity and identity through sex but fails to assert his identity which leads him to a tragic destiny: alcoholism and worse, suicide. Fonny is a complex character as he is both a depiction of Frank and Joseph: he does not manage to assert his identity because of the lack of love from his mother which may be a reason to explain his incarceration, but he attempts to reconstruct himself as a man and a father through the love he received with the Rivers. He also reconstructs himself through artistic creation. Art represents hope, overwhelms despair and is essential to survive in America: "I got my wood and stone and I got Tish. If I lose them, I'm lost", Fonny declares (101). In this first part we learned that Baldwin constructs two opposed families to expose the consequences of love and the absence of love on the protagonists' identities. Black men and women are victims of racial and sexual stereotypes within the family: black women are either Mammy figures or Jezebel and black men who are Mandingos in the families and childlike savages in the society. We saw the way the intersectionality of race and gender impacts the black characters. However, through familial love, Baldwin deconstructs these stereotypes.

Our chapter two will focus on the intersection of the notions of racism and sexism in the American Society (the macrocosm of black family) by dealing with the conflict of the black subject and the white object, the way James Baldwin constructs the American society and its social problems. In that way Baldwin's fiction may be seen as a form of protest literature but focuses more on the black subject as individual in the society.

## **II) Baldwin's Critical Vision of American Society**

This chapter intends to demonstrate that although James Baldwin criticized Protest literature, Richard Wright and naturalism, *If Beale Street Could Talk* can be read as a protest novel. Moreover, we will use this concept of race and gender as social constructions that intersect. We will examine Baldwin's discourse that attempts to reshape the American democracy and we will see what it means to be black in the American society for James Baldwin.

## 1) A Racist and Sexist Society

### a) A Satire of the Racial System

*If Beale Street Could Talk* depicts Baldwin's own experience. He wrote the novel in a period when black activists were arrested, and several members of the Black Panther were murdered. The attacks of Chicago caused the deaths of Fred Hampton (a member of the Black Panther), and the rise of police violence. Additionally, Tony Maynard, "Baldwin's former bodyguard, chauffeur and friend"<sup>57</sup>, was arrested and sent to prison in Germany. When Maynard was released, Baldwin published *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Maynard's case inspired Baldwin's plot. One may see parallels with Baldwin's characters Fonny and Daniel who are both imprisoned.

The author also narrates the injustices that he faces as an African American in the United States. He then fictionalizes his own life and experiences in his novel. Born in 1924 in New York, James Baldwin grew up in a mostly black area in Harlem. In the 1930's, America suffered from an economic crisis because of the Great Depression. James Baldwin, as an African American suffered from poverty, exclusions and racial injustices. The colour of his skin becomes a burden. As a preacher, a witness, a writer of his time, James Baldwin's quest is to tell the truth. Baldwin exposes the problem that African Americans suffer from, in both his fictions and essays. When speaking of truth, one may speak of reality and realism. Indeed, Baldwin uses fictions as a tool to illustrate the reality of America. Baldwin can be considered as a realist writer because he aims at depicting the situation of the United States before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement. James Baldwin depicted reality through the act of writing. He was also politically committed, participating in the Civil Rights Movements alongside Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers or Malcom X who denounced the problems of injustice that African Americans suffered from in a highly stratified society. Baldwin, as a committed writer, used the pen to expose the psychological origins of racism. Thanks to the fame he obtained with his essays, he has been considered as a spokesperson of the African American community, although he had never claimed such a position.<sup>58</sup>Baldwin rather

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<sup>57</sup>Lynn O. Scott: James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. p1968

<sup>58</sup>Julius Lester. "James Baldwin – Reflections of A Maverick" published on May 27,1984:  
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-reflections.html>

insists on re-establishing the truth of American history by making the American people aware of the society they live in.

In this second chapter, it is interesting to show that although James Baldwin makes a satire of the American racial system dominated by white people, he offers a more complex and psychological vision of racism. Actually, his black characters are given voices and are in quest of their identities. How does James Baldwin use the concept of “race” in the construction of identity? Baldwin explains that: “identity is not something you are born with, rather it is something we claim for ourselves, then must assert wilfully to the world.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed Baldwin explains that identity is a fluid social construction. In *Beale Street*, the characters see themselves and are defined through the eyes of the others. They see themselves as “others”, different, and inferior, even dehumanized because of the categorizations established in a white-dominated society. Baldwin invites the American people to go beyond categorizations so as to become a nation. By reconstructing the identity of his characters, James Baldwin reconstructs the identity of America. Baldwin uses the novel genre, fiction to comment on the characters’ quest of identity and expose the reality of America. Michel Raimond explains that an author is “realist”, when he/she creates an imaginary world. For the Robert dictionary, the novel is : « une œuvre d’imagination en prose, assez longue qui présente et fait vivre dans un milieu des personnages donnés comme réels nous fait connaître leur psychologie, leur destin leurs aventures »<sup>60</sup>. Thus, how does James Baldwin use fiction as a tool to expose racial problems? Baldwin may be seen as a realist writer because he depicts the American issues of his time. Yet, can the novel be read as a protest novel? Before attempting to answer this question, we will first start by giving a definition of this literary form. A protest novel is a work of fiction that illustrates the sufferings of characters under an ostracizing system. This genre focuses on the character as an individual but also as a representative of a community. The characters evolve and are in quest of change, some characters succeed, and others change. The most important themes of African American protest novels are: oppression, violence between different ethnic groups, human relations, escapism, struggle, cross-racial issues, slavery, and identity crisis. All these elements can be found in *Beale Street*. But one may take into consideration the fact that James Baldwin

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<sup>59</sup> Popova, Maria. “Margaret Mead and James Baldwin on Identity, Race, The Immigrant Experience, and why the “Melting Pot” is a problematic metaphor”, published on March 26, 2015: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/26/margaret-mead-james-baldwin-a-rap-on-race-2/>

<sup>60</sup> Michel Raimont. *Le Roman*. Paris : Armand Colin, 2015. p.20.



had always condemned protest literature in his essays. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel”<sup>61</sup>, James Baldwin severely criticizes Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) which he describes as “a very bad novel, having in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*.”<sup>62</sup> Baldwin also criticizes Richard Wright’s protest novel *Native Son* in his essay “Many Thousand Gone”, because for him, the novel reinforces racial stereotypes about black people.<sup>63</sup>

For the author of *Beale Street*, protest writers dramatize racism and perpetuate stereotypes rather than challenging or bringing solutions to solve the problems. Protest writing is a pamphlet disguised in literature, or a form of propaganda where characters are dehumanized, are over-victimized and the readers are imbued with the sense of moral. Although James Baldwin never proclaimed to be a protest writer like Richard Wright for example, *Beale Street* shares similarities with protest literature in its form and for the themes it deals with. However, James Baldwin adds a new dimension in his novel as the characters are psychologically constructed and challenge their own identity as black characters in the American society. James Baldwin condemns racism in his writing, but he focuses more on how racism damages the characters’ selves and brings the black characters to questions their position and their identity in the American society. The characters are set in a milieu. In literature, the milieu refers to the geographic and climatic setting in which the characters evolve. Baldwin constructs an oppressive and stiffening fictional world in which the characters have to survive.

They evolve in Harlem, a neighbourhood that is mostly populated by black people. New York and America are described as a curse for black people. Clementine said that “Albany isn’t exactly God’s gift to black folks either” (28). She said “the other places in Harlem are even worse than the projects. You’d never be able to start a new life in those places, you remember them too well, and you’d never want to bring up your baby here” (31). America is described as a land of injustices far from being the so-called land of plenty and opportunity for African Americans. Moreover, Baldwin continues with a detailed description of America and New York in his fiction. America during the sixties

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<sup>61</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays. Notes of a Native Son*, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p.11-12.

<sup>63</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays. Notes of a Native Son*, “Many Thousands Gone”. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.



and the seventies is characterized by political, cultural and social divisions resulting from the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the Watergate scandal and mainly the persistent struggle for the Civil Rights.

The author portrays the seventies' Harlem, considered as a dark period for the history of New York and America. Because of the deindustrialization, the economic and social situations of the city were highly damaged leading to poverty, unemployment, drugs, and the creation of ghettos, prostitution, prison violence, criminality, racial divisions and tensions.<sup>64</sup> James Baldwin inserts all these elements in the novel to give it a realistic dimension. Roland Barthes speaks of "effect of reality"<sup>65</sup> to refer to fictional elements which are described like in the real world. In the essay "The Harlem Ghetto,"<sup>66</sup> James Baldwin describes the Harlem of his time. Baldwin argues that Harlem is a place that needs to be rebuilt: "the streets are crowded and dirty, there are many too human beings per square block."<sup>67</sup> Life is expensive, rents are going up and wages are going down. Harlem is a hopeless place for black people. The writer's description of Harlem and the rest of America in his essay is identical to the description in the novel. Indeed, through the point of view of Tish, James Baldwin shows his anger about America, gives a negative opinion and draws a derogatory description of America and New York.

New York is "the ugliest and the dirtiest city in the world. It must have the ugliest buildings and the nastiest people" (9); "The streets were very crowded now, with youngsters, black and white, and cops." Tish compared New York to hell (9) and Albany to a curse from God for black people "Albany isn't exactly God's gift to black folk either." (28).

America is described as a land of racial injustices, discriminations and stereotypes. Tish criticizes the American system, a hopeless system where African Americans cannot envision a better future and emancipate. Indeed, the American system makes and shapes the African American identity. Tish declared that schools "really teaching the kids to be slaves" (36). Indeed, African Americans are alienated by the society in which they live. Tish adds fatalistically: "In this fucking free country you're supposed to be somebody's

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<sup>64</sup> "Harlem". Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, 13 July 2018. Web. Retrieved on: 26 July 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem>.

<sup>65</sup> Roland Barthes. L'effet de réel. In : *Communications*, 11, 1968. Recherches sémiologiques le vraisemblable. pp. 84-89 : [https://www.persee.fr/doc/comm\\_0588-8018\\_1968\\_num\\_11\\_1\\_1158](https://www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1968_num_11_1_1158)

<sup>66</sup> James Baldwin. Notes of a Native Son, "The Harlem Ghetto". New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> James Baldwin, Baldwin Collected Essays. Notes of the Native Son. "The Harlem Ghetto". New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998. p.42.

nigger. And if you're nobody's nigger, you're a bad nigger" (37). Baldwin explains that an African American cannot fully emancipate and be free in the American society because of the perpetuation of racial and gender stereotypes. Tish says that "a man who is not afraid to trust his imagination is effeminate. It says a lot about this country, because, of course, if all you want to do is make money, the very last thing you need is imagination. Or women, for that matter: or men" (59-60). James Baldwin clearly condemns the American society which is more based on money and capitalism rather than creativity, art and imagination. He makes a satire of the American society who forces people to conform to its values. Baldwin was criticized because he was an artist and art used to be ill-perceived within the African American community. When Fonny discusses with Joseph about marrying Clem, Fonny said to Joseph that he was a sculptor. Joseph answered that Fonny: "you ain't got no kind of future" (86). It shows that the stereotypes are not only perpetuated by white people, they are also shared by black people themselves. Racial injustices reinforce racial divisions in the novel and are the main reason why Clementine and Fonny cannot live together. James Baldwin uses the extended metaphor of the wall of glass in the novel. When she visits Fonny in prison, Clementine said that she was facing Fonny "through a wall of glass" (4). The glass represents the racial divisions that African American people suffered from.

Moreover, the hatred of white people towards black ones is also the reason why Baldwin criticizes the American system. Here again, we see that love is the vehicle of Baldwin's discourse. In fact, the absence of love, perhaps even hatred causes the African Americans to be dehumanized and reduced to a state of servility. New York is a "white place" (29). Then, America is a place where African Americans are excluded because of discriminations. Daniel says that "this country really do not like niggers" (100). Clementine criticizes the restrictions established by the US government that deprive American people of freedom: "I had one margherita, though we all knew that this was against the godden mothefucking shit-eating law." (57) Indeed, in the novel, freedom can only be reached through criminality and misdeeds. Joseph and Frank do not hesitate to steal money from their jobs in an attempt to save Fonny.

James Baldwin represents America as a place that shapes the characters' identities. Indeed, black characters represents the "other" whose identity is fragmented and neglected. The characters question their existence in the novel through the metaphor of the mirror which represents otherness. The novel opens immediately with Clementine

facing a mirror through which she questions her identity. When speaking about her sister Ernestine, the narrator declared: “If you look helpless, people react to you in one way and if you look strong, or just come on strong, people react to you in another way, and, since you don't see what they see, this can be very painful. I think that's maybe why Sis was always in front of that damn mirror all the time, when we were kids. She was saying, I don't care. I got me.” (46) Alice Hunt also faces the mirror: “She was wearing heels, she was gaining weight. She was fighting it, not successfully. She was frightened: in spite of the power of the Holy Ghost. She entered smiling, not quite knowing at what, or at whom, being juggled, so to speak, between the scrutiny of the Holy Ghost and her unsteady recollection of her mirror” (61). The confrontation with the mirror is another recurrent theme in African American literature. It aims to question the characters' identities and their true selves. Indeed, these characters struggle to assert their identities which are built through the white characters' eyes. Clementine questions the sense of the act of naming of baptism and she is perceived through different identities, Ernestine plays the role of a strong woman to assert her identity and Alice Hunt masks her blackness with clothes and make-up. In other words, the characters attempt to dissimulate their real identities or seem to have several identities in the American society because of their race.

