James Baldwin's
Go Tell It on the Mountain
Historical and Critical Essays
EDITED BY
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Irresistible, unknowable powers; family secrets; feelings of powerlessness; taboo sexual desires—the things that haunt and encumber John Grimes in James Baldwin’s Go Tell It on the Mountain are very much the terrain of Gothic fiction. Baldwin’s novel—usually considered a work of social realism (albeit one with striking symbolic power)—may lack some of the obvious trappings of the traditional Gothic tale, but its central conflicts (familial, psychological, sexual, and spiritual) can be fruitfully considered in Gothic terms. Chris Baldick, editor of The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales, locates the “Gothic effect” in stories that “invoke the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine or hero) within the dead-end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house ...)” (xix-xx). Baldick’s formula captures important elements of John’s experience: the dark, violent, irretrievable family past that shapes his daily life; his desire to escape both home and church; the daily reminders that his fate is fixed.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is, in fact, a story full of curses and traps. Most of the novel is devoted to revealing the familial, cultural, and spiritual legacies that define and repress John and his family. At one point or another—and from one point of view or another—hidden transgressions, original sin, racism, patriarchy, and fate are all presented as “curses” from which the family and its
members struggle to escape. Indeed, the term “curse” appears throughout the novel. When Deborah discovers that Royal has been killed, for example, she observes to Gabriel that “it sure look like the Lord is put a curse on that family. First the mother, and now the son” (146). John is described as moving towards the altar “like a curse” (150). He wonders if looking at his father’s naked body has rendered him subject to Ham’s curse, and the “ironic voice” in his head “remind[s] him” that “all niggers had been cursed” (200). Similarly, Florence thinks that “all women had been cursed from the cradle,” that all had been “given the same cruel destiny, born to suffer the weight of men” (78). The novel’s Gothic effect is heightened by its combining, as Baldick describes, “a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space” (xix). Roy complains that his mother “think[s] that’s all that’s in the world is jails and churches” (18), and John’s longing to escape the confines of home and church creates in him a desire to run away—to the park, to the city, to the movie theater, to school, to the library. John’s spatial confinement intensifies the role that painful and mysterious legacies play in his life. He is both haunted and trapped.

John’s story is a Gothic one, but he is not a typical Gothic protagonist. His distinctiveness as a character lies in the fact that his portrayal combines elements of the Male and Female Gothic traditions. In Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic, Anne Williams contends that Gothic is a literature that “systematically represents ‘otherness’” (18) and that its central subject has always been the “patriarchal family” (22). As a result, perspective and subject position become important elements in Gothic literature, for it matters a great deal whether a text is constructed around the “female” as other or the “male” as other. Williams argues that despite superficial similarities, Male and Female Gothic texts (frequently but not necessarily associated with the gender of the author) “employ two distinct sets of literary conventions” (100) and that Male and Female Gothic modes express different attitudes towards the supernatural and offer different narrative structures and different plots. According to Williams, the Male Gothic may have either a male or a female protagonist and is likely to employ multiple points of view, conclude with a tragic or ambiguous ending, and present the supernatural as a reality. Female Gothic, on the other hand, encourages the reader to identify with the protagonist—who is always female—by focusing exclusively on her point of view, concludes with a comic ending (usually a marriage), and rationally explains the heroine’s seemingly supernatural encounters. Through these and other strategies, Male Gothic texts—even those with sympathetically portrayed female protagonists—suggest the horror of a world in which patriarchal categories are destabilized by a monstrous “other” that is—sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively—female.

Female Gothic, on the other hand, envisions a “female ‘reason’” (138) that can confront the threatening male “other” and ultimately “enlarge[ ] the world, open up the possibility of discovering good ... and of finding what [the heroine] seeks” (145). John’s story blends elements from both traditions.

Like the traditional Female Gothic heroine that Williams describes, John’s quest for love and acceptance leads him towards a kind of rebirth, gives him a new identity, and teaches him the value of accepting help from another. At the same time, John resembles the protagonists of the Male Gothic tradition, both male and female. Like the male protagonist of the Male Gothic, John’s desire for knowledge and power lead him to contend both with his father and with supernatural forces in a struggle over issues of legitimacy and inheritance. Like the female protagonist of the Male Gothic, John is physically confined, constantly watched, and systematically humiliated. The novel in which John’s story is told primarily fits into the Male Gothic tradition because of its fractured structure, which encompasses multiple points of view, and by its ambiguous ending, which resists closure. These structures suggest that the comic ending of the Female Gothic, although desirable, will not “work” for John, whose identification with the female heroine is based on ambiguous, obscure, and potentially taboo desires that John spiritualizes and on outside pressures conspiring to feminize and humiliate him. In other words, the happy ending of the Female Gothic protagonist will not solve John’s crises and may, in fact, exacerbate them.

