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Women in Black Boy vs Go Tell It On the Mountain

Introduction

Terry Pratchett's writing on women heavily features three archetypes, "the maiden, the mother, and the crone" (Pratchett, 1992). It is straightforward to fit the women in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* into these categories. The object of desire, usually sexual, but also someone to possess in order to control them or to gain status or favour. The helper, the nurturer, the healer of wounds, or the safe harbour to return to. The impediment, the obstacle, the enemy. It is much harder with the ones in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Wright's characters are described in just enough to detail to advance his narrative, while Baldwin's are fully realized in their own right. Both works are journeys. Richard's journey into manhood and John's journey to religious epiphany, but their treatment of supporting characters, particularly women, are profoundly different.

By modern standards, Wright produces fragile and shallow women characters primarily present to be instruments of his bildungsroman. Both men are essentially well-meaning and try to be good narrators of their stories. Their only actual crime is that they adhere too closely to the conventional masculine ideologies of the mid-twentieth century. Wright creates women that fit the archetypes developed by Joseph Campbell. They are there to hug you, impede you, assist you or be an object to attain.

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Baldwin, 1952) is, at its most basic, a simple tale of John Grimes' 14th birthday and how, on that day, he was saved (and experienced a profound religious ecstasy. It features multiple points of view, including parts of the story, told from some of the women's own points of view. We can see their personalities and thoughts, and fears directly. We are not always trying to infer them from a biased and probably unreliable male narration. While this is the premise of the novel and John is its protagonist, the middle part gives us three other points of view, allowing us into the thoughts, reminisces, and prayers of John's aunt Florence (his step-father's sister), his step-father Gabriel Grimes, and his mother, Elizabeth. These three were part of the great migration, coming to New York from the South. They reflect on how and why they left and how they got to their current place in life.

Mothers

The first part of *Black Boy* follows Richard's earliest memories of his interactions with his mother. Being beaten almost to death by his mother for burning half their house down and her repeatedly sending him out into the streets to be beaten and robbed by a group of boys "to teach [him] this night to stand up and fight for yourself" (Wright, 1945, p17). Her role as disciplinarian wanes through his disorganized early years, where poverty and family problems caused frequent moves, hunger, and disconnection. She is later stricken with a chronic illness that causes strokes and turns her into an invalid. She transitions then into a MacGuffin of sorts as many times in his later travels Richard's goal is to earn enough and save enough so that his mother can come live with him. Richard has problems with everyone he meets, particularly in the South, when they do not question or reflect on their lives or provide answers to his questions. However, these interactions are almost uniformly negative when he has them with women.

Given her own chapter in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, John's mother Elizabeth remembers how her mother died, and her maternal aunt took her away from her beloved father because he ran a brothel, and while he doted on her, he was not a fit parent for a young girl in society's eyes. She receives a relatively strict religious upbringing but ends up running north with a man, Richard. She stays with a friend of her aunt's and visits Richard often, becoming pregnant with his child (he is John's biological father). She does not immediately tell Richard about the pregnancy as she is concerned about his reaction. After walking her to her door at 2:00 AM, he is arrested for a crime he did not commit and spends some time in jail. The night after he is exonerated and released, he commits suicide. Elizabeth meets Florence at their job, which introduces her to Gabriel. Even though Florence disapproves of their relationship, remembering Gabriel's drunkenness, they ultimately get married. This is a character arc in its own right. We have no idea what Ella's upbringing was like or how she came to be where she was at the opening of the book where Richard burns the house down. We can only intuit these things from what Richard tells us. She is a more mainstream Methodist so she must have broken with her mother's stricter faith to go follow a more mainstream path. But we never hear about any of this so we can only infer.

Other Relatives

After the onset of his mother's illness Richard ends up living with his grandparents and an aunt. They are deeply religious, zealous 7th-Day Adventists who live an austere life of prayer and ascetic deprivation "For breakfast, I ate mush and gravy made from flour and lard ... At four o'clock in the afternoon, I ate a plate of greens cooked with lard" (Wright 1945, p103). Richard is a willful and disobedient child who often finds himself in conflicts with his relatives, making the relatives want to provide a whipping. However, a common thread that runs through most of

them is his threatening to cut them if they try, as he does not feel he deserves the beating. His grandmother is a former slave who is profoundly religious and prone to casual violence for any perceived slight in Richard – this is essentially all we know about her, even though her presence takes up a fair portion of the book's first part. We are told that nothing Richard ever does is good enough for her, and once she gives up on saving his soul, she becomes needlessly violent and dismissive. Getting away from her and his other relatives, who all seem to take their cues from her in how they treat him, becomes Richard's main impetus for moving North.