Moreover, the characters suffered from stereotypes from society because they are black. In the bus, Tish declared that people “looked at us as though we were zebras and, you know some people like zebras and some people don't. But nobody ever asks the zebra” (9). We can see that the narrator sees herself through the eyes of white society. She sees herself as an exotic and ambiguous animal. Symbolically, a zebra represents the two-ness that Du Bois refers to in *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Tish is not considered fully American, she has a double identity, thus she may be seen a stranger in her own country. When he was on exile in France for political reasons James Baldwin declared: “It was in France that I could start a career of writing English because there I was not able to speak French and so I was driven to recognize myself as an outsider *that way*, not as a black man, but as an English-speaking person.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, James Baldwin also had the feeling of being an outsider because he was black, homosexual and an artist. The characters' blackness becomes a burden to carry in America. The characters

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<sup>68</sup> W.E.B Du Bois. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. “The Soul of White Folk”. United States: Blackstone Audio, Inc, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Coles. “James Baldwin Back Home, 1977: [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-home.html?\\_r=1](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-home.html?_r=1)

are aware of their blackness in contrast with the so-called whiteness as a source of injustice. Daniel states that “this country really do not like niggers” (100). Indeed, the use of the term “nigger” by black characters shows that they are not able to emancipate in a society where they are perceived as inferior. Thus, blackness (as inferiority) and whiteness as (superiority) are social constructions that assert white supremacy. Moreover, it is interesting to see that female characters are turned into sexual objects in a racist and sexist society.

### **b) The Commodification of Female Bodies**

How and why does James Baldwin represent the black female body as an object in order to expose the racial and sexual prejudices black women are victim of in the American society?

Even though James Baldwin is known for his essays on racism and mainly racism towards black men, the author also wrote essays about women’s double oppressions. In *Nobody’s Knows My Name: A Letter from the South* (1962)<sup>70</sup> James Baldwin explains that coloured women have been devalued since slavery as they were forced to be slaves and machines that produced children. Black women used to suffer from humiliations, pain and sexual attacks by their white masters. In *on Catfish Row*<sup>71</sup>, James Baldwin speaks of female singers like Billie Holliday and Bessie Smith saying that they have been dehumanized and not recognized for their talents and womanhood: as black female artists, they suffered from gender and racial oppressions. At the end of the essay, Baldwin stated that despite being victims of a double oppression, these black women had managed to find their identities: “People who thought of Bessie Smith as a coarse black woman, and who let her die, were far less free than Bessie, who had escaped all their definitions by becoming herself. This is still the only way to become a man or a woman or an artist.”<sup>72</sup> Harlem is a place where women have no hope. In the novel, women are doubly victimized. They suffer from both their “race” and “gender”. Harlem is described as a racialized place where African American men cannot assert their masculinity and identity.

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<sup>70</sup> James Baldwin, Baldwin Collected Essays. “Nobody Knows My name”. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.

<sup>71</sup> James Baldwin, Baldwin Collected Essays. “On Catfish Row”. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.p.620.

But it is worse for the female characters who are reduced to be sexual objects and prostitutes because of the double oppression they suffered from.

The feminist Frances M. Beal explains in her pamphlet that the American system aims at destroying the humanity of all people particularly black men, women and children. She attempts to explain the role of coloured women in the society by making a relationship between racism and capitalism. She adds that “the black woman likewise was manipulated by the system, economically exploited and physically assaulted.”<sup>73</sup> Beal develops the concept of double jeopardy meaning that women doubly suffered from racism and sexism. Black women continue to be objects of stereotypes: “sex role”, they stay at home caring for children and the house. They are reduced to a “biological function” which Beal calls “legalized prostitution.” In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins explains that prostitution has been used as a stereotypical image since Slavery to justify oppression.<sup>74</sup> She explains that “prostitution represents the fusion of exploitation for an economic purpose — namely, the commodification of Black women’s sexuality—with the demeaning treatment afforded pets.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, since slavery, black women have always been used and seen as objects of pleasure for white men. It is interesting to see that in the novel most of the female characters are perceived as prostitutes or Jezebel figure by the American society and that they struggle to remove or erase the stereotypes that have been placed upon themselves and have dehumanized them.

Because of the mechanism of the American society, black women are forced to be reduced to sexual objects and fail to assert their identity. In fact, black female characters suffer from a double-consciousness. Clementine is called Jezebel by Ernestine:

Sis started calling me Jezebel after I got my job at the perfume center of the department store where I work now. The store thought that it was very daring, very progressive, to give this job to a colored girl. I stand behind that damn counter all day long, smiling till my back teeth ache, letting tired old ladies smell the back of my hand. Sis claimed that I came home smelling like a Louisiana whore. (39)

Indeed, we can see here the importance of the act of naming and identity. The Jezebel figure is a stereotype used to refer to black women. Clementine is called Jezebel because she works for white people and is objectified. She has been hired because she is a black woman and thus white society can have control on her. Collins explains that

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<sup>73</sup> Frances M. Beal *Black Women’s Manifesto; Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. Third World Women’s Alliance, 1969. p.1.

<sup>74</sup> Patricia H. Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. p.5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.144-145.

prostitution has been used as a site of oppressions and intersectionality for black women because the prostitution image serves as a tool used to exploit and dominate the black female body in a white-male dominated society.

Clementine's body is dominated and exploited. Clementine questions prostitution. Indeed, through Clementine's voice, James Baldwin explains that women are forced to be prostitutes: "I could not conceive of peddling myself for so low a price. But, for a higher price? For Fonny?" (113). Clementine is ready to sacrifice her dignity, her femininity and womanhood to save Fonny. America is described as a corrupt place, where women have no choice but to prostitute themselves for survival and are submissive to the patriarchal American society.

However, some black female characters managed to emancipate in the American society. Ernestine and Clementine have a job because they have been raised with the values of love shared in their family. The narrator Clementine insists on the destiny of black children in America: "If he had sons, they might very well be dead or in jail [...] it is a miracle that Joseph's daughters are not on the block" (123). Black boys and girls have no fate as their lives and future were already written. Black boys are destined to be criminals and black girls are destined to be prostitutes. These were the stereotypes perpetuated by American the society.

Indeed, Baldwin not only describes characters that are conscious of their blackness, but he also describes female characters that are conscious of their gender. Like the concept of race consciousness developed by Du Bois, gender consciousness may refer to the way women are perceived in society. Gender is a social construction used by the American patriarchal society to maintain gender hierarchy. As America is a sexist society woman developed a form of consciousness of their dehumanization. Clementine realizes that she and Ernestine were seen as "tired whores" or a "lesbian couple" or "both" (122). We can see that because people see two black women together, they immediately think that they are prostitutes or lesbians. James Baldwin uses the Jezebel image to show the impact of race and gender oppressions on the female characters selves and how the prostitute image is degrading for the African American female characters. The African American women's bodies become an instrument to assert the American society's domination and to dehumanize black women.

When Tish constantly repeats that she "she was not woman enough to help the man, to give him what he needed", "I was not yet a woman", "I ain't a woman", she may

implicitly mean that she is not a free woman although she is still a teenager. Indeed, women are reduced to be sexual objects in America. Baldwin explains that black female characters are classified in the American society. Sheila and Adrienne have to be prostitutes to survive into the white American society: “I can tell you why Adrienne can’t get fucked you want to hear it? I could tell you about Sheila, too, and all those cats she jerks off in their handkerchiefs in cars and movies\_ now you want to hear that?” (73).

However, Clementine is aware that “the possible sale of her body” can be compared to a rape (118). She insists on the dehumanizing and degrading act of prostitution: “Now, maybe because I had spent so much of the day, and the night before, with my terrors – and my calculations – concerning the possible sale of my body, I began to see the reality of rape” (118). Indeed, she thinks of the possibility to prostitute herself in order to free her boyfriend. James Baldwin makes the satire of the way America treats black women, through the voice of Tish, a feminine voice.

Moreover, James Baldwin exposes another stereotypical sexual image of women in the novel. Indeed, through Ernestine, Baldwin exposes the image of the black lesbian. Collins states that the stereotypical image of the lesbian woman was that she looked “mannish”, she was qualified as a defective woman (Collins 145-146). Trudier Harris reveals that Ernestine’s “qualities espouse in helping Fonny are tied in some ways to the masculine qualities”<sup>76</sup>. Indeed, Ernestine is described as an authoritative character. “She can cut [her] Daddy off when he’s talking which I can’t do” (47). She has an angry voice. She is given masculine attitudes; she smokes cigarettes. She does not hesitate to have a quarrel with Adrienne and Alice using harsh words: “But if you touch my sister, I’m going to have to make up my mind pretty quick.” (71), “If you come anywhere near this house again in life, I will kill you.” (73), “Now. I am not my sister. Remember that. My sister’s nice. I’m not. My father and my father are nice. I am not” (73). Indeed, Ernestine acts differently than the other female characters in the novel, while Clementine has a sweeter and more poetic and feminine voice, Ernestine’s voice is more urban, harsh and masculine. These characteristics reinforce the stereotypical assumption that black women’s sexuality is deviant. Moreover, one may add that in a bar, Clementine and Ernestine are considered as a lesbian couple or tired whores (122)

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<sup>76</sup> Trudier Harris. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987. p.144.



What is more, Ernestine is unmarried, and Sharon makes her reproaches about it: "Oh, shut up," (88) Sharon said. "Wish to God you'd get married to somebody, then I'd be able to bug your half to death, instead of the other way around" (88). And Ernestine answers: "I don't think I'm ever going to marry. Some people do, you know – Mama? – and some people don't" (88). This may show that Ernestine is a lesbian.

Baldwin depicts America as a racist and sexist stratified society. It will be interesting to see that Officer Bell represents both racism and sexism.

## 2) **Officer Bell**

This section is devoted to the strategies used by James Baldwin to construct the character of Officer Bell as the antagonist of the story. It focuses on interracial relations and tensions and on how they affect the characters' sense of identity.

In the introduction of this analysis we saw that racism and sexism deal with the concept of superiority. In *If Beale Street Could Talk* James Baldwin constructs Officer Bell as a character who is the caricature of the white racist and sexist policeman. We will see how Baldwin deconstructs the myth of white supremacy, how he uses the metaphor of the eye as both a symbol of power, authority but also resistance. Officer Bell appears as a villain. He is the antagonist of the novel who intends to harm the protagonists in their quest: to form a family and be married. On a deeper level, Officer Bell dehumanizes the protagonists through the intersection of racism and sexism.

### a) **A Caricature of White Male Racism**

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin narrates an anecdote about policemen when he was a child:

The humiliation did not apply merely to working days, or workers; I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, "Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?" When I was ten, and didn't look, certainly, any older, two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and, for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots.<sup>77</sup>

Joyce Carol Oates in her review on the novel declared that: "The white policeman, Bell, seems a little crazy, driven by his own racism rather than reason. He is a villain, of course (he has even shot and killed a 12-year-old black boy, sometime earlier), but his

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<sup>77</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*. "The Fire Next Time" New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998. p.298.



villainy is made possible only by a system of oppression closely tied up with the mind-boggling stupidities of the law.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Officer Bell is described as a caricature of American racism. To understand the role which is played by this character, one must give a definition of the word “antagonist”. It refers to “a character or a group of characters, which stands in opposition with to the protagonist which is the main character. The term comes from the Greek “antagonistēs” which means opponent or rival. In other words, in the narrative, Officer Bell appears to be Tish and Fonny’s opponent because he arrested Fonny for a crime he did not commit, and he sent Victoria Rogers, the rape victim to Puerto so that Clementine and her Family cannot gather evidence for Fonny’s trial.

James Baldwin wrote a lot about white supremacy in the U.S. In a polemical article entitled “On being white and other lies”<sup>79</sup>, he deconstructs the myth of white supremacy by explaining that there is no homogeneous white community in America, only a group of European immigrants who decided to be part of a racial élite. America is a land of immigrants; it is a multi-ethnic society. Baldwin means that European immigrants such as Irish, Jewish, Italian, German and other origins were forced to obey and to correspond to the so-called norm, the WASPS (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants), if they want to be treated as Americans. These groups of people decided themselves to hate and exclude certain ethnic groups who do not fit this “norm” such as blacks, Jews or Latinos because they were not white. Society defines one’s identity in America and thus one is considered different if one does not fit to this “norm.” However, the writer insists on the fact that words such as whiteness and blackness are social constructions to strengthen the divisions and disparities between black and white. James Baldwin keeps using binary scheme to construct his fiction: Officer Bell represents whiteness and the protagonists represent otherness and blackness. Bell makes Fonny the main suspect of the rape in the police line-up because he is black. Officer Bell represents the oppressor and the black protagonists are the oppressed. He is the obstacle to the love between the two protagonists. Because of him, Fonny is jailed and Clementine may be condemned to raise her child alone. Bell uses the American system to oppress the black characters. Indeed, because he is white and benefits from a superior social status, he represents authority and

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<sup>78</sup> Joyce Carol Oates. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The New York Times on the Web. May 19, 1974: [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwinbeale.html?\\_r=1&oref=s\\_login](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwinbeale.html?_r=1&oref=s_login).

<sup>79</sup> James Baldwin, “On Being White and Other Lies”. *Essence*, April 1984. pdf file: [http://www.cwsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/Family\\_Herstories/2\\_On\\_Being\\_White.PDF](http://www.cwsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/Family_Herstories/2_On_Being_White.PDF)

thus, cannot be denied. He is a liar, he made a testimony against Fonny even though there was no evidence that prove that Fonny is guilty: “You have forgotten the testimony of Officer Bell, his was the really authoritative identification of the rapist. It is Bell who swears that he saw Fonny running away from the scene of crime” (93). Indeed, Bell represents power, justice and superiority because of his whiteness. As he is white, he owns the authoritative voice that the black characters do not have. Hayward, the lawyer states that Clementine’s testimony “counts for nothing” (94). On the one hand this means that white people represent power and on the other hand black people are deprived of their rights as American citizens.