According to Williams, the typical heroine of the Female Gothic is on a quest—sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious—for love and acceptance in a patriarchal world that confines and menaces her. It is clear that John Grimes desires these same things, even though he can neither consistently articulate these longings nor bring himself to believe that such pleasures are possible (or appropriate) for him. He cherishes the memory of a principal’s praise and wonders if his intellectual gifts might enable him “one day [to] win that love which he so longed for” (13). His hope falters, however, whenever he encounters—or even thinks about—which affects his father. He knows that his father despises him (37), and he struggles throughout the novel either to win Gabriel’s love or to train himself to scorn it. He looks into a mirror and is reminded of his father’s claim that “his face was the face of Satan” (20). He searches the mirror for a “principle of ... unity” in his face but cannot “tell what he most passionately desired to know: whether his face was ugly or not” (21), and he worries that his ugliness is what keeps his father from loving him. As the novel draws to a close and John struggles on the “threshing-floor” (193) of the church, he longs for a vision of love, longs to hear a voice saying, “you are beautiful, John” (203). When his visions have ceased, his desire to reconcile with his fa-
ther remains: he feels “a hope for peace” and strives “to speak the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself” (210). From the beginning to the end of the novel, it is clear that what John most earnestly desires is to be seen through eyes of love even though the only looks he has ever known are his father’s humiliating, hateful, penetrating gazes.

John’s salvation experience also links him with the heroines of Female Gothic, who endure the terrors of the night by realizing their need for the help of another and who experience rebirth and emerge with a new identity. John does not marry, but—in keeping with a story that is cast in spiritual/religious terms—he is born again. John finds himself at the altar in church, and he senses that he is in spiritual darkness, an “utter darkness [that does not present any point of departure, contains no beginning, and no end” (196). During the night, he has a series of visions—of the cross, of hell, of sinners, of his family, of slaves moaning from the grave. He feels certain that he “belong[s] to the darkness” (205), that the grave is his fate, that the “army” of the dead will “swallow up his soul” (204). He calls out for God and hears a voice that turns out to be young Elisha’s, a voice that tells him to call upon Christ for help in getting through the darkness (205). He listens to the voice, has a brief vision of Jesus, pleads with the Lord for help, and rejoins Elisha and the congregation (207). The faith that he musters is rewarded, and he is given new life: he emerges from his stupor certain that “his hands were new, and his feet were new, and he moved in a new and Heaven-bright air” (209). The saints around him sing, “Lord, I been introduced/ To the Father and the Son,/ and I ain’t/ no stranger now!” (209), and he assures them, “in the new voice God had given him,” that he is “saved” (209). Elisha proclaims himself John’s “big brother in the Lord” (224) and, as they part for the evening, gives John “a holy kiss,” at which point the sun “falls” over Elisha like a golden robe, and strikes [John’s forehead, where Elisha had kissed him, like a seal ineffaceable forever” (225). All the saints—except Gabriel and Elizabeth—talk over John’s salvation experience and rejoice that John has a new relationship to the community, a new family, a new name, a new identity.

Such a reading of John’s story, of course, does justice neither to the Gothic elements nor the gender issues of the book, in part because John has as much in common with protagonists of the Male Gothic tradition (both male and female) as he does with the heroine of the Female Gothic, and in part because his tale is told in a novel whose narrative structures can be placed decidedly in the Male Gothic tradition.

As we have seen, John resembles the heroines of the Female Gothic in that he is motivated by a deep yearning to be loved. His desires are, however, much more complicated than that. Like the male protagonist of the Male Gothic, John also longs for forbidden knowledge and power, a desire which is suggested as early as the opening epigram of John’s tale, “I looked down the line/ And I wondered” (3). As he cleans the house on the morning of his fourteenth birthday, he gazes (as he has gazed before) at the photographs on the mantle and thinks about Deborah, his father’s first wife, a “shadowy woman [who] held in the fastness of her tomb...the key to all those mysteries he longed to unlock” (23). His thirst for knowledge extends beyond the dark past of his family, and he.excels at school, where his teachers notice his intelligence and encourage his intellectual growth. He looks upon his talent—and the recognition of educators—not just as ends in themselves but as instruments of power. A principal tells him that he is “a very bright boy,” and the memory of her praise “gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon at least a shield,” an assurance “that he had in himself a power that other people lacked,” a power he “could use...to save himself” (13). His mother appears to sense John’s longings, and she tries to satisfy him with the assurance that “the Lord’ll reveal to you in His own good time everything He wants you to know” (26).