Richard feels no religious leanings and participates in his grandmothers' church's hard, gruelling rituals, such as all-night prayer services, only as long as he is forced. This attitude causes his grandmother to disavow and disregard him without casting him out for appearance's sake. A large part of Richard's problem with the women in his life seems to be their inability to articulate what he has done or why they have a problem with him to his satisfaction. He even explicitly calls this out when describing his aunt Addie's anger at him at church school when he "knew that I had been beaten for a reason that was not right" (Wright, 1945 p107).

We do not meet John's grandmother but we do get to spend some time with his "aunt", his step-father's sister Florence. left her dying mother with her brother and came North with a man she ultimately married, but he turned out to be a profligate spender and wastrel who left her for another woman. He died in France during the Great War. She has a letter from her brother's first wife describing how he fathered a child with another woman and plans to confront him and tell Elizabeth. She is dying of cancer and praying for salvation. She is not concerned with John at all, rather she is wrapped up in her own concerns.

Simple Desires

When Richard arrives in Memphis, he starts out rooming with a woman he considers simple and her daughter, who is obsessed with marriage and wants to marry Richard but turns cold to him when he turns her down. Her simple desires and lack of any real ambition disgust him to the point where he refuses her sexual advances even when she throws herself at him.

Women in These Stories

There are no well-developed women characters in *Black Boy* at all. The women that are there are essentially archetypes or story devices in this very traditional, very male hero's journey. They are helpers, antagonists, and even a prize or two along the way. Even Richard's mother, the woman we see the most, goes through stages. She begins as an antagonist when Richard is young—trying to thwart his behaviour and correct him. Later she becomes a burden or a prize as her failing health makes her more object than a person from the story's perspective. Stepping back and looking down at the story from a great height, we can wonder if, particularly given her later behaviour and support of her son, she was indeed as bad as he laid it out for us or if he is an unreliable narrator. Certainly, whipping your young son almost to death is not a good thing. However, if he sets fire to the house and then goes and hides under it, you might not be entirely in your right mind, and in a culture where corporal punishment is the expected norm, a severe beating was warranted.

Including women's points of view allows us to look at Baldwin's story from a feminist perspective. It is particularly noteworthy since these women of colour have agency and are the main characters in their part of the narrative. Even the side characters can be admirably feminist for their times. See, for example, Esther's relaxed attitude towards sex and her courage to move

away to have a baby all on her own. In contrast to Wright's women, they do not fit Joseph Campbell's archetypes, providing impediments to the hero's progress, the help along the way or the reward at the end and ticking checkboxes for the story's advancement. "Women do not need to make the journey. In the whole mythological journey, the woman is there. All she has to do is realize that she is the place people are trying to get to." (Miyamoto 2017). Part of Richard's story is Wright describing his development into a man and given his many interactions with women

Both works feature female characters used purely for the sexual gratification of the male characters. Their presentation is quite different. Gabriel's seduction of Esther is "so devoid of affection that it reduces Esther to a thing" (Nenon, 2017, p16). However, by her words and actions in the story, we see that Esther is not just a thing, and we can intuit that Gabriel is the one in the wrong, driven by lust and perhaps by some unconscious desire to fall so that he could be saved again. Contrast this with the "circus girl" in *Black Boy*, a woman whom Richard meets while working as an insurance agent during the depression and who gives him sexual favours when she does not have the weekly dime to pay her premium. In Richard's view, she is ignorant and illiterate, and her desire to visit the circus is bizarre and based on faulty ideas about what the circus is. We are not given enough time with her to understand her as Richard is our only narrator. Since her only purpose is to show the ignorant and immoral way the "common negro" lives, we might wonder if she genuinely thinks Richard is "all right" (Wright, 1945 p290) or if she had had the dime, she would have paid him so that he would go away.

Conclusion

The figure of mothers features extensively in both works, but their take on "mother" is very different. In the first 20 pages, Baldwin gives us several interactions between John and his mother, assigning chores and chastising him to be a good boy but also giving him some money

for his birthday so that he can “go out and get yourself something you think you want.” (Baldwin 1953 p25). Richard’s mother is a wholly different animal. She is the archetype of the mother, disciplinarian, burden, and motivation. However, we seldom get a sense of her as a person. While Elizabeth gets her chapter and her name is mentioned many times throughout the book, Richard’s mother, Ella’s name, is only mentioned once halfway through and never again. It can be argued that Wright focused on the male point of view because he saw them as more affective to his changes while the women were mostly hindrances, mostly seeming to be background noise, not impacting his growth or lack thereof. They were turbulence.

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