In that way, James Baldwin plays with the portrayal of Bell. He represents white power and institutionalized violence. Fonny and Clementine are his victims. It means that Fonny and the other black characters are powerless and inferior against Bell. He is a “racist” and a liar (94). He is a harsh man who has no feelings and show no sympathy for black people. Indeed, Baldwin opposes two Manichean concepts. In *If Beale Street Could Talk* whiteness represents purity and innocence. The “so called purity” of Bell is to be found of the description that James Baldwin made of him. Clementine notices that he has got blue eyes and red hair. (139) Thus, the encounter with Bell enables Clementine to be conscious of her blackness. Baldwin clearly mocks at Officer Bell. He plays with stereotype of the New Yorker policeman of Irish origin to deconstruct the idea of whiteness.

By looking at Bell, Tish is aware of her differences. She is black, and he is white, being black or being white has not the same meaning in America.

As a white man, officer Bell shows that he has power on Fonny. Indeed violence, animosity and hatred characterize Bell. Because he is black, Fonny appears as a scapegoat to Bell. Fonny becomes a victim of lynching. Bell uses lynching to uphold his masculinity and authority. When Tish goes out to buy tomatoes at one of the markets on Bleeker Street (135), she is being harassed by a white boy and Fonny defends her, which leads to a fight between the two men. The fight is interrupted by Bell who, without any evidence, condemns Fonny for being at the origin of the fight because he is black. Officer Bell infantilizes Fonny by calling him “boy”: “Is that so, boy?” (137), “we are going to take you down boy” (138). In this way, Officer Bell asserts his white masculinity. One may take into consideration the fact that Fonny does not rebel to defend himself when being lynched by Bell. He just answers “yes” (138). When the policeman asks him questions,

Fonny does not act and is protected by two women: Clementine and the Italian Lady. This means that Fonny loses his masculinity because he cannot defend himself alone. It also shows the power of a white man over a black man. Indeed, the act of lynching is meant to castrate Fonny. Bell is compared to a pervert predator and Fonny is the pray:

When Fonny was alone, the same thing happened. Bell's eyes swept over Fonny's black body with the unanswerable cruelty of lust, as though he had lit the blow-torch and had it aimed at Fonny's sex. When their paths crossed, and I was there, Fonny looked straight at Bell, Bell looked straight ahead. *I'm going to fuck you, boy*, and Bell's eyes said. No, you won't, said Fonny's eyes. *I'm going to get my shit together and haul ass out of there* (172).

This passage adds a new dimension in Bell's brutal dehumanization of Fonny. We see that Bell breaks Fonny's identity by hurting his masculinity. Indeed, the process of dehumanization is expressed through the interplay of glances between the two characters. Trudier Harris, in an article entitled "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*"<sup>80</sup>, analyses the role of the eye in Baldwin's novel. By looking at each other, the characters reveal "many of their subconscious thoughts and meaning."<sup>81</sup> The eye contact symbolizes fights, conflicts but also communion and seduction between the characters. Harris adds that through the act of looking at each other "one character is usually dominating another."<sup>82</sup> Bell's eyes reveal power, control and supremacy but his look also conveys the possibility of rape. In this passage, Baldwin connects racism, sexuality and violence. Fonny's body becomes an object of desire for Bell who looks at Fonny's sex with "lust". This suggests another racist stereotypical vision that white men have on black men. Officer Bell sees Fonny as a Mandingo. When Bell says, "I'm going to fuck you boy" (172), it shows the homosexual phantasm of Bell which turns the black male body as an object of desire to possess and to dominate through violence. Fonny is compared to a sexual beast in the eyes of Bell. It also reveals a will from Officer to assert his masculinity by showing that a white man is superior to a black man also in terms of sexuality. By castrating Fonny, Officer Bell gains access to the sexual power he lacks. To be more precise, Officer Bell asserts his white male identity by destroying Fonny's racial and sexual identity. Of course, James Baldwin clearly denigrates Officer Bell. Through the voices of different black characters in the novel, Baldwin built up a satirical image of white supremacy. Officer Bell is described as a ruthless and unfriendly character: While most of the characters are loved by other characters, nobody loves Officer Bell. Ernestine

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<sup>80</sup> Trudier Harris. "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*." *Melus*. 5.3 (1978).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*p.54.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*p.54.

says that his wife hates him. (120) Black characters hate him just like some white characters including, the Italian lady who compared him to “disease pigs” (139). Moreover, through Officer Bell, James Baldwin deconstructs the myth of whiteness. Indeed, whiteness was defined by white people to justify their racial purity and superiority to black people. Whiteness represents purity and blackness sin. Baldwin explains that the myth of whiteness is a liar created by white people to protect themselves from Indians and black people. Indeed, even though Bell is described with “blue eyes and red hair” (139), Baldwin turns him into a devil who despised the black characters and dehumanizes them. In *The Soul of White Folk* (1920), W.E. B. Du Bois criticizes white supremacy and American imperialism. For Du Bois, in America, everything good, efficient, fair and honorable is white whereas the devil is black.<sup>83</sup>He explains that to solve the problems of racism in the world, one has to believe in the humanity of coloured people. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Officer Bell who is a racist character, he is not a central character of the novel. He is only a secondary character as Baldwin writes his narrative from the perspective of his black characters. Baldwin’s message is that love can eradicate racism and that justice always prevails. At the end of the novel, Fonny is released from prison and the birth of the baby is seen as a rebirth of America.

Through Bell, James Baldwin creates a caricature of white America. Indeed, James Baldwin explains that white men want to dehumanize black men by perpetuating their racist stereotypes. For Bell, Fonny is just a phallic symbol that he wants to emasculate or castrate in an attempt to assert his identity and white masculinity. Through the confrontation between Officer and Fonny, Baldwin depicts the power relation between the white male oppressor and the black male oppressed. Moreover, Bell’s attitude towards Baldwin’s black characters is actually both racist and sexist.

### **b) A Sexist Male Character**

This part is devoted to the way James Baldwin constructs Officer Bell as a sexist character. It shows that like Fonny, Clementine is a victim of white racism and also sexism. They are doubly oppressed because of her race and gender.

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<sup>83</sup> W.E.B Du Bois. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. “The Soul of White Folk”. United States: Blackstone Audio, Inc, 2014.p. 461

Officer can be associated to the image of the white macho in the novel as he exacerbates his virility. He is compared to John Wayne (171), an American actor of western movies nicknamed “The Duke”. He embodies the virile, tough and solitary man. While Fonny seems to be powerless in front of Bell, Clementine shows anger, resentment and even frustration towards him. She draws a derogatory portrait of him: “he was kind of pinheaded, heavy gutted, big assed and his eyes were as blank as George Washington’s eyes” (171). Through Tish’s words, one can hear Baldwin’s angry voice who mocks at Officer Bell’s virility and white supremacy. Tish highlights on the cruelty of Bell. By describing Bell in a negative way, she deconstructs Bell’s masculinity.

Moreover, Bell is described as a ghost that constantly haunts Clementine’s mind. Like Fonny, she becomes Bell’s victim. She sees him everywhere. Baldwin depicts the power relationship between Clementine and Bell through the confrontation of gazes. Bell’s gaze becomes the gaze of the oppressor, and Clementine’s gaze stands for the gaze of the victim.

When looking at Clementine, Bell shows his power, authority and superiority as a white man:

If you look steadily into that unblinking blue, into that pinpoint at the center of the eye, you discover a bottomless cruelty, a viciousness cold and icy. In that eye, you do not exist: if you are lucky. If that eye, from its height, has been forced to notice you, if you do exist in the unbelievably frozen winter which lives behind that eye, you are marked, marked, marked, like a man in a black overcoat, crawling, fleeing, across the snow. The eye resents your presence in the landscape, cluttering up the view. Presently, the black overcoat will be still, turning red with blood, and the snow will be red, and the eye resents this, too, blinks once, and causes more snow to fall, covering it all. Sometimes I was with Fonny when I crossed Bell’s path, sometimes I was alone. When I was with Fonny, the eyes looked straight ahead, into a freezing sun. When I was alone, the eyes clawed me like a cat’s claws, raked me like a rake. These eyes look only into the eyes of the conquered victim. They cannot look into any other eyes. (172)

Through the use of the pronoun “you”, the author directly addresses to the reader who becomes a close witness of the scene. The use of interior monologues enables the reader to enter Clementine’s consciousness and identify with the character.

Baldwin uses images and symbolisms to describe the experience of being watched by somebody. Indeed, Baldwin refers to the snow of cold to strengthen Bell’s inhumanity. “You discover a bottomless cruelty, a viciousness cold and icy” (172). “the unbelievably frozen winter” (172). Officer Bell has a dehumanizing and inhumane look, he also has a violent and mortal look. Baldwin uses the symbolism of colours in this passage. The snow is the metaphor of whiteness and purity which contrasts with the “black overcoat” which stands for blackness, and the colour red which represents blood. The colour white

progressively stifles the colour red and black. In other words, the use of the colours black, white and red illustrates the violent killing of a black person. By looking at Bell, Clementine is under Bell's thumb and cannot escape. She is trapped and paralyzed. Indeed, this passage describes a white male gaze on a black female body. Bell is the white patriarch and Clementine the submissive black woman. This scene foreshadows the passage where Clementine is harassed by Bell. Indeed, Bell sees violence as a form of sexual pleasure.

Just as Bell takes pleasure in lynching Fonny's body to assert his masculinity, he enjoys harassing Clementine. We also see here how James Baldwin connects sexuality with race and violence. Yet, while Fonny did not react when being lynched by Bell, Clementine tries to resist at least in her imagination. James Baldwin eroticizes the gaze of Officer Bell. The latter proposes Clementine to carry her parcels:

I looked into his eyes again. This may have been the very first time I ever really looked into a white man's eyes. It stopped me, I stood still. It was not like looking into a man's eyes. It was like nothing I knew, and – therefore – it was very powerful. It was seduction which contained the promise of rape. It was rape which promised debasement and revenge: on both sides. I wanted to get close to him, to enter into him, to open up that face and change it and destroy it, descend into the slime with him. Then, we would both be free: I could almost hear the singing (173).

Baldwin describes the ambivalence of Bell's gaze. Indeed, Bell is a sexual predator, who pretends to be friendly. Tish is both fascinated and repelled by his gaze. Indeed, she says that the gaze is powerful, a "seduction" but at the same time it looks like "rape" and "revenge". Baldwin eroticizes a violent confrontation between Clementine and the white policeman to show the ambivalence of his power. Indeed, Bell uses seduction in order to trap Clementine. What is interesting to point out is the fact that Clementine only acts in her imagination: she tries to act but she cannot. We see that Bell's look is both violent and eroticized. Violence becomes a form of sexual pleasure through which Bell asserts his identity, his authority and his whiteness. He also terrorizes, dehumanizes and deconstructs Clementine's identity. By using sex as a form of power, Bell asserts his masculinity: "I watched his eyes, his moist, boyish, despairing lips, and felt his sex stiffening against me." (174). Clementine is the victim of Bell because she is a black woman. The intersection of her race and gender makes her more vulnerable in the American Society. The exchange of gazes between Clementine, Fonny and Bell enables the reader to feel the experience of the black victims and the white oppressor.

James Baldwin shows the power relations at work which associate the notions of race gender and sexuality. Because they are black, Fonny and Clementine are turned into

sexual objects. Bell, as white policeman, uses his supposed sexual superiority and power to lynch Fonny and Clementine's black bodies. Bell is described as a voyeur, a sexual predator, who, through the act of looking, wants to dominate the two protagonists. His look translates the sexual fantasies of a white man onto black people but also sexual violence. Indeed, the confrontation of gazes between both black protagonists, is described as a "mental rape" which psychologically affects the characters. It also shows how far black people represent the "other" in the American society. Both characters become aware of their blackness through Bell's racist gaze. By adopting a racist and sexist attitude towards Fonny and Clementine, Bell perpetuates the myth of white supremacy.

However, in "On being white and other lies", James Baldwin ends his article with the following statement: "It is the black condition, and only that, which informs us concerning white people. It is a terrible paradox, but those who believed that they could control and define Black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves."<sup>84</sup>

James Baldwin explains that for the integration of African American in America, one needs to destroy notions such as blackness and whiteness which are social constructions. White people need to focus on their own identity and self-examination before wanting to define black people. In the novel, James Baldwin brings a touch of optimism through his message of love. Even though Officer Bell is a racist and sexist character depicted in a derogatory way by Baldwin, the protagonists resist to racial system, and overthrow the situation with the birth of the baby and Fonny's liberation. Although James Baldwin clearly depicts Officer Bell as an unsympathetic character and turns him into a caricature, the author did not have a fully negative view on white people. We will see that the relationships between black and white characters are indeed ambivalent. We will also focus on Baldwin's message on multi-ethnicity. Racial and gender relationships are indeed crucial in the construction of the characters' identities

### **3) Ethnic Relations**

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<sup>84</sup> James Baldwin. "On Being White and Other Lies". Essence, April 1984. p.3 pdf file: [http://www.cwsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/Family\\_Herstories/2\\_On\\_Being\\_White.PDF](http://www.cwsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/Family_Herstories/2_On_Being_White.PDF)



### a) **Interracial Relationships**

This section is devoted to the study of the ambivalence of interracial relationships in the novel. James Baldwin reconstructs America's identity in his novel through the possibility of love and solidarity between blacks and whites. Equality and the construction of new social order that privileges mixing of races and cultures.

James Baldwin did not hate white people. In an essay entitled: "The devil finds work" (1976), he explains his relationship with his white teacher Orilla Miller when he was a child. Baldwin said that it is partly because of her that "he never really managed to hate white people."<sup>85</sup> Indeed Orilla Miller, nicknamed Bill by Baldwin, was a white teacher in the Harlem public school 24. Orilla Miller played a major role in Baldwin's literary career. She was the first person to have noticed Baldwin's writing talents. She directed his first plays and took him to museums in order to develop Baldwin's cultural knowledge.