There are, of course, situations in which protagonists of the Female Gothic desire knowledge, but their desire emerges from a different source than it does in the Male Gothic tradition. In the Male Gothic tradition, female characters seek knowledge out of an ill-fated curiosity, while males seek knowledge in order to mount rebellions against other, more powerful males. In Female Gothic, heroines look for answers when they wish to understand another (specifically, a male "other") (Williams 160). John does desire knowledge as a way of obtaining love and approval (we will recall that he hopes to use his intellectual power to "win that love which he so longed for") (13), but his primary motive for wanting to know is in order to arm himself for battle with his father. He thinks of his education as a weapon against Gabriel’s power; he assures himself early on in the novel that "he would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life" (12). John’s “hatred” for Gabriel and his “intelligence” are said to “feel[d]” each other (13). John’s anger against his father—and his desire to rebel—may spring from the rejection that he has suffered at his father’s hands, but these coping mechanisms threaten to become controlling obsessions. John “live[s] for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed” (13). John’s thirst for knowledge, both at home and at school, cannot be separated from his strife-ridden relationship with Gabriel.

Conflicts involving fathers and sons are, of course, the very stuff of Male Gothic fiction. Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto begins with the epi-
gram, "the sins of fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation" (18), and its protagonist, Manfred, spends the narrative chasing his dead son's bride-to-be throughout his castle in the hope of ravishing her and producing an heir in an attempt to maintain ownership of a territory that his grandfather and father had illegally usurped. The example of Walpole is paradigmatic not only in its focus on fathers and sons but also in its concern with issues of legitimacy and inheritance. Baldwin's novel deals with these same issues, although they are, like John's rebirth, recast in religious/spiritual terms.

The Grimes family is poor, but Gabriel has come to view his spiritual legacy in terms much like the ones the aristocrats (and would-be aristocrats) that peopled early Gothic fiction viewed their estates. One of the many secrets about Gabriel's past to which John lacks access is the vision of religious power and wealth that Gabriel received shortly after the "Twenty-four Elders Revival Meeting" (96), an event that convinced him that he must eschew the "worldliness" (103) of the "unholy pastors..., unfaithful stewards" (106) with whom he had dined. He prayed that he would not become like them, and he felt that light shone down on him from Heaven, on him. the "chosen" (106).

Shortly after, he dreamed that God took him to the top of a mountain and then to a "peaceful field" (108), where he sensed that everything "was his" (109). In the vision, the voice of God had assured him that his "seal" would be upon Gabriel's "seed" (109). From that point on, Gabriel longs to have a son and to see the prophecy fulfilled. His choice of the name "Royal" makes the link between his conception of power and inheritance and the aristocratic legacies of the past explicit. Gabriel's desires are, of course, thwarted by Deborah's barrenness and by Royal's illegitimacy. He hopes, however, to see the prophecy fulfilled in the second Royal, or Roy, who "had been begotten in the marriage bed, the bed that Paul described as holy" (111). Gabriel clings to the belief that "it was to [Roy] the Kingdom has been promised" (111) even though Roy has shown no interest in religious or spiritual things, and his father worries that the boy "might be cursed for the sin of his mother" (111).

When John—whom Gabriel regards as the monstrous proof of Elizabeth's sin—died, Gabriel beats and hates and mocks him because he is illegitimate, and because any spiritual favor that John may experience imperils Gabriel's faith, which is primarily constituted by his sense of entitlement to a legacy that is spiritual and eternal in nature but not without worldly benefit (i.e., power).

