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A Comparative Analysis of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

Introduction

Though James Baldwin and Nathaniel Hawthorne lived and wrote their 'hallmark' works of literature in vastly different time periods, the two classic American authors have in common that they have adversarial familial ties to religion. Baldwin grew up with a cold, Pentecostal priest for a father; Hawthorne's ancestors were "conspicuous" Puritans (Hawthorne 6), some of whom were judges in the Salem Witch Trials. For Baldwin, his resentment of his father was compounded by a cynical attitude towards his father's ministry, which he viewed as a hypocritical group.¹ For Hawthorne, his great-great-grandfather is noted as the only judge in the Salem Witch Trials who never repented, a fact that deeply troubles Hawthorne for which he asks for "pardon of heaven for their cruelties." (Hawthorne 13) In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin is inspired by his own religious experiences combined with a fictional narrative to critique the Pentecostal Church. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne details his connection to and attitude towards Puritan society in his autobiographical prologue "The Custom-House" and the rest of the novel is a fictional narrative critiquing Puritanism. In both novels, the authors use the

1. Baldwin, James, et al. "James Baldwin: Letter from a Region in My Mind." *The New Yorker*, 17 Nov. 1962, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind.

sins of their characters to imply the idea central to religious hypocrisy: that religion and religious systems allow humans to justify sin.

Priests as Hypocrites

First, In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin crafts the character of Gabriel as the symbolic figurehead of Christianity in the novel but also the novel's fundamental sinner. As John, the stepson of Gabriel and the novel's protagonist observes, Gabriel has marked his stepson's destiny to be a priest since the beginning of Gabriel's life. Nonetheless, Gabriel is the most sinful character in the novel. In fact, sin seems to be in Gabriel's inherent nature: his sister Florence notes that Gabriel has always been ungrateful, trouble-causing, and reckless. Before his "salvation," Gabriel is a frequent drunk and womanizer. John's resentment of his father Gabriel doesn't lead him to completely resent religion, however, he feels that he cannot be saved without "first kneeling to his father," who Baldwin describes as the "ambassador to the King of Heaven." (Baldwin 15) Naming a character so bound with sin as the "ambassador to the King of Heaven" is an obvious irony that hyperbolically underlines Gabriel's hypocrisy, and thus the hypocrisy of religion. Thus, metaphorically, the only barrier to John's salvation is hypocrisy. This metaphor is drawn throughout the novel, implying that hypocrisy is the true barrier to religious salvation.

Gabriel's sin is not limited to his unmarried, pre-salvation life. Gabriel has a sexual affair with a woman Gabriel describes as a "harlot" named Esther, who gives birth to their child far away from Gabriel as he sent her away with money stolen from his wife, Deborah. In confessing this sin to Deborah, Gabriel states that "Esther's mind weren't on the lord—she'd of dragged me right on down to hell with her." (Hawthorne 173) Ironically, Baldwin does not write that Esther

is immoral, a sinner, or even a prostitute like Gabriel describes. As it appears to be false, Gabriel's accusation of Esther, the mother of his "bastard" child, is utterly hypocritical. Just like Gabriel's "salvation," his exiling of Esther and their child is simply a desperate, futile attempt to rid himself of his sin and the consequent guilt. To spite Gabriel, Esther ironically names the child, the physical manifestation of their adulterous sin and Gabriel's hypocrisy, "Royal," mocking Gabriel's stated desire to create a "royal line" of offspring, further underscoring Gabriel's hypocrisy and highly immoral use of his professed religion to justify his sin.

Similarly, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne creates Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale as the novel's ultimate symbol of religious hypocrisy. Dimmesdale has a sexual affair with Hester Prynne, a "widow" after her husband, Roger Chillingworth, is presumed to have died due to his prolonged absence at sea. Hester has Dimmesdale's child, for which she is condemned by the Puritan community for having an illegitimate child. While Hester stands on the scaffold to be shamed by the community, Dimmesdale ironically says to Hester, "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin?" (Hawthorne 63) Essentially, to avoid suspicion of his obvious sin, Dimmesdale reproaches Hester, but reluctantly and weakly as not to pressure her to reveal the truth: that the father is himself. His comment is dramatically ironic and highly hypocritical, directly rebuking his own "silence" to the clergy and community who are currently unaware of his wrong. Wracked with guilt, Dimmesdale punishes himself through self-harm, meanwhile, his sermons become increasingly passionate and his popularity among the community grows. Only at the end of the novel does he relieve himself of his sin, literally dying for his sustained pride in the arms of Hester. Dimmesdale's cowardice, especially as an increasingly popular priest in the Puritan community, is deeply hypocritical, as

he continues to preach Puritan values while staying silent about his sin. Dimmesdale, like Gabriel from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is the primary figure of religion while also one the most, if not the most, extreme sinner. Dimmesdale does not directly justify his sin with religion, but his position of power as a clergyman allows him to remain popular in the community despite his sin. Even in the end, the community accepts Dimmesdale and his sin, not only emphasizing Dimmesdale's hypocrisy but the hypocrisy of the Puritans themselves. While not intending to spite Dimmesdale as Esther spites Gabriel, Hester ironically names Dimmesdale's illegitimate child "Pearl" after the value of the child's cost to Hester's place in society, which advances Dimmesdale's hypocrisy and weakness anyway, as his child is named after the societal cost of Hester's actions, a cost that Dimmesdale never has to endure.

Conclusion

Both authors, Baldwin and Hawthorne, critique religion through the creation of a religious character and the inherent hypocrisy of their sins. Baldwin crafts Gabriel the priest, a terrible sinner of various offenses, who is also Baldwin's main personification of religion, to be the novel's ultimate religious hypocrite. Like Baldwin, Hawthorne uses Dimmesdale, a sinful priest who refuses to confess his sin, to expose religious hypocrisy. As there are many other striking parallels between the two novels, it is impossible to believe that Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which preceded Baldwin, didn't inspire the character and plight of Gabriel in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.