Black and white relationships is the major theme that James Baldwin developed in his essays and works of fictions. Baldwin's novel *Another Country* (1952) is a love story between a black jazz drummer Rufus and a white woman Leona.

As developed earlier in the analysis, James Baldwin's fiction is built around ambivalent black and white relationships. While the protagonists suffer from Officer Bell's animosity and cruelty, Baldwin depicts in his fiction, other white characters in more positive ways, thus avoiding a Manichean representation of race relations in America. Bell is the only racist character in the novel probably because the writer wants to insist on possible friendly relationships, solidarity between his black and white characters. Indeed, white characters in the novel are not WASPS but belong to different ethnic groups. James Baldwin incorporates realistic elements with the depiction of different ethnic groups: African Americans, Europeans immigrants, Jews and Latinos. The author depicts a multiethnic America. By depicting European Americans characters who are African Americans' allies, Baldwin rebuilds America as a united nation and a community.

The white characters that James Baldwin depicts in the novel also own a double identity like the African American characters. By depicting white characters from mixed

<sup>85</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*. "The Devil Finds Work" New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998. p.480.



origins, Baldwin insists on the fluidity of identity and also on the reconstruction of America as a multi-ethnic nation.

Clementine as a member of the African American community, can identify with these ethnic groups no matter their origins, gender and race. The owner of the Spanish restaurant Pedrocito allows Fonny and Clementine to have dinner. In the restaurant Clementine declares that “the people were different from the people in the street, their smiles were different, and I felt at home” (56).

By constructing ethnic relationships between African American communities and European Americans, Baldwin insists on the need to transcend racial barriers. Family becomes a macrocosm of the society as the black characters establish human relationships with the white characters. Baldwin insists on the importance of the family in the development of the characters’ identities. For their survival in the United States, Clementine and Fonny need to build bonds with other ethnic groups in their quest of identity.

He shows that white people can be black’s allies in the United States. However, some black characters still have negative views on white people. Frank shows distrust towards Hayward, the lawyer because he is white: “It’s a white boy who’s been to a law school and he got them degrees. Well, you know. I ain’t got to tell you what that means: it don’t mean shit.” (64). Tish declares that she “wouldn’t be comfortable with a lawyer” (90). But ironically, it is the lawyer who helps the families by defending Fonny’s case. Baldwin explains that people should not be judged according to the colour or their skins and should be treated as human beings.

The author starts by depicting Hayward as an individualist character who fights for his own interests and success. In his office Clementine notices that there are “trophies and diplomas on the walls” (93). Victory is his leitmotiv: “what matters is who wins” (93). However, Baldwin gives human values. He is honest, devoted to his own beliefs, generous and is ready to sacrifice himself for the others. He defends Fonny, a black man. Clementine states that for “Hayward, the battle increasingly became a private one, involving neither gratitude nor public honor” (127). She adds that his colleagues “scorned him and avoided him” (127). Indeed, Baldwin depicts the trust and mutual respect that may exist between his white and the black characters. Hayward refuses to accept racial stereotypes and believes in equality: “If I didn’t believe in Fonny’s innocence, I wouldn’t have taken the case” (p94).

By helping Fonny and Clementine, Hayward respected them as persons while the officer Bell treats them like animals because they are black. Hayward fights for racial equality and represents Bell's opponent. Baldwin explains that the relationship between blacks and whites can be strengthened if this relationship is based on common understanding and recognition of others as human beings and citizens. Baldwin also shows the humanity that can exist between black and white through the relationship between the Tish and the Hayward: "I smiled, and he smiled and something really human happened between us, for the first time" (97). Moreover, Hayward asks Sharon to help him by sending her to Puerto Rico. Baldwin depicts the human relationships between the two characters: "she shakes hands with Hayward" (131), and Hayward "placed her in a much respected, respectable hostel" (146).

Baldwin insists on the solidarity and the mutual understanding of blacks and whites as the keys for the reconstruction of America. He portrays the Jewish lawyer Hayward as one of the protagonists' allies, but there are other white characters who help Fonny and Clementine in their battle for justice. Indeed, he depicts white characters who are guided by their own will and ethics. Levy, a landlord, accepts to rent Fonny and Clementine a loft. Clementine gives a positive portrait of him: "He was an olive-skinned, curly haired, merry-faced boy, about thirty-free, maybe dug people who loved each other" (133). Indeed, like Hayward, Levy knows the values of love and family. He has a wife and two boys (135). He insists on the importance of having children for the future of America: "Make babies on it. That's how I got here" (133); "you should have some beautiful babies" (133). Levy is considered as a member of the family by Clementine: "What I most remember about him is that he didn't make either of us feel self-conscious" (133). Baldwin creates white characters who are conscious of the racist system they live in: "Look. I told you not to worry about the neighbors. But watch out for the cops. They're murder" (135). Baldwin shows through Levy that mutual respect can exist between black and white characters. The restaurant owner Pedrocito is a generous and helpful character. He welcomes Fonny and Clementine in his restaurant as if they were members of his own family. He also knows the values of love: "I assure you that we will prepare it with love" (142). He offered Clementine and Fonny brandy (143). Finally, an Italian lady defends Clementine and Fonny against Bell:

I do not know what would now have happened if the Italian lady who ran the store had not spoken up. "Oh, no," she said, "I know both these young people. They shop here very often. What the young lady has told you is the truth. I saw them both, just now, when they came, and I watched her choose her tomatoes and her young man left her and he said he would be right back. I was busy, I could not

get to her right away; her tomatoes are still on the scale. And that little good-for-nothing shit over there, he did attack her. And he has got exactly what he deserved. What would you do if a man attacked your wife? if you have one." The crowd snickered, and the cop flushed. "I saw exactly what happened. I am a witness. And I will swear to it. (138)

The Italian lady who defends the couple is not prejudiced. She describes Fonny as a good man (139). She also represents a mother figure who protects Fonny from the American racist society. The Italian lady protects Fonny and Clementine as a mother would protect her children. Baldwin describes her as "mother figure" in her actions: "I [the Italian lady] saw exactly what happened. I am a witness. And I will swear to it" (138). She stares into Clementine's eyes. She touches Clementine's face (139).

Indeed, all the white characters that James Baldwin depicts in *Beale Street* except Bell (the only racist character) epitomize love, friendship and solidarity. Baldwin not only depicts black and white relationships, but he also male/female solidarity and friendship. The network of relationships that Clementine and Fonny construct with the white characters enable them to face racism and fight against the racist system they live in. Baldwin shows that friendship is not a question of race or gender, it is a question of humanity and human relationships are more effective than the US government.

The white characters in the novel have human values and are given human qualities. The humanity that Baldwin gives to the white characters is expressed through their smiles. The smiles are symbols or means of interactions, they represent the character's humanity, complicity and friendship that are built between black and white characters. Friendship is another form of love that Baldwin depicts in the novel with heterosexual and familial love. Baldwin has a religious vision of American society, people should be treated as brothers and sisters. Hayward "smiled a painful smile" (91), "he was smiling" (91), then he has "a shy and boyish smile" (92), "he smiled again" (92). On a photograph Tish notices that Hayward's wife was smiling (93). Then Clementine and Hayward interact with each other with smiles "I smiled, and he smiled and something really human happened between us, for the first time" (97). Levy smiled at Fonny (133) and Pedrocito smiled at Clementine (141). Smiles help black and white characters to interact. James Baldwin insists on the fact that human beings should be treated equally by constructing a new social order that privileges mixed ethnicity and cultural identities.

Otherness is one of Baldwin's central themes in his writings. His protagonists and the other white characters develop a friendship whereas with Bell, the relationship is based on hatred. By stressing on a possible love and friendship between black and white

characters, Baldwin first adds an optimistic dimension to his novel, reconstructs America's identity as a nation and insists on the fact that the "the other is the same."

*If Beale Street Could Talk* has been adapted into a French movie entitled *A la place du Coeur*<sup>86</sup> directed by Robert Guédiguian and released in 1998. Clim Patché 16 years old a white young woman, and Bébé Lopez, a black young man, are in love but Bébé has been imprisoned for raping a woman. Robert Guédiguian transposed a story that happened in New York to Marseille. It is worth saying that the movie is essentially focused on love, friendship and familial support. The film shows how the characters can overcome social and racial injustices.

The author of *Beale Street* shows that love and friendship can transcend social, racial, sexual oppressions and discriminations. Indeed, through the depiction of peaceful interracial relationships Baldwin argues that love and friendship are above all human feelings and are "colour-blind."

Moreover, by depicting white characters of mixed ethnic origins, Baldwin deconstructs the concept of whiteness. He reconsiders America as a multi-ethnic nation by depicting different ethnic groups. The author also illustrates interracial relationships, but he also depicts relationships between Latinos and African Americans, showing the possibility of a new multi-ethnic social order.

#### **b) Ethnic Relationships: Latinos and African Americans**

Latinos are the other ethnic group to be depicted in the *Beale Street*. Indeed, like African Americans, Latinos also represent the "other". As minorities, they are marginalized. Through the depiction of two ethnic groups, one may see an opposition between America and Puerto Rico, a protectorate of the United States. For Baldwin, geography can forge one identity. He travelled a lot in his life. His trips in Europe have been crucial in the development of his identity as a black American homosexual and particularly as a writer. He was living Switzerland when his first novel *Go Tell it on The Mountain* (1952) was published, he wrote *Another Country* in Istanbul (1962).

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<sup>86</sup> *A la Place du Cœur*. Dir. Robert Guédiguian. Diaphana Films, 1998. Film.

On 11<sup>th</sup> November 1948, Baldwin first exiled in Paris for four years because of racial segregation in America and because Paris was considered as an artistic capital city at that time. His exile in Paris represents an opportunity to question his identity:

In America, the color of my skin stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me – anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, for Baldwin, America is the land of racial and sexual prejudices whereas Europe is the land of freedom, a place where people are not judged regarding their skin colour. In *Beale Street* the writer uses America and Puerto Rico as opposite geographical metaphors. If America is described as a hellish and hopeless place, Puerto Rico is a place of humanity where racial barriers do not exist. The passage from Baldwin's essay *Nobody Knows my Name* echoes with one of the passages in *Beale Street*. When she arrived in Puerto Rico to find evidence to prove Fonny's innocence, Sharon notices that: "her first impression is that everyone appears to be related to each other. This is not because of the way they look, nor is it a matter of language: it is because of the way they relate to each other. There are many colours here, but this does not, at least at the airport, appear to count for very much" (145).

Sharon insists on the humanity and tolerance in Puerto Rico. Yet, Sharon does not feel at home on the island because she is different. Sharon is disoriented in Puerto Rico, she is described as a tourist (146), or an outsider because she speaks English and Puerto Rican speaks Spanish. Indeed, language is essential in the formation of identity. Sharon states that she "does not speak any Spanish" (146). Puerto Ricans also suffer from the same exclusion in America because of language, they "don't understand what's happened no one who speaks to them speaks Spanish, for example", Clementine declared (7). Indeed, Sharon is unable to identify with this ethnic group.

African Americans and Latinos struggle with their identities because of their sense of two-ness. Because of their mixed identities, Latinos are like African Americans, they are marginalized by the American society. Latinas and Latinos do suffer from their inability to assert their identity because of their living conditions in the USA. Victoria's femininity is damaged. She is described as a "very thin girl" (164), she's got thin wrists and bony hands (169). Moreover, Pietro Alvares, a twenty-year-old, Puerto Rican man is

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<sup>87</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*. "Nobody Knows my Name" New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998. p.135.

Victoria Rogers 'husband and also her pimp cannot assert his identity because he is not American:

“Look. I ain't no American. You got all them lawyers and folks up there, why you coming to me? Shit – I'm sorry, but I ain't nothing. I'm an Indian, wop, spit, spade – name it, that's me. I got my little thing going here, and I got Victoria, and, lady, I don't want to put her through no more shit; I'm sorry, lady, but I really just can't help you” (154-155).

However, Baldwin constructs an ambivalent relationship between Latinos and African Americans. James Baldwin constructs Porto Rican characters who refuse to cooperate with African Americans to show the difficulty of cross-ethnic alliance and the difficulty to cross the colour line.

Indeed, Sharon, as a mother figure, tries to cooperate and convince Pietro and Victoria but they refuse. They refuse cross-ethnic solidarity. Sharon plays the role of the mother figure as a tool of domination. The discussions with Sharon and Pietro and Sharon and Victoria show their ethnic differences. The fact that Sharon comes from the north and is called lady, automatically links her with a form of superiority. The conversations between Sharon and Pietro and Victoria show that it is Sharon who is the most active, she speaks the most. Indeed, Sharon asks Pietro a lot of questions: “Are you a rapist?” (155), “Answer me. Are you?” (155), “Do you think I am a liar?” (155), “Do you think I am crazy?” (155), to whom he only answers “no”. Sharon tries to dominate or convince him by asking a lot of questions.

The conversation between Victoria and Sharon shows that Victoria rejects US imperialism: “she looks at Sharon with bitterness.” (165); “I am not a lady.” (165). “I am Mrs. Rivers” (165). Even though Baldwin describes the tensions between African American and Latinos, he seeks to create ethnic connections. Indeed, Sharon's actions show that she wants to create a community of women of colour sharing a common identity as “others.”