The conflict between John and Gabriel is Oedipal (John even has a vision in which his father castrates him) (201), but it is also more than Oedipal. Analyzing Go Tell It on the Mountain in terms that are both gendered and Gothic reveals a more complicated—and subtle—link between Baldwin's novel and the Male Gothic tradition. Up until this point, we have considered John's connections to the male protagonist of the Male Gothic tradition. But John's experience also resembles that of the typical female protagonist in the Male Gothic mode. There are many ways in which John is feminized within the story: his brother Roy mocks him with a "shrill, little-girl tone" (16), and he is required to scour home and church so often that he imagines cleaning (of all things) as an impossible, lifelong task, his hard trial, like that of a man he had read about somewhere, whose curse it was to push a boulder up a steep hill, only to have the giant who guarded the hill roll the boulder down again" (20). Virtually everything that Gabriel does to John humiliates him, and most of his preferred forms of humiliation are, in the context of patriarchal culture, coded feminine. Gabriel displays a picture of John as a naked infant even though the other children are clothed in pictures on the family mantle, and John can never look at it without feeling shame and anger that his nakedness should be here so unkindly revealed" (22). The picture is part of Gabriel's overall strategy of subjecting John to a penetrating, humiliating male gaze—one that is omnipresent in the Male Gothic tradition.

The piercing eyes of a Gothic villain/hero make frequent appearances in the Female Gothic tradition, of course, but they serve a different function than they do in the Male Gothic mode. According to Williams, the Female Gothic plot is often "a version of 'Beauty and the Beast'" (145), in which the depth of sentiment revealed in the Gothic villain/hero's eyes is brought to the fore by the heroine's transforming gaze. In other words, "in the context of Female Gothic, to gaze becomes a creative rather than a destructive act. In realizing things or persons other than herself the heroine literally 'makes them real'" (145). In the Male Gothic tradition, however, the gaze is "implicitly male, implicitly patriarchal" (108). Female figures in Male Gothic texts are almost always punished for looking. This tradition continues today: in her analysis of modern horror films, Linda Williams remarks that a "woman's gaze is punished...by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (17).
tries to satisfy his curiosity by learning the secrets of the father.

In Go Tell It on the Mountain, John is continually subjected to his father’s judging, punishing gaze and continually punished for looking. When he returns from the movie theater on his birthday and sees his sister Sarah dashing towards the drugstore, he worries that she is buying aspirin for his mother, which would mean “that he would have to prepare supper, and take care of the children, and be naked under his father’s eyes all the evening long” (35). Early on in his vision at the altar, he senses that he has “been thrust out of the holy, the joyful, the blood-washed community” and “that his father has thrust him out” (198). As the vision continues, John imagines “his father’s eyes looking down on him,” “stripping him naked, and hating what they see” (199), at which point he “tries to escape his father’s eyes” and feels “as though he has gone blind” (199). In the subsequent vision, he remembers how he, like Ham, had “looked... upon his father’s hideous nakedness” (199) one morning while his father bathed, and he hears his father preparing to beat him for the transgression. While John is at the altar, Gabriel catches him John looking at him, and “John’s staring eyes... remind[d] Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother’s eyes when she beat him, of Florence’s eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah’s eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther’s eyes and Royal’s eyes...” (150). John fears that he is being—and may always be—punished for looking at his father, and he is not far from the truth, for Gabriel sees in John the judging (female) eyes that he longs to escape or subdue. And the cruel, censorious glare that Gabriel trains on John remains within the Male Gothic tradition because nothing that Gabriel does can transform it into a loving gaze.

Other elements of the novel, including the inclusion of multiple points of view and the ambiguity of the ending, also place Go Tell It on the Mountain in the tradition of the Male Gothic. Anne Williams notes that “the Female Gothic generates suspense through the limitations imposed by the chosen point of view,” while “male Gothic derives its most powerful effects from the dramatic irony created by multiple points of view” (102). Male Gothic, therefore, “subtly increases our sense of distance from the...protagonist” (103). Go Tell It on the Mountain opens and closes with John’s story, but most of the book is devoted to the memories of other characters: Florence, Gabriel, Elizabeth. As a result, the reader knows a great deal more about John’s situation than John does and remains sympathetic to John’s plight while being distanced from his ignorance and, therefore, from his interpretations of events. This distance is especially important at the end of the novel because the reader “knows” what John only suspects: that John’s salvation will not win him his father’s love but will rather provoke Gabriel’s anger and retaliation. The fractured structure of the novel into multiple perspectives, therefore, calls into question the comic ending and suggests that although the ending can be read as a rebirth, John’s tale, like most texts in the Male Gothic tradition, resists “narrative closure” (104). The ambiguity of the ending is heightened by John’s own feelings, thoughts, and words as he repeatedly seeks affirmation from Elisha and looks, in vain, to his parents for signs of approval.

