

## THE SEARCH FOR MANHOOD IN JAMES BALDWIN'S "GOING TO MEET THE MAN"

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**Abstract :** James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" is about the story of Jesse, a white deputy Sheriff in a small Southern town at the post Civil War America who finds himself unable to comply to his duties as he used to do. Jesse suffers from psychosexual disorder and strives to recover from this anomaly through reminiscence of horrors perpetuated on black people. From a psychoanalytic approach, this work first overviews the concept of manhood as it is reflected in the story and strives to provide a meaning to Jesse's sexual impotence. Afterwards, the paper discusses Jesse's recall of series of violence done to black people as his approach to manhood. This work finally argues that, by contrasting the protagonist and the American legendary Jesse James, the work actually questions the nature of the protagonist's manhood.

**Keywords:** Emasculation, manhood, racism, psychoanalytic approach, Jesse James.

### Introduction

In the existence of humanity, men have impacted the history of the world much more than women, simply because their ego has always directed their actions. Many nations are governed by male dominated ideals, forcing the whole social structure to behave as such. The feminist revolution of the 60s brought figures like Simone de Beauvoir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Marlene Dietrich, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, to mention only these, on the field of literature with the ultimate aim to improve women's image in a male dominated society. Therefore, this study seeks to understand men's constant concern to strengthen whatever shapes their manhood.

Manhood is central to this study, and should be understood as The online Oxford Dictionary defines on the one hand "the state or time of being an adult man rather than a boy", and on the other hand that, manhood as "the qualities that a man is

supposed to have, for example courage, strength, and sexual power."<sup>17</sup> The context of this study takes into consideration both aspects of the definition, but focuses much more on the second one. In literature and in other expressive forms of arts, manhood is variously depicted with the ultimate goal of enforcing male dominated rules. Dr. Myles Munroe (2001: 8) writes in his *Understanding the Purpose and Power of Men: a book for men and the women who love them* that "In every culture and social system, men are struggling to find their place in a fast-changing world." Obviously, the fast-changing world sometimes leaves some men on the margins of society, compelling them to struggle and reassert their manhood. In the American context for example, the building of the nation has been possible owing to the determination of men like Michael Kimmel (1996, p.33) who argues that, men "struggled to build themselves into powerful impervious machines, capable of victory in any competition. And they ran away to the frontier, to the West, to start over, to make their fortunes and thus to remake themselves, to escape the civilizing constraints of domestic life represented by the Victorian woman." Here, Kimmel emphasizes the ardor and bravery of men as opposed to the tenderness and delicacy of women. In the same line, David D. Gilmore (1990, p.11) opines in his *Manhood in the Making* that, "real manhood . . . is not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds." Gilmore's view posits that manhood is achieved through challenges boys must face and overcome in their lives.

From the above critics' views stems men's vital preoccupation in redefining their role in society, which seem to be out of their control.

Much precisely, in the American race relations context, white supremacy is maintained through the emasculation of Blacks and other minorities. In his book

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<sup>17</sup>[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/manhood](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/manhood).

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*A Rage for Order: Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, Joel Williamson (1986, p.11) argues that, in the South, in order to enforce white masculinity, society has set up rules to control the overwhelming black population. This is quite logic since the Emancipation Act freed black slaves and potentially raised them up to the same level of citizenship as their former masters. James Baldwin, in his writings, emphasizes a lot on the black man's place in the American society. Jezy J. Gray (2014, p.2-3) comments that, Baldwin did expose and resist racial narratives imposed on African Americans through his capacity as a writer and public intellectual. In fact, much of what endures so brilliantly in his work is his penchant for questioning and complicating images of black men in the white cultural imagination.

In Gray's view, racial narratives only enforce prejudice, and prevent black men from achieving manhood through free activism, and instead of penning these narratives, "Baldwin foregrounds performance, voice and community as the vehicles through which black men wrestle with and re-negotiate their identities" (Clark, 2002, p.34). Here is Baldwin's literary concern: redefining manhood in an American society devoid of Jim Crow.

The current study takes a stand from Baldwin's short story "Going to Meet the Man", published in 1965. "Going to Meet the Man" is about Jesse, a white deputy Sheriff who struggles to recover from emasculation in a Southern city at the post Civil War era. The story spots a white law enforcer, who is unable to comply with both his marital and professional duties, and who needs to fill the gap. The interest of this study lies in the new context of race relations at the post Civil War period, where the yoke of bondage is removed from black men's necks, positioning them as equal to their former masters. The new context requires adjustments from white males in order to keep their supremacy moving and unchallenged by the growing black population. The same way, Jesse in "Going to Meet the Man" is discomforted by the demonstrations organized by the black

community, and the fear of failing to maintain order in the city turns him mad and unable to stand alone.

From a psychoanalyst approach, this paper focuses on Jesse's search for manhood, which implicitly means that, he is emasculated and needs to reassert his status as a dominant white male character. Psychoanalysis is a "form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders" and in which context the patient is expected to "talk freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts are brought into the conscious mind" (Barry, 2002, p.96). Similarly, the theory helps to unveil the characters' inner feelings governing some of their unusual behaviors. The theory then diagnoses and helps understand Jesse's abnormal behavior. The paper first discusses how the concept of manhood is expressed in the text; after it goes on to scrutinize the meaning of Jesse's sexual impotence, the healing of which requires a psychological process in which Jesse must reminisce memories of violence inflicted to some black victims. The paper finally contrasts Jesse, the main character with the American legendary Jesse James, to question the protagonist's approach to the search of manhood.

### **1. Manhood as Depicted in James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man"**

James Baldwin has dedicated his works to the place of the black male character in the American society after hundreds years of emasculation and debasement. In "Going to Meet the Man" Baldwin's characters are majorly men, black and white and their relations are interwoven with violence, horrors and hard struggle to free themselves from the social grids that bind them together.

The issue of manhood in Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" is both physically and verbally depicted. The unnamed narrator is an omniscient storyteller who merges into male characters' inner world to unveil to the reader their motivations. As male characters, society expects from them courage, virility and domestic responsibility. The narrative mainly focuses on Jesse the white deputy Sheriff whose reminiscence of memories moves the story. It develops

themes like male sexual performance, the journey from boyhood to manhood (maturity and social responsibility) and the black male's emasculation through white oppression and the ritual of castration.

Manhood is then a multifaceted concept in the story, and it ranges from the protagonist's ability to comply with his role as a law enforcer at work and as a husband at