By depicting multi-ethnic relationships, not only does Baldwin speak of otherness, he also speaks of sameness. Through sameness, Baldwin argues that ethnic solidarity is possible. The conversation between Sharon and Victoria can be interpreted as a will on Baldwin's part to create a community of women of colours. Indeed, he depicts the conversation between Sharon and Victoria as a mother-daughter relationship. She calls Victoria “daughter” (169,170). Sharon considers her as a member of the family. In the United States Clementine recalls: “I've had to think about it and now I think that maybe not. I don't know what I wouldn't do to get Fonny out of jail. I've never come across any

shame down here, except shame like mine, except the shame of the hardworking black ladies, who call me Daughter” (7). In fact, Baldwin demonstrates the difficulty of ethnic solidarity through racial and gender relationship. Baldwin calls for a mutual understanding. Even though Latinos and African Americans are different in terms of origins, they share common difficulties in the United States. They are both women and victims of a double victimization as women of colours.

Brian Norman wrote an article entitled “James Baldwin’s confrontation with US Imperialism in *If Beale Street Could Talk*”<sup>88</sup> in which he analyses the theme of US imperialism and the possibilities of solidarity between African Americans and Latinos. Norman links the notion of imperialism and gender, ethnic and racial interactions between African Americans and Latinos. He states that, “The challenge for Baldwin is how to imagine a kinship between African Americans and Puerto Ricans that recognizes distinct but complementary histories of subjugation, imperialism, and less than-full citizenship.”<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, we can argue that the kinship that James Baldwin creates in *Beale Street* is expressed through love and friendship and the recognition of the other as equal. Love and acceptance of the other are expressed through Ernestine. She helped a Puerto Rican girl in a settlement for kids where she works: “She met a little girl in the hospital, she was dying, and at the age of twelve, she was already a junkie. And this wasn’t a black girl. She was Puerto Rican.” (39). Indeed, Baldwin insists on the fact that love goes beyond the notions of race, gender and ethnicity. In the same way, when Sharon arrives in Puerto Rico as a tourist or an outsider, she still makes friend with a Puerto Rican taxi driver named Jaime.

Baldwin advocates inter-ethnic solidarity and cooperation through the main theme of novel: love and friendship:

Jaime is a somewhat muddy-faced boy, with brilliant eyes, and a sullen smile. He is entirely intrigued by this improbable North American lady – intrigued because he knows, through unutterably grim experience, that, though she may be in trouble, and certainly has a secret, she is not attempting to do him any violence. He understands that she needs him – the taxi – for something; but that is not his affair. He does not know he knows it – the thought has not consciously entered his mind – but he knows she is a mother. He has a mother. He knows one when he sees one. He knows, again without knowing that he knows it, that he can be of service to her tonight. His courtesy is as real as her trouble. And so, he says, gravely, that, of course, he will take the *Sempra* wherever she wishes and wait for her as long as she likes. (148)

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<sup>88</sup> Brian Norman. “*James Baldwin’s Confrontation with US Imperialism in “If Beale Street Could Talk”*”. *Melus* Vo 32, No.1, in *Contact Zone: Language, Race, and Nation*, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.



James is very friendly to Sharon and helpful: “I hope you will enjoy your visit, Senora. If you need anything allow me” (147), to whom Sharon answers: “Thank you so much. You have been beautiful” (147). Baldwin draws a positive portrait of Jaime “muddy face”, “brilliant eyes” and “sullen smile”. He explains that inter-ethnic solidarity is essential in the development of a common identity. Indeed, Baldwin compares the interdependence of minorities to the interdependence of a man and a woman or a mother and her child.

Sharon’s trip reveals that destitute people need to make alliances across race gender and ethnicity for the development of a collective and individual identity. Baldwin creates an international bond between the disinherited to integrate African Americans and Latinos into the American society. Indeed, he explains that the minorities are rejected by the white majority because they represent the other. He keeps using the themes of love and friendship to show that people should be accepted as human beings whatever their race, gender or origin. Because they are categorized in the American society, the characters are excluded. The final part will be devoted to Baldwin’s metaphorical use of the prison and rapes in the novel as symbols of power relation and to Baldwin’s discourse on race and sexuality.

### **III) Power Relations and the Omnipresence of Violence**

#### **1) Prison Violence**

This chapter demonstrates how Baldwin constructs black male characters as victims of their blackness and of the stereotypes that American society imposed on them. Baldwin plays with the stereotype of black men as criminals to deconstruct racial and sexual prejudices.

##### **a) Dehumanization of Prisoners**

According to James Baldwin, the origins of racism and racial discrimination date back from the curse of Ham in the Bible. Blackness has always been associated with sin whereas whiteness is always associated with purity. Fonny and Daniel are represented as martyrs in Baldwin’s novel because of the colour of their skins. They are victims of injustices in an American society in which being black, is much more a burden rather



than a blessing. Quoting Sir Alan Burns, the French psychiatrist and essayist Franz Fanon defines the concept of colour prejudice in the following terms:

It [colour prejudice] is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and are so frequently insulted. As colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker colour, and the dark-skinned peoples will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated.<sup>90</sup>

In Baldwin's fiction, Fonny and Daniel are portrayed in a caricatural manner. Fonny is described as "ugly", with "skin just like raw", "wet potatoes rind", "eyes like a Chinaman", "nappy hair", "thick lips" (10); and Daniel is "big, black and loud" (97). Through stereotypical description, Baldwin seeks to demonstrate how it has become natural to associate blackness with evil, inferiority and ugliness in America.

Moreover, he denounces the strategy by which the American society marginalizes people because of their difference: "Take my word... the Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans and the Blacks, those are the people who are in prison. What do you think is happening in prisons all over America? What do you think it's happening? I'm not being a racist, which is beneath me in any case..."<sup>91</sup>

In her paper devoted to Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Zhang Jing, explains that because they are black, Fonny and Daniel are "confined in the alleged stereotype of degraded criminals due to racial prejudice so it seems to be a widespread and frequent phenomenon that plenty of blacks, falsely arrested or accused, are condemned to imprisonment or death."<sup>92</sup>

The stereotypical image of black men as criminals or rapists, has been shaped since slavery. It was used by white community to control slaves. Because of the fear of a possible slave rebellion, white masters spread the stereotype that African American men were criminals, thieves and rapists.<sup>93</sup> The historian David M. Oshinsky states that "Southern whites had long viewed criminal behaviors as natural to the Negro. They took his stealing for granted, as a biological flaw."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Frantz Fanon, and Charles L. Markmann. *Black Skin White Masks*, London, 1970. p.89: [http://abahlali.org/files/Black\\_Skin\\_White\\_Masks\\_Pluto\\_Classics\\_.pdf](http://abahlali.org/files/Black_Skin_White_Masks_Pluto_Classics_.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> Fred L. Standley, Louis H. Pratt. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Jackson, Miss: Univ. of Mississippi, 1996. p.119.

<sup>92</sup> Zhang Jing. «The Other of Black People in *If Beale Street Could Talk*», *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 5, No. 6, 2017. pp. 77-82. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20170506.11

<sup>93</sup> Barnard Amii. "Application of critical race feminism to the anti-lynching movement: Black women's fight against race and gender ideology". *UCLA Women's Law Journal*. 3.

<sup>94</sup> David M. Oshinsky "worse Than Slavery": *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*, Simon

Because of white stereotypes, black men have been victims of racial injustices. Injustice is what Baldwin always exposed in his novels. Fonny has been falsely accused of rape on a Puerto Rican woman just because he is black: “you were the blackest thing in the lineup that morning. There were some white cats and a Puerto Rican and a couple of light brown brothers – but you were the only *black* man” (182). Ernestine confesses that “if Fonny were white, there wouldn’t be a case at all” (120). Fonny is victim of white men and women who do not hesitate to lie in order control and marginalize black people. Officer Bell invents a false testimony to condemn Fonny:

Mrs. Victoria Rogers, née Victoria Maria San Felipe Sanchez, declares that on the evening of March 5, between the hours of eleven and twelve, in the vestibule of her home, she was criminally assaulted by a man she now knows to have been Alonzo Hunt, and was used by the aforesaid Hunt in the most extreme and abominable sexual manner, and forced to undergo the most unimaginable sexual perversions. (116-117)

Francine Larue Allen demonstrates in her thesis how “in the fictional societies of Baldwin’s novels, decontextualized stories operate similarly, creating mythic images that hide the reality of who individuals are.”<sup>95</sup> For Baldwin, lying is a conscious strategy to devalue blackness, and thus promote whiteness:

“It is not true that people become liars without knowing it. A liar always knows he is lying, and that is why liars travel in packs: in order to be reassured that the judgement day will never come for them. They need each other for the well-being, the health, the perpetuation of their lie. They have a tacit agreement to guard each other’s secrets, for they have the same secret. That is why all liars are cruel and filthy minded—one’s merely got to listen to their dirty jokes, to what they think is funny, which is also what they think is real.”<sup>96</sup>

Baldwin explains that white American people pretend not to be racist. Indeed, for Baldwin, the lie is that white people pretend to be innocents while black people are considered as guilty.

Bell’s testimony is based on lies that maintain Fonny’s exclusion. Interestingly, Bell’s testimony focuses exclusively and in details on the crime itself and not on the “events leading up to the rape.”<sup>97</sup> It perpetuates a racist ideology. Baldwin plays with Bell’s testimony and with the reader’s opinion, so that the reader can immediately

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and Schuster, 1997, p. 32.

<sup>95</sup> Francine Allen. “Reclaiming the Human Self: Redemptive Suffering and Spiritual Service in the Works of James Baldwin.” Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2006. p. 49. Available from: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=english\\_diss](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=english_diss)

<sup>96</sup> James Baldwin. *Collected Essays*. “No Name in the Street”, New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998. p.468-469.

<sup>97</sup> Francine Allen. “Reclaiming the Human Self: Redemptive Suffering and Spiritual Service in the Works of James Baldwin.” Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2006. p. 50: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=english\\_diss](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=english_diss)

perceive that he is a liar. Bell's testimony is unreliable, first because it is imprecise: "the hours of eleven and twelve" (117). It is filled with stereotypes on black men who are said to be criminals and sexual beasts: "she was criminally assaulted by a man", "the most extreme and abominable sexual manner", "forced to undergo the most unimaginable sexual perversions". The use of superlatives and hyperboles also show that Baldwin ridicules Bell who is turned into a caricature and a buffoon by the author.

In addition, Daniel Mc Carty is also a helpless victim, Daniel is Fonny's friend who has been falsely accused for stealing a car, although he is incapable of driving one and has no lawyers to defend his case:

"They said – they still *say* – stole a car. Man, I can't even *drive* a car, and I tried to make my lawyer – but he was really *their* lawyer, dig, he worked for the city – prove that, but he didn't. And, anyway, I wasn't in no car when they picked me up. But I had a little grass on me. I was on my stoop. And so they come and picked me up, like that, you know, it was about midnight, and they locked me up and then the next morning they put me in the lineup and somebody said it was *me* stole the car – that car I ain't seen yet. And so – you know – since I had that weed on me, they had me anyhow and so they said if I would plead guilty they'd give me a lighter sentence. If I *didn't* plead guilty, they'd throw me the book. Well" – he sips his beer again – "I was alone, baby, wasn't nobody, and so I entered the guilty plea. Two years!" He leans forward, staring at Fonny. "But, then, it sounded a whole lot better than the marijuana charge." He leans back and laughs and sips his beer and looks up at Fonny. "It wasn't I let them fuck over me because I was scared and dumb and I'm sorry now." He is silent. Then, "Two years!" (102)

Actually, Daniel is victim of blackmail by the American police who force him to plead guilty if he wants to have a lighter sentence, but unfortunately the fact that he was caught with "weed" by the police when he was arrested did not help him. Fonny and Daniel are lynched both physically and psychologically. Like Fonny, Daniel is a victim of false charges and is vulnerable because he is black. He is alone against the world. Baldwin insists on the feeling of loneliness in the passage. He shows the conflict between the individual and society in order to dramatize the victimization of Daniel Carty through the use of the third-person plural: "they", versus the first-person singular: "I". We can see that the accusation is also based on liars and false charges. Baldwin's use of indefinite pronouns, "they," "somebody" shows how much Daniel is completely rejected by white people, contrary to Fonny who has at least, the support of his white lawyer Hayward. It shows that Baldwin does not completely condemn white people and that interracial solidarity is possible as we mentioned earlier in the analysis. Daniel is literally alone, lives with his mother and has no support. Therefore, he is incapable to build a new sense of self because of the lack of love. Baldwin dramatizes Daniel, who is depicted as a helpless and vulnerable character. In addition, Baldwin portrays Daniel as more

vulnerable than Fonny to insist on the importance of love and the absence of love in one's plight.

Baldwin attempts to demonstrate how false narratives are meant to maintain racial stereotypes and to assert racial and gender oppressions as well as white supremacy. White supremacy seeks to show that black men are not men, they are savages and that the colour of their skins is associated with the evil. Both Fonny and Daniel are victims of the stereotypical images that have been placed on them. They perpetuate the stereotypes that black men are criminals, thieves and rapists. Through Tish's voice, Baldwin satirizes white people by turning them into caricatures. He also intends to rewrite the truth about the African American community by exposing racial and gender oppressions in America. Throughout the novel, Clementine seems to be a reliable narrator as her voice appears as evidence that prove that Fonny and Daniel are innocent. Although these two men are discriminated against because of their race, although they are dehumanized and demasculinized, Baldwin "rehumanizes" them through black solidarity and friendship.

#### **b) Daniel and Fonny as Stereotypical Victims**

This section attempts to demonstrate how prison is used as a metaphor by James Baldwin. Prisons appear as sites that maintain racial divisions and racial and sexual discriminations, and that dehumanize black men. We will see how Baldwin uses fiction to rewrite black male humanity through intra-ethnic solidarity and black friendship.

Prisons and prison experience are recurrent themes in James Baldwin's essays and fictions but also in Baldwin's life. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Richard had been falsely imprisoned and beaten up. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's been gone* (1968), Caleb, Leo's brother is also falsely accused and imprisoned. In *Just Above My Head*, Red a drug addict, is sent to prison several times. Baldwin also directed a play entitled *Fortune and Men's eyes* which deal with prison experience, through the character of Smitty who has been sent to prison for marijuana possession.