The ambiguity of the ending also suggests another way in which Baldwin’s novel can be viewed as a blending of Male and Female Gothic modes. Part of the resolution in a Female Gothic text normally consists of a “debunking” of the supernatural: the encounters that seemed paranormal in origin are revealed to have rational explanations. Go Tell It on the Mountain, however, is ambiguous in its treatment of spiritual matters. Critics have traditionally interpreted John’s salvation experience in psychological terms—and Baldwin’s text can easily support such a reading. Nevertheless, the novel offers no final answer about the status of John’s religious encounter (or the religious encounters of any other character, for that matter). Early on in the novel, the narrator reports that “all the pressures of church and home unite[d] to drive him to the altar” (5), suggesting that a range of familial, psychological, and social determinants are at work in his conversion. But to acknowledge these determinants is not to say that there can be no genuine spiritual or supernatural dimension to the religiosity of the characters.

If the text suggests (or at least allows for) the possibility that John’s vision—not only of his father and of the congregation but also of Jesus—is shaped by forces that cannot be reduced to the psychological and social, then it shares another potential affinity with the Male Gothic tradition: the suggestion that the supernatural may be real but less than benign. Williams remarks on the violence characteristic of Male Gothic texts, and it would be fair to say that religious experience in Go Tell It on the Mountain is depicted as violent. John reflects that “there had never been a time when [he] had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder,” and he has often seen what he describes as “the Power striking someone” (7). After Sister McCandless predicts that “The Lord’s going to work with [John] in a mighty way,” the narrator reports that “there were times—whenever, in fact, the Lord had shown His favor by working through her—when whatever Sister McCandless said sounded like a threat” (52). Elizabeth reflects that “God was everywhere, terrible, the Living God; and so high, the song said, you couldn’t get over Him; so low you couldn’t get under Him; so wide you couldn’t get around Him; but must come in at the door. And she, she knew today that door: a living, wrathful gate” (176). When John is drawn towards the altar, he “feels[a] terror he had never felt before” (75). His conversion is described as a kind of possession:


something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed" (195). He is then "filled with an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; had cracked him open, as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle" (195-196). To the extent that John's religious experience can be interpreted as authentic, it—not unlike John's daily encounters with Gabriel—has a painful, feminizing impact. After John sees the Lord, "for a moment only" (206), he experiences great joy and moves to take his place within the congregation of the saints. In a moment, however, "something begins to knock in that listening, astonished, newborn, and fragile heart of his; something recalling the terrors of the night, which were not finished, his heart seemed to say; which, in this company, were now to begin" (209). As the walk home draws to a close, he pleads with Elisha, "no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what anybody says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was there" (225).

The potentially comic ending of the novel is, therefore, destabilized in several ways: by the distance created by multiple perspectives and the reader's knowledge that conversion will not make Gabriel love John, by the uncertain status and the experiential violence of the supernatural, and by John's own insecurities. Anne Williams notes that "the best that even the survivors of the Male Gothic plot can expect is a kind of spiritual inoculation. They emerge from the concluding apocalyptic orgy of violence with lowered expectations, permanently marked by what they have suffered" (104). In her description does not neatly fit Baldwin's ending, it does suggest a possible interpretation of that ending: as a record of John's "spiritual inoculation."

It should not be surprising that the comic ending characteristic of the Female Gothic tradition does not "work" for John because John's identification with the female is extremely problematic, based as it is on taboo desires that John barely understands and on the powerlessness that he feels as a result of being feminized and subjugated by his father. Bryan R. Washington's "Wrestling with 'The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name': John, Elisha, and the 'Master'" discusses the homoerotic subtext of the novel, pointing out that John's sexual thoughts and impulses always gravitate towards experiences and fantasies involving men (as in the scene where he sees in the yellow stain on the ceiling an image of a woman but then immediately begins to think of urine contests in the boys' bathroom at school) (87) and that John tends to sympathize and identify with female characters, including the character portrayed by Bette Davis in Of Human Bondage, the film that John sees on his birthday. Washington concludes that "John's unspoken desire for men suggests... that he is (or is resigned to function as) an 'imitation' woman" (87), in part because Baldwin "is unable to construct a scenario in which the desire to be like another man could become the uncoded desire to be with another man" (93). John's salvation experience thus functions not only as a bid for his father's love and acceptance but also as a way to become like—and closer to—Elisha, for whom John feels an attraction that is as intense as it is unspeakable. This is another reason that John seeks Elisha's assurances that he is saved (and that Elisha will remember and will tell others that he is saved): because the consummation that he seeks is as much with Elisha as it is with God, if not more so. Spiritualizing his emotions and desires comes "naturally" to John, who has been raised in a community that both translates all of its experiences into Biblical terms and practices a form of religiosity that borders not only on the violent but also on the sexual. More than once, John has watched Elisha and the rest of the congregation dance, sweat, cry, and moan in the name of the Holy Spirit (89). To the extent that John understands his desire for Elisha, he understands it in the terms offered by his culture: he understands it alternately and uneasily as feminine and spiritual.

John's tendency to identify with feminine impulses and with female characters also results, of course, from the fact that he has been systematically feminized by his father. If John's desire for Elisha renders him an "imitation' woman" (87), as Washington suggests, Gabriel's treatment of John has the same effect. John identifies with women not only because of his ambiguous desires for men but also because he has been placed in a subject position normally occupied by women. He, like Elizabeth, is powerless within the family. Elizabeth is right in more ways than she knows when she tells John that he is his "mother's right-hand man" (25). John, for his part, feels an attachment to his mother but not an unconflicted one: he is angry for what he can only interpret as her resignation to a cruel fate. He compares the picture of his mother as a young girl "who knew that no evil could undo her, and who could laugh" to the mother that he knows and senses that "between the two faces there stretched a darkness and a mystery that John feared, and that sometimes caused him to hate her" (15). It is no wonder that John cannot occupy the female position comfortably. He can sympathize with the desires and with the powerlessness of women, but he cannot become one of them, and he cannot accept a subjection that would make his father the victor in a power struggle that is as palatable to John as it is mysterious and impenetrable.

The dynamics of that power struggle, as we have seen, are not likely to be altered by John's "rebirth." There is some suggestion, in fact, that John's pain and humiliation may, in fact, be intensified by his salvation experience. During the walk home from church, Florence—who knows not only that Gabriel cannot rejoice at John's conversion but also why—tries to call attention to

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Gabriel’s hypocrisy by pointing out, “with a little smile,” that Gabriel’s soul must be “praising God this morning” because he’s “always been saying...how the Lord would answer prayer” (214). Gabriel is silent for awhile, then says, “he going to learn...that it ain’t all in the singing and the shouting—the way of holiness is a hard way” (214). He goes on: “I’m going to see to it...that he walks right before the Lord. The Lord’s done put his soul in my charge—and I ain’t going to have that boy’s blood on my hands” (214). Gabriel’s ominous words suggest that his cruelty—which has always been justified as a religious obligation—will only be fueled by John’s conversion. The abuse and degradation that helped to drive John to the altar, rather than being relieved by his rebirth, may actually be exacerbated.

Go Tell It on the Mountain has so much in common with the Male Gothic tradition—in its structure, in its portrayal of the supernatural, in its ambiguity—that its departures from that tradition are striking. Noticeably absent from Baldwin’s novel are Male Gothic’s tendency, as Anne Williams describes it, both to “assume that heroic activity is the province of men” (133-134) and to “position the audience as voyeurs who...may take pleasure in female victimization” (104). These departures begin to make sense when John’s affinities with heroines of the Female Gothic—his desire to make meaningful assertion that helped to drive John to the altar, rather than being relieved by his rebirth, may actually be exacerbated.

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When [he] should walk these streets again, they would be shouting here again; the roar of children’s roller skates would bear down on him from behind; little girls in pigtails, skipping rope, would establish on the sidewalk a barricade through which he must stumble as best he might. Boys would be throwing ball in these streets again—they would look at him, and call:

'Hey, Frog-eyes!'

Men would be standing on corners again, watching him pass, girls would be sitting on stoops again, mocking his walk. Grandmothers would stare out of windows, saying:

'That sure is a sorry little boy.' (220).

John hopes that what has taken place at the altar can help him to cope with the harsh facts of his life, but he knows that his identity in the community will not really change, as it does for the heroines of the Female Gothic. He will remain, in short, a monster.

That Go Tell It on the Mountain is about John’s ambiguously successful struggle to locate (or create) an empowering (if fragile) self-image despite the profound but mysterious pressures of both past and present is not news to anyone who has read the novel. Exploring the novel in Gothic terms can, however, give a name and a significance to the various elements of John’s experience; reveal a correspondence between the novel’s social, historical, spiritual, and psychological dimensions; and explain the overall effect of the novel. David Punter describes the Gothic as an “image-language in which to examine fears” (117), a symbolic code that can be used to explore both cultural-historical and psychological fears simultaneously. Anne Williams goes as far as to suggest that cultural analysis as it is undertaken in Gothic fiction is very similar to the process of psychoanalysis and that Freud’s “collected works...tautly constitute a Gothic story” (240). Mark Edmundson points out that “Gothic is the art of haunting...Gothic shows time and again that life...is possessed, that the present is in thrall to the past” (5), and John is most certainly a haunted character. His struggle to be seen as something other than a monster is threatened by many forces: by the historical legacy of racial hatred, by rigid social constructions of gender, by a suffocating fundamentalist theology, by his hidden genealogy, and by repressed emotional and sexual desires. The cultural, familial, and personal past conspire, in short, to “curse” him to a fractured, conflicted sense of identity. Conceptualizing the novel as Gothic also helps to account for its claustrophobic effect: historical and familial legacies trap John physically (in a small house), geographically (in a northern ghetto), and culturally (in a fundamentalist church). John feels incarcerated and suffocated, and his avenues of escape are limited. The themes of Go Tell It on the Mountain turn out to be the same themes of Gothic literature: history, identity, gender, and power.

Gothic themes, images, and effects have, of course, frequently been employed in texts concerned with the enslavement of African-Americans and its ongoing legacy. This should come as no surprise, given Baldick’s description of Gothic as a mode in which historical tyranny and physical incarceration are united (240). Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination argues that white American writers such as Hawthorne and Poe have used Gothic conventions to define an American identity that is free, innocent, benevolent, and optimistic in sharp contrast to an enslaved, guilty, frightening, and fearful “Africanist presence” (17)—a presence that is both “not-free” and “not-me” (38). But white writers are not the only ones who have found in the apparatus of the Gothic a useful tool for examining the experi-
ence, significance, and legacy of slavery: Teresa A. Goddu's "Haunting Back" explores the ways in which African-American writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison herself have used Gothic elements and effects to "rematerialize the ghosts of America's racial history" and to create a space in which "the unspeakable is spoken" (132). In exploring the many "curses" that lay claim to John, Baldwin joins a long tradition.

If Baldwin is not the first African-American writer to employ Gothic images and effects to explore the legacy of racism, he is also not the first male writer to complicate the dichotomy between Male and Female Gothic traditions and to destabilize the separation between male subject and monstrous female "other". Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain is, therefore, part of an ongoing exploration of gender and power within the tradition of the Gothic Romance. His contribution to that tradition demonstrates the continuing usefulness of Gothic tropes in interrogating the many concepts and categories by which Western thought and culture is ordered. In John's struggle for love, power, and identity, the limitations imposed by history, patriarchy, fundamentalism, and family are all brought to bear—and John's need for new materials from which to construct a life emerges. Perhaps this is why John's last words are, "I'm ready...I'm coming. I'm on my way" (226). The Gothic tradition provides powerful symbols for the many obstacles facing John as he attempts to move forward, the many social determinants that make him feel repressed and helpless. Conceptualizing these determinants in Gothic terms provides a language for describing their scope and power and, in so doing, enhances—rather than diminishes—the realism of Baldwin's novel.

Notes

1. Stephen King's Carrie would be an example of a Male Gothic text with a sympathetically portrayed female protagonist.
2. Williams offers Dracula as an example of a Male Gothic text in which the monster is technically male but blurs the boundaries between genders in that he "has uncanny affinities with a bloody, threatening Mother Nature" (134).
3. Linda Williams includes films such as Nosferatu, The Phantom of the Opera, Psycho, Halloween, and Dressed to Kill, among others.
4. Since Female Gothic texts normally end in marriage, their heroines normally attain new property and a new standing in the community. Many of these protagonists begin as governesses, and so their new social standing represents a significant increase in status.
5. Anne Williams argues that Coleridge and Keats wrote in both the Male Gothic mode (in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and "La Belle Dame sans Merci," respectively) and the Female Gothic mode (in "Frost at Midnight" and "The Eve of St. Agnes").