Baldwin makes the satire of a racist society which unfairly sent African American people to prisons. Trudier Harris explains that "one of the most striking representations of prison experience in African American literature is James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* in which a young black man is erroneously jailed for rape."<sup>98</sup>David Leeming,

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<sup>98</sup> Trudier Harris. "The Necessary Binding Prison Experiences in Three August Wilson Plays." *South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002. p.138.

prominent scholar, wrote a biography of James Baldwin calls *If Beale Street Could Talk* Baldwin's "prison parable, a fictionalization of his prison concerns during the 1968-69 period and the natural illustration and culmination of his long meditation on psychological emotion, and intellectual imprisonment."<sup>99</sup>

Tish compares prison to the inferno (111). Prison becomes the microcosm of American society. Fonny and Daniel are both, black male prisoners who suffer from racial and sexual oppression. Baldwin connects prison with the notions of "race", "gender" and "sexuality".

Moreover, Baldwin describes the bad conditions in which African American prisoners live. The cells are crowded and tiny: Daniel, Fonny's friend and a former prisoner declares that he was in "a little cell with about four or five cats, they was just nodding and farting" (107). There is no hygiene, the toilet "does not work very well" (178).

In addition, Baldwin insists on the psychological and physical terror of black prisoners. Baldwin explains that discriminations damage the black character's sense of self. Indeed, the reader can see a progression in the character's despair in prison. Prison experience is described as a mental and a physical torture for the characters. Fonny gets mad because of his situation. Throughout the novel, as Fonny is confined in prison, the reader notices that he becomes more and more insane. His frustration and insanity are expressed through rhetorical questions: "listen to what?", "you want me to die here?", "you know what's happening to me, to me, in here?" (110). Baldwin aims at dramatizing Fonny's condition in prison. In his cell Fonny questions his own sanity: "things are happening inside me that I don't really understand, like I'm beginning to see things I never saw before" (183).

Baldwin explains how prison experience terrorizes the black characters, essentially Daniel, and makes it difficult for them to rebuild their identity and humanity. Daniel is crying: tears scream down his face." (103) he is "terrified of freedom" (106). Daniel is trapped in a tragic destiny. He keeps repeating that his prison experience "was bad. Very bad and it's bad now." (163). He feels lonely and desperate.

Loneliness also dehumanizes the characters. Daniel said: "I was alone baby, wasn't nobody" (102). Fonny also loses his humanity in prison as if he was an inert being. Baldwin compares Fonny's mind to an empty shell. The author shows through prison

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<sup>99</sup> James Leeming. "If Beale Street Could Talk". *James Baldwin: A Biography*, New York: Arcade, 2015.

experience that Fonny is not a man yet: “I’m not as tough as I thought I was. I’m younger than I thought I was. But I’ll get it together.” (183) Yet, Fonny’s self, toughens. Indeed, prison experience enables Fonny accepts his social position: “Now, Fonny knows why he is here\_ why he is where he is now, he dares to look around him.” (191) Fonny is aware of his condition in prison. Baldwin uses prisons as metaphors that destroys the black male characters’ masculinity.

However, the writer reveals the importance of otherness in the reconstruction of black identity and humanity. Although Fonny and Daniel are dehumanized in prison, Baldwin reconstructs their humanity through love and friendship. Fonny survives in prison thanks to the love he has for Clementine and for his sculptures: “I got my wood and stone and I got Tish. If I lose them, I’m lost” (101). Baldwin insists on love and artistic creation in the development of identity.

Friendship becomes crucial for the development of identity in Baldwin’s fiction. What saved Daniel from loneliness and despair in the American society is his friendship with Fonny. The author advocates black male solidarity:

For Baldwin, the bonding of males and for African American males in particular is a natural process towards a shared sense of unity and fraternity, but one whose development has been inhibited, if not together thwarted, by society’s sexism, realism, and unrealistic expectations for men. Thus, Baldwin advocates, strongly in many places, dangerously in others, that men must be allowed to bond in ways that men themselves deem necessary and beneficial fear of criticism and without being made to feel guilty or less masculine for needing or wanting male companionship, male support, and male acceptance.<sup>100</sup>

James Baldwin attempts to rewrite black masculinity through black male bonding and friendship. In *Beale Street*, Clementine reveals: “And I could not be indifferent to Daniel because I realized, from Fonny's face, how marvelous it was for him to have scooped up, miraculously, from the swamp waters of his past, a friend” (99). Baldwin’s fictional construction of Daniel may be a reference to the prophet Daniel in the Bible as their stories are very similar. Daniel (in the Bible) who was thrown to the lion’s den and has been saved by god. Baldwin recreates this biblical image the novel because Fonny saves and protects Daniel from the American society by offering him hospitality. It is worth adding that Fonny and Clementine’s apartment is compared to a safe place, “where no one can reach us” (105).

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Q Miller. *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2000. p.216

Black male union between Fonny and Daniel is symbolic of the need for support to fight against prejudices. Fonny and Clementine also act like father and mother figures for Daniel, trying to recomfort him:

Fonny: chews on the rib, and watches me: and, in complete silence, without moving a muscle, we are laughing with each other. We are laughing for many reasons. We are together somewhere where no one can reach us, touch us, joined. We are happy, even, that we have food enough for Daniel, who eats peacefully, not knowing that we are laughing, but sensing that something wonderful has happened to us, which means that wonderful things happen, and that maybe something wonderful will happen to *him*. It's wonderful, anyway, to be able to help a person to have that feeling (105).

Although Baldwin shows in his fiction how African Americans reconstruct their sense of self as individuals, he also urges them to rebuild their black identity as a community. The use of the pronoun “we” but also the anaphors such as “we are” (repeated three times) insist on the idea of community and black alliance and solidarity in contrast with “to him” and “a person” translating individualism.

Baldwin demonstrates how Fonny and Daniel reconstruct their racial and gender identity. Daniel and Fonny are victimized as black men, yet, they manage to overthrow the stereotypes that have been placed on them thanks to love and friendship that they establish between each other. Baldwin insists on the importance of the other in the construction of the self. On the one hand, Fonny is saved in the novel thanks to his pregnant future wife Tish and his sculptures. On the other hand, Daniel is pictured as a tragic character because he is alone. Baldwin shows that it is much more difficult to survive in the American society when you are black and alone. However, although Daniel is having no support in the American society, he seeks to reconstruct his identity and masculinity through his friendship with Fonny and Clementine.

James Baldwin exposes the intersection of race relations and sexuality, he uses it as an instrument of power which affects the characters' identities, but he also shows that sexuality can be a way for the characters to discover themselves and the other.

## **2) Baldwin's Discourse on Sexuality**

### **a) Hetero- and Homosexual Rapes**

This section shows how James Baldwin uses rape as a metaphor of racial and sexual power, how rape destroys and transforms the characters' sense of self and is used for both racial and sexual oppressions.



Sexuality and the question of sexual identity have been the major concerns for James Baldwin because for him, the question of race and gender in America cannot be separated from the question of sexuality: “The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.”<sup>101</sup> In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, James Baldwin uses sexuality as a trope for both gender and racial oppression. Collins explains how sexuality appears as a site for intersectionality:

Sexuality can be conceptualized as a freestanding system of oppression of race, class, nation, and gender, as well as part of each of these distinctive systems of oppressions. A third approach views sexuality as one important social location that joins these distinctive systems of oppressions. This conceptualization views sexuality as conceptual glue that binds intersecting oppressions together. Stated differently, intersecting oppressions share certain core features. Manipulating and regulating the sexualities of diverse groups constitutes one such shared feature or site of intersectionality.<sup>102</sup>

As Baldwin’s characters evolve in an oppressive and racist system, sexuality appears as a form of power. Baldwin deals with varied forms of sexual relationships including rapes whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. Rape was “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression”<sup>103</sup>, says Collins. She explains that “rape is in fact a product of highly conflictual and stylistically varied discourses that conflate matters of race, class, and nationhood with issues of gender and sexuality.”<sup>104</sup>

Michel Foucault showed that sexuality and power are linked, because a society needs to regulate sexuality through repression to maintain a social order. He explains that:

“Discourse (about sexuality) can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmit and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”<sup>105</sup>

Indeed, in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, rape is used as a form of power relation aiming at destroying the characters’ identities whether there are male and female and controlling their bodies. Although Baldwin includes sexual scenes in the novel, the rapes are not described, probably because he does not want to shock his readers and because his fiction is much more focused on a message of love. However, rape is at the core of

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<sup>101</sup> “James Baldwin: The Last Interviews”: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/02/24/james-baldwin-the-last-interviews/>

<sup>102</sup> Patricia H Collins. op.cit: p. 134-135.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p.147.

<sup>104</sup> Sabine Sielke. *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*, 2009. p.8.

<sup>105</sup> Michel Foucault. “The Deployment of Sexuality”, *The History of Sexuality*. 1978 p.101:

[http://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/foucault\\_sexuality\\_24grammata.com\\_.pdf](http://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/foucault_sexuality_24grammata.com_.pdf)



Baldwin's plot. Male and female characters are victims of rapes. Baldwin shows that rape is used as an instrument for asserting racial and gender oppression but also to justify racial and gender stereotypes. In *Beale Street*, rape is another form of violence that dehumanizes the victims. One may take into consideration the fact that rape is another example of male domination towards the female characters but also the male characters. Baldwin writes about the experience of the raped victim and his/her struggle to reconstruct their identity.

Victoria, Clementine on one side, Fonny and Daniel on the other side, are the "victims" of rape in Baldwin's fiction but in different ways. Victoria Rogers, the raped victim, is "a Puerto Rican woman who suffers from the aftereffects on the rape" (92). Although Fonny has not raped Victoria, it is important to reveal that she has been raped by a black man. It is an act of sexual violence of a man on a woman. Baldwin continues to show how African Americans and Latinos have been reduced to sexual objects and have been dehumanized and manipulated in the American society. Bell forces Victoria to accuse Fonny because he is black. But at the same time, testifying against Fonny enables her to reconstruct her identity and to move on:

"Will you listen to me? Please? Of course, she's *lying*. We know she's lying. But – *she's* – not – *lying*. As far as she's concerned, Fonny raped her and that's that, and now she hasn't got to deal with it anymore. It's over. For her. If she changes her testimony, she'll go mad. Or become another woman. And you know how often people go mad, and how rarely they change. (119)

Baldwin shows how rape experience transforms the self. Indeed, Victoria becomes "another woman" after being raped. She returns to Puerto Rico. Her return is symbolical as she falls into madness after a miscarriage. Baldwin shows how Victoria struggles to emancipate herself in the American society. She is Puerto Rican, a prostitute, a raped victim, she lost her unborn child and gets mad. Baldwin shows how the intersection of race, ethnicity, class and gender contributes to racial and gender oppressions and can also destroy women victims of rape because of the stereotypical images of black and Latinos women as sexual objects. Collins declares that: "Rape became the specific act of sexual violence forced on black women, with the myth of the black prostitute as its ideological justification."<sup>106</sup>

Clementine also experiments sexual harassment. Her confrontation with officer Bell is described as "a mental rape". Clementine describes Bell's look as a form of rape: "It was seduction which contained the promise of rape. It was rape which promised

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<sup>106</sup> Op. cit. p.147.

debasement and revenge: on both sides” (173). Contrary to Victoria Rogers, Clementine is not a rape victim. Although she is powerless towards Bell’s mental rape, she resists to it: “I wanted to get close to him, to enter into him, to open up that face and change it and destroy it, descend into the slime with him. Then, we would both be free: I could almost hear the singing” (173). Baldwin urges women to act and rebel against rapists. On the other side, Baldwin describes Victoria as a rape victim who is powerless and on the other side, Clementine rebels. This rebellion is a symbolic act of freedom and emancipation. By resisting to Bell, Clementine asserts her identity and erases the stereotypical image of the black Jezebel placed on her.

What is more, it is worth adding that rape is silenced by the characters. Though Clementine and Victoria experience two different kinds of rape, they remain silent or at least they do not want to speak about it. When Sharon questions Victoria about the rape, she does not answer, or appears to be on the defensive. When Sharon asks: “Is this the man who raped you?” (167), Victoria does not reply, Sharon adds: “One thing I can tell, lady – you ain't never been raped.” She looks down at the photograph, briefly, then up at Sharon, briefly. “It looks like him. But he wasn't laughing” (167). Indeed, the dialogue between Sharon and Victoria, reinforces Victoria’s victimization and powerlessness but also worsens her trauma as she falls into madness.

When Clementine is victim of sexual harassments by Officer Bell at the end of part one of the novel, she declares: “I never told Fonny about it.” (174). Indeed, silence in the novel reveals another issue. Baldwin explains that rape and sexual violence have been legitimized in America and have justified racial and gender oppressions on women. It also shows that both female characters think that they are guilty of their own rape. Tish asks her sister:

“Do you think she was really raped?” to which her sister replies, “... that question has no bearing on anything. As far as our situation is concerned, baby, she was raped.... I think, in fact, she was raped and that she has absolutely no idea who did it.... She'd recognize him if he raped her again. But then it would no longer be rape. If you see what I mean. (118)

Because they have integrated the Jezebel stereotype, women are seen by men but also consider themselves as prostitutes and breeders. This is the reason why Clementine is called “Jezebel” in the novel and questions the act of prostitution.

Moreover, one must highlight the fact that women are not the only victims of rapes. In prison, Daniel and Fonny experience homosexual rape. They are raped by other men

because of the sexualized image placed on them. Black men are considered as phallic symbols and sexual beasts.

As prison experience dehumanizes the male characters, rape experience in prison becomes a dehumanizing and humiliating act. As for Victoria, rape experience transforms Daniel's personality:

On the night that Fonny was arrested, Daniel was at the house. He was a little drunk. He was crying. He was talking, again, about his time in prison. He had seen nine men rape one boy: and he had been raped. He would never, never, never again be the Daniel he had been. Fonny held him, held him up just before he fell. I went to make the coffee (174).

James Baldwin shows that rape is not only a matter of sex as it affects the male character's masculinity, it is above all a matter of power. Because they are black men, Daniel and Fonny are scapegoats and are the victims of lynching. In this passage, Daniel is both spectator and victim of the rape, he is then portrayed as a powerless black man. Clementine insists on the fact that rape transforms the individual: "he would never, never, never again be the Daniel he had been" (174). Baldwin explains how rape destroys black men masculinity and how it is difficult for the characters to reconstruct their identities after experiencing rape. Daniel is alone, victimized and has no future in the American society. Baldwin shows how sex is an instrument of domination. By raping Daniel, white men assert their masculinity.

On the contrary, Fonny rebels against the system by refusing to be raped:

He is placed in solitary for refusing to be raped. He loses a tooth, again, and almost loses an eye. Something hardens in him, something changes forever, his tears freeze in his belly. But he has leaped from the promontory of despair. He is fighting for his life. He sees his baby's face before him, he has an appointment he must keep, and he will be here, he swears it, sitting in the shit, sweating and stinking, when the baby gets here. (192)

In both passages, Daniel and Fonny are crying. Through their cries, they are given humanity. Rape experience also transforms Fonny's self but contrary to Daniel this transformation is "positive". Baldwin explains that Fonny prefers being physically mistreated rather by being raped because he knows how degrading and humiliating rape is for a man. Although Fonny experiences a physical transformation because he has been beaten in prison (he loses a tooth, and almost an eye), violence toughens and strengthens his sense of self. Contrary to Daniel, "Fonny is fighting for his life" (192). This passage can be related to the blues, as it conveys the message that blues songs advocate: the ideas of never giving up, of moving on and hoping for a better life. This passage is very optimistic as Fonny is fighting for his baby. Fonny resists because he wants to be with

Clementine and his baby. The baby symbolizes Fonny's hope for a better life and in a better place. It also symbolizes freedom and rebirth.

Rape is a form of sexual violence to justify and legitimize racial and gender oppressions and stereotypes. Baldwin plays with these stereotypical images to expose and denounce the way the disinherited are perceived in America.

Victoria and Daniel are trapped as tragic victims. However, Fonny and Clementine manage to assert their identities through the love they share for one another, through resistance and hope, Baldwin shows how the weaker manage to turn the situation around through a love message. Clementine and Fonny's actions are self-willed, it means that they have the capacity to act and resist. They are free.

The author adds a moral dimension to his novel, explaining that love, hope and resistance can solve everything. Indeed, this moral message is very specific of African American literary and oral tradition of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Folktales were stories passed on orally with a lesson to be learned. These stories also illustrate a reversal of power. Trisker tales featuring Brer Rabbit and John the Slave who embody wit, intelligence, are tools for resistance and survival. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, love is the main weapon to fight against oppression and to survive. Baldwin shows how sexuality is used as a form of power in multiracial society. However, sexuality is not only a matter of power for the writer. It is also a form of love, of self-assertion, of self-discovery and discovery of the other.

## **b) Sex versus Love**

This section shows how through sexuality the characters manage to reconstruct their identity. Baldwin shows the intersections between sexuality, race and gender relation.

*If Beale Street Could Talk* is a love story. Baldwin deals with different types of love relationships in this fiction. Sexual act is one of the forms of love in the novel. It has been said that the novel was banned because it contains explicit sex scenes that shocked the audience.<sup>107</sup>

However, the sexual acts that are depicted in the novel show the gender relation between the male and female characters. The only sexual acts which are described in the

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<sup>107</sup> Femi Lewis. "Banned Books by African-American Authors." ThoughtCo, November 02, 2017. Retrieved on 26 July 2018: <https://www.thoughtco.com/banned-books-by-african-american-authors-45170>

novel are the one which involve Alice Hunt and Frank, Clementine and Fonny. In both sexual scenes, Alice Hunt and Clementine are submissive, they accept male sexual domination. There are only references to the male sex and phallic symbols which is considered as the “stronger sex” whereas the female sex is not mentioned to highlight male power and female submission.

Moreover, sexual acts in *Beale Street* are violent as if rapes were depicted. Indeed, violence is exposed as an instrument of power in society but also within the family. Baldwin shows how men need to dominate their wives to assert their masculinity.

In his description of the sexual act between Alice and Frank, Baldwin uses verbal violence: “bitch” (17), “black bitch” (17) and physical violence: “he slap her, hard, loud” (17). The sexual act between Fonny and Clementine is also violent:

I held on to him, in an agony; there was nothing else in the world to hold on to; I held him by his nappy hair. I could not tell if he moaned or if I moaned. It hurt, it hurt, it didn't hurt. It was a strange weight, a presence coming into me – into a me I had not known was there. I almost screamed, I started to cry: it hurt. It didn't hurt. Something began, unknown. His tongue, his teeth on my breasts, hurt. I wanted to throw him off, I held him tighter and still he moved and moved and moved. I had not known there was so much of him. I screamed and cried against his shoulder (79).

Indeed, during the sexual act, Clementine literally suffers. (“agony” “moaned”, “hurt”, “screamed”, “cried”). In both cases, the female characters are submissive. Their bodies become a site for black male domination. Through these acts, Baldwin may continue to show the stereotypical images that black men and women have in the society. Black men continue to be considered as sexual beast and women continue to be turned into sexual objects or Jezebel in America. However, the sexual act between Clementine and Fonny is paradoxical. It shows violence and the fact that Clementine accepts this “rape”. She says: “it hurt. It didn't hurt” or “I wanted to throw him off, I held him tighter”. She compares her first time to the fact of “being hit by a truck.” (80) But surprisingly, she describes this act as “the most beautiful thing that ever happen to her” (80). The sexual act is ambivalent as it reflects both violence, pain and joy. It is also the moment when Clementine loses her virginity which means that she is becoming a woman.

However, despite the fact that the sexual act illustrates black male control on women in the novel, one may take into consideration the fact that sexuality is not only a question of power relation (race and gender relations). Baldwin explains that “sex is about love and communion rather than the anatomy of the people.”<sup>108</sup> Sexuality is a part of the

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<sup>108</sup> Ben Kiely. “Enabling the Kaleidoscope : Blurring Sexual Aim and Destination in James Baldwin’s *Another Country*”, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* [En ligne], Écrivains, écritures, Hommage à James Baldwin (Dossier par Benoît Depardieu), 01 janvier 2005.

extended metaphor of love used by James Baldwin in the novel. The expression “make love” is repeated several times in the novel.

Sex reveals the love between Fonny and Clementine. When she asks Fonny if his parents ever made love together, he answers: “Yeah but not like you and me.” (15) It reveals that the sexual act between Frank and Alice is not based on love contrary Clementine’s and Fonny’s one. Their sexual intercourses are sacralised by James Baldwin and described in a poetic manner. Through the sexual act between Clementine and Fonny, Baldwin seeks to demonstrate that black love exists.

The writer also shows how sexuality can be related to the question of identity. Baldwin’s depiction of heterosexual relationship shows the importance of man/woman sexual relationship, the discovery of the body and the discovery of the other in the construction of identity: “We were a part of each other, flesh of each other's flesh – which meant that we so took each other for granted that we never thought of the flesh. He had legs, and I had legs – that wasn't all we knew but that was all we used. They brought us up the stairs and down the stairs and, always, to each other” (51). This quotation illustrates the love and communion between Clementine and Fonny.

To become a woman, Clementine needs Fonny and Fonny needs Clementine to become a man. In that sense, *If Beale Street Could Talk* can be read as a coming-of-age novel, as the protagonists, lose their innocence, grow from childhood to adulthood, from naivety to maturity. It reveals the physical and psychological growth of both protagonists. At the beginning of the novel, Clementine and Fonny are young, they are adolescents: Clementine says, “I was not yet a woman.” (58) Fonny is “is not a man yet,” said Ernestine but “he’s going to become man” (88).

Indeed, through love and sexuality, they become adults. Through her awareness of Fonny’s body, Clementine sees that she exists as a woman: “It’s astounding the first time you realize that a stranger has a body – the realization that he has a body makes him a stranger. It means that you have a body, too. You will live with this forever, and it will spell out the language of your life” (52). The novel insists on gender differences.

Thus, sexuality becomes a symbol of transformation as Fonny and mainly Clementine learn how to become a man and a woman through the discovery of their bodies. As young people they experiment sexuality and are becoming more mature throughout the novel. Baldwin shows how through sexual experiences the characters lose their innocence and grow in maturity in an attempt to assert their identity.

Symbolically enough, Fonny experiments masturbation in prison, which represents his growth as a man:

He drags on the cigarette. His prick hardens. Absently, he strokes it, through his shorts; it is his only friend. He clenches his teeth, and resists, but he is young, and he is lonely, he is alone. He strokes himself gently, as though in prayer, closing his eyes. His rigid sex responds, burning, and Fonny sighs, dragging on the cigarette again. He pauses, but his hand will not be still – cannot be still. He catches his lower lip in his teeth, wishing – but the hand will not be still. He lifts himself out of his shorts and pulls the blanket up to his chin. The hand will not be still, it tightens, it tightens, moving faster, and Fonny sinks and rises. Oh. He tries to think of no one, he tries not to think of me, he does not wish me to have any connection with this cell, or with this act. Oh. And he turns, rising, writhing, his belly beginning to shake. Oh: and great tears gather behind his eyes. He does not want it to end. It must end. Oh. Oh; Oh. He drops his cigarette on the stone floor, he surrenders totally, he pretends that human arms are holding him, he moans, he nearly screams, his thickening, burning sex causes him to arch his back, and his limbs stiffen. Oh. He does not want it to end. It must end. He moans. It is unbelievable. His sex trickles, spurts, explodes, all over his hand and his belly and his balls, he sighs; after a long moment he opens his eyes and the cell comes crashing down on him, steel and stone, making him know he is alone (179-180).

This passage focuses on Fonny's intimacy in prison. Indeed, it illustrates masturbation as a sign of frustration for a black male prisoner. Baldwin dramatizes Fonny's loneliness and despair through the use of repetitions: "lonely", "he is alone", "he is alone". It shows Fonny's despair who is confined in a cell between "steel and stone". Baldwin shows how loneliness can affect the self through the way he syntactically constructs this passage. The contradictions and repetitions contribute to give an impression of chaos. Masturbation is an ambivalent act for James Baldwin as it reveals both Fonny's frustration, "his hand will not be still- cannot be still" and his male sexual desire and pleasure, expressed through the use of the verb "to burn": "burning, burning sex". The lexical field of the body "teeth", "eyes", "sex", "hand", "belly", "balls", "lower lip" also illustrates Fonny's male sexual desire and the discovery of his body and sexuality.

The awakening of his sexuality aims at reinforcing Fonny's personal, psychological and spiritual growth. Fonny discovers his sexuality by experiencing it. One must remind that Fonny is not a man yet. He is still a teenager. Baldwin insists on the fact that Fonny is young and vulnerable. Thus, masturbation in prison toughens his sense of self. It also shows and accelerates Fonny's progression towards manhood.

This passage may remind the reader of a passage in Baldwin's bildungsroman and autobiography *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, when John Grimes the protagonist of the novel, a fourteen years old boy, experiences puberty when he masturbates in a bathroom at school thinking of boys older than him. However, although Baldwin rewrites the masturbation scene in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, both scenes have not the same meaning. In fact, Field Douglas explains that "in contrast to John Grimes in *Go Tell it*, who feels



shame at his onanism and sexual dreams, Baldwin pictures Fonny masturbating alone in prison but full of love, concentrating ‘as though in prayer.’”<sup>109</sup> Contrary, to John who refuses to accept his homosexual desires, Fonny accepts his condition in prison through sexuality. John feels guilty for his act which he considers to be a sin and reveals his homosexual desire, which pushes him to move away from religion. On the contrary, Fonny “tries not to think of” [Clementine] and does not want her “to have any connection in this cell, or in this act.” Indeed, Fonny is aware that his act is impure and the fact of associating Clementine to masturbation would reduce her to an instrument or a sexual object.

Baldwin depicts Fonny’s sexual experience in his cell as a form of love even though it is a temporary solitary act: “Fonny strokes himself gently, as though in prayer, closing his eyes.” The author of *Beale Street* explains that Fonny’s masturbation may be interpreted as a spiritual act where Fonny is in communion with his body. Baldwin compares Fonny’s sex to a friend to show how a man needs sexuality, love and friendship for the development of his identity.

The writer describes a short moment of ecstasy, of trance during which Fonny’s self is transformed. His transformation is progressive and reveals different feelings and emotions he experiences in his cell: “he moans, he screams,” he feels pain and it is through these different experiences that Fonny will be able to grow psychologically, moving from adolescence to adulthood and fatherhood. Furthermore, masturbation shows how Fonny attempts as a man, to resist and survive in prison.

The end of this passage marks the end of Fonny’s “dream” as he “opens his eyes and realizes that the cell “comes crashing down on him, steel and stone making him that he is alone.” By opening his eyes, Fonny goes back to reality, to the reality of a young black prisoner who experiences solitary confinement.

In the same way, Clementine moves from childhood and naivety to innocence, maturity and adulthood. She is innocent at the beginning:

And it was absolutely astonishing to me to realize that I was a virgin. I really was. I suddenly wondered how. I wondered why. But it was because I had always, without ever thinking about it, known that I would spend my life with Fonny. It simply had not entered my mind that my life could do anything else. This meant that I was not merely a virgin; I was still a child. (53)

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<sup>109</sup> Douglas Field. “Pentecostalism and All that Jazz: Tracing James Baldwin’s religion. *Literature and Theology*, Vol 22. No. 4, December 2008, p.451-452: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.870.7360&rep=rep1&type=pdf>



Baldwin associates virginity with innocence. She is compared to the Virgin Mary in the epigraph. But as the narrative progresses, Clementine is becoming more mature and loses her innocence:

“The baby was conceived that night. I know it. I know it from the way Fonny touched me, held me, entered me. I had never been so open before. And when he started to pull out, I would not let him, I held on to him as tightly as I could, crying and moaning and shaking with him, and felt life, life, his life, inundating me, entrusting itself to me.” (133)

Tish loses her innocence through the act of penetration. Sexuality is sacralised by James Baldwin as it leads to procreation, “the baby was conceived that night.” Clementine experiments heterosexuality in order to build her femininity. Her femininity is also characterized through her physical change. Indeed, throughout the novel Clementine’s body transforms as she is becoming more feminine: “I have never had breasts, or a behind, but I am beginning to have them now” (159).

Her transformation is also psychological as she evolves throughout the novel, she was first a naïve character, a child but progressively gains in maturity. At the beginning of the novel, James Baldwin describes Tish’s naivety with humor when Fonny, Clementine, Geneva and Daniel (two childhood friends) are involved into a fight. Clementine hurt Fonny and thought that she killed him or that Fonny got the lockjaw (11). However, she gradually understands that the world in which she lives is based on racial and sexual stereotypes. Clementine is constantly in quest of meaning about herself and about America: “it would make sense” (3), “I guess that makes sense too” (3), “I’m beginning to think that everything that happens makes sense” (3). Through sexuality, Clementine manages to reach that meaning because she realizes that she is becoming a woman but also a mother. Besides, Baldwin originally wanted to divide his novel into nine chapters, each one representing one month of Clementine’s pregnancy<sup>110</sup> to show Tish’s evolution as a future mother. Eventually, although he divided the novel into two parts, it still shows Clementine’s evolution from childhood to womanhood and motherhood. As noted by Alicia Trupe: “As she adjusts to pregnancy and develops her ability to endure emotional strain, she reviews the event that leads to Fonny’s present situation, in the process giving the reader a detailed picture of Black life in 1960s-1970s Harlem.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt, *Conversations with James Baldwin*, Miss: Univ. of Mississippi, 1996. p.109.

<sup>111</sup> Alicia Trupe. “Guilty or Innocent”. *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature*, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006. p.99.

The two protagonists do experience and feel different emotions throughout *If Beale Street Could Talk*: through pain and prison experience for Fonny, and pregnancy for Clementine, the two protagonists build their identity as adults in the American society. The characters move from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to maturity and build their sexual identity through the discovery of sexuality whether individually or with the other.

## CONCLUSION

Through the use of fiction, Baldwin gives a detailed picture of American society in the seventies. Despite the end of racial segregation, inequalities still persist, racist and sexist mentalities have not changed. Intersectionality constitutes the basis of his work as one cannot speak of race without dealing with gender and sexuality. Race, gender and sexuality are social constructions. For James Baldwin, these notions have been shaped by white American society to categorize and divide people.

*If Beale Street Could Talk* is constructed on a Manichean and binary structure. The two families are opposed. Baldwin shows the consequence of love and the absence of love in the construction of identity. He creates characters that attempt to reconstruct their identity because of stereotypes placed on them. Some manage and some fail.

James Baldwin shows how American society perpetuated racial and sexual stereotypes on black men and women in order to control them. Stereotype is at the basis of Baldwin's fiction. Racial and sexual stereotypes date back from colonialism after slavery and are still valid in seventies America. Baldwin's use of realism aims at giving an authentic portrayal of America in the seventies where the rate of crime, criminality and violence explode, drugs, prostitution, racial and sexual injustices and social hierarchy still exist despite the end of racial segregation. America is a predominantly white patriarchal society. In such an environment, African American people are trapped in a tragic destiny because they are the objects of racial and gender oppressions. Intersectionality is present in the black family, in society and in prison.

In chapter one, we showed how black mothers are either seen as mammies, or Jezebels and black fathers as sexual beasts and Mandingoes. Baldwin's fiction is constructed on a binary scheme to show the role of black mothers and fathers and the impacts of these stereotypes have on their roles in the black family. Fonny is castrated by his mother Alice and seeks to get back his identity through the Rivers family. However, even though Sharon, Ernestine and Clementine are "mammy figures," they managed to remove these stereotypical images placed on them because they are women of action and are motivated by love, resistance and fight. Black fathers need to assert their masculinity in the families by acting like patriarchs in the house and with their wives, because they are castrated by the society thus making them powerless.

In chapter two, we demonstrated that James Baldwin wrote the satire of the

American society. In our analysis, we read *Beale Street* as a new form of protest novel as the writer adds a psychological dimension to his characters by showing how they respond to racism. America is described as both a racist and sexist society. American society also creates stereotypical images as black women as prostitutes and black men as criminals in order to maintain the myth of white male supremacy and justify racial and gender oppressions. Whiteness and blackness are social constructions aiming at perpetuating categorizations and racial and sexual stereotypes within the American society. Non-white people represent the “other”. Baldwin shows that being a black woman in America implies to be reduced to sexual objects, prostitutes or lesbians. Racism and Sexism are represented through Officer Bell who is also the stereotype of the white male racist and sexist policeman and is ridiculed by James Baldwin. African Americans and Latinos are seen as “others” in the American society because of their ethnic difference, but they share a common fate.

In chapter three, our analysis enables us to conclude that prison experiences affect Fonny and Daniel’s identities and dehumanize them. Black prisoners are victims of the mechanism of the American judicial system. They are reduced to the stereotypical image of black criminals and are objects of racial and sexual discriminations.

In Baldwin’s fiction, rape becomes a form of sexual lynching and a form of white power assertion. Baldwin depicts the experience of the raped victims and shows how it is difficult to reconstruct oneself in the society when one is dehumanized. However, one must not forget that *If Beale Street Could Talk* remains a love story. Love for Baldwin can conquer everything. Love can fight racial and sexual discriminations and violence in America. Love is declined in all its forms in the novel moving from heterosexual love, familial love to friendship and solidarity. These relationships with the other enable the characters to reconstruct their identity. Otherness is a key concept on James Baldwin’s work, and it is through the experience with the other that the characters survive because the other is the same. Baldwin still shows the consequence of love and the absence of love in the construction of one’s identity. It is through the experience with the other that the characters survive in the novel because the other becomes the same.

While Fonny survives as man in America thanks to the love he received from the Reivers, Frank commits suicide and Daniel are desperate to rebuild his future. The Rivers are the embodiment of love and resistance whereas the Hunts embody hatred.

When he wrote *If Beale Street Could Talk*, James Baldwin declared in an

“unpublished television interview”: “certain battles I’ve been fighting in myself are beginning to end.”<sup>112</sup> It shows that he started to accept the identity he had repressed in the past.

*Remember this house*<sup>113</sup> is the title of James Baldwin’s unfinished manuscript. It narrates the successive assassinations of his three friends Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers and Malcom X. *Remember this house* is not only a tribute to these political leaders. The word “re-member” is interestingly used as it refers to what James Baldwin attempted to do throughout his life. First, Baldwin was attempting to reconstruct his identity as a man liberated from all the oppressions he suffered from. Re-member represents also Baldwin’s will to remember America as a united nation and a democracy and the possibility of a cohesive multi-ethnic America. Katharine Lawrence Balfour explains that “anyone interested in the possibility of multiracial democracy have much to learn from the writings of James Baldwin [...] Baldwin plumbs his own history for clues to the possibility of democracy.”<sup>114</sup> In *Beale Street* the possibility of democracy is expressed through the possibility of love between two African Americans, Clementine and Fonny, between members of a black family, through black sexuality through which the characters discover their bodies and themselves, but particularly through the possibility of friendship and human ties with other ethnic groups.

Friendship, and solidarity across race and gender are also important. Baldwin shows that Black and White can coexist in America. Latinos and African Americans need inter-ethnic alliance to build a community. He also advocates intra-ethnic relationship expressed through the relationship between Fonny, Clementine and Daniel.

This analysis shed light on the author James Baldwin which was known in France but who tends to be forgotten, although his books were published and translated, and studied by French scholars such as Benoit Depardieu, who wrote a biography on James Baldwin,<sup>115</sup> a thesis, and several articles. France was a country for which James Baldwin had a great admiration, where he gave several interviews and he died there. Symbolically, he died in a place where he is finally free. *If Beale Street Could Talk* has not been studied

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<sup>112</sup> Daryl Cumber Dance. "James Baldwin." In *Black American Writers: Bibliographical Essays*, edited by M. Thomas Inge, Maurice Duke, and Jackson R. Bryer, 73-120. Vol. 2. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978. p.81.

<sup>113</sup> James Baldwin. *Remember this House*.

<sup>114</sup> Lawrie Balfour. *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*. Ithaca (N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 2001. p.6.

<sup>115</sup> Benoît Depardieu. *James Baldwin : l'évidence des choses qu'on ne dit pas*. Paris, Belin, 2004.

a lot by scholars compared to his other fictions. However, this novel deserves more attention as the messages that James Baldwin conveys about love, racial and sexual inequalities are universal. Moreover, the mechanism of the American society forty-two years ago is unfortunately still current nowadays. Right-wing extremist groups are boosted, especially since the election of Donald Trump who constantly makes racist and sexist remarks. Black and white families keep living apart. The condition of African Americans is not improving. African Americans are the most incarcerated community with the Latinos. The rate of violence in some areas are still high. There is still police violence.

Interestingly enough, there is a movie adaptation of the novel scheduled for January 2019. Barry Jenkins, the film director, declared at Essence Festival that: “the sad reality is, this book was published in 1974 and it’s still relevant now. The system is still the system, so we leaned in.”<sup>116</sup> The novel ends with the birth of the baby. The baby embodies Baldwin’s hope to see America as a united multi-ethnic nation.

James Baldwin should be read and reread by everyone who wants to understand racism. His literary style is specific as he manages to deal with serious issues with subtlety, refinement and poetry. James Baldwin never claimed to be a spokesman of the African American community, he only bore witness to the truth. Perhaps, because all the themes he dealt with in his fictions and essays are universal and can be transposed in other countries and cultures. Racism and other forms of discriminations are global scourges.

This analysis was a tribute to James Baldwin, a gifted artist who struggled for freedom, equality and justice until his death.

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<sup>116</sup>Danielle Young. “Barry Jenkins Visually Reimagines James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* for a Full Display of Cinematic Blackness”. The Grapevine. 7 Nov.2018:  
<https://thegrapevine.theroot.com/barry-jenkins-visually-reimagines-james-baldwins-if-bea-1827496279>

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**Abstract:**

Despite the end of racial segregation, the United States of America are still a divided country at the end of the seventies and the condition of African Americans is worsened rather than improved. The seventies represent a dark period of the history of New York (Harlem) and America. James Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* published in 1974 portrays through a love story between Clementine et Fonny, different characters who are victims of racial and sexual stereotypes and are set in a milieu where there is no hope for them. Baldwin denounces the condition of African American men and women. The intersection of the notions of race, gender, class and sexuality is at the core of our analysis on the novel. Baldwin shows how racial and sexual stereotypes divide America but also affect the construction of identity. Our dissertation deals with the fictional representation of multiracial America. How does James Baldwin construct his narrative and "Afro-Americanize" the novel in order to deconstruct these stereotypes and reconsider America as a "true" democracy? Our reflection will be divided into three parts in order to answer these questions: firstly, we shall analyze Baldwin's vision and message about African American family and the different gender relations within, then we will analyze his critical vision on American society, and finally, we shall examine how James Baldwin links the themes of prison, violence, and sexuality to power relation based on racial identity.

**Keywords:** African American literature, race, gender, sexuality, identity, intersectionality, stereotypes, love.

**Résumé :**

Malgré l'abolition de la ségrégation raciale, les Etats-Unis d'Amérique demeurent un pays encore « divisé » à la fin des années soixante-dix et la condition des Afro-Américains empire plus qu'elle ne s'améliore. Les années soixante-dix représentent une période sombre de l'histoire de New York (Harlem) et de l'Amérique. Le roman de James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, publié en 1974, dépeint à travers une histoire d'amour entre Clémentine et Fonny, différents personnages victimes de stéréotypes racistes et sexistes et qui évoluent dans un milieu où il n'y a aucune place pour l'espoir. Baldwin dénonce la condition des Afro-Américain(e)s. L'intersection des notions de « race », de genre, de classe et de sexualité est au centre de notre analyse sur le roman. Baldwin montre comment les stéréotypes de « race » et de genre divisent le peuple américain mais aussi comment ils affectent la construction identitaire. Notre mémoire porte ainsi sur la représentation fictionnelle de l'Amérique pluriethnique. Comment James Baldwin construit-il son récit et « afro-américanise » le roman pour déconstruire ces stéréotypes et envisager l'Amérique en tant que « vraie » démocratie ? Pour répondre à ces questions, notre réflexion s'articulera en trois parties. Tout d'abord, nous analyserons le point de vue de James Baldwin sur la famille afro-américaine et les relations de genre en son sein, puis nous analyserons le regard critique que James Baldwin porte sur la société Américaine et pour finir, nous examinerons comment l'auteur relie les thèmes de la prison, de la violence et de la sexualité à relation de pouvoir fondée sur l'identité raciale.

**Mots-clés :** Littérature afro-américaine, « race », genre, sexualité, identité, intersectionnalité, stéréotypes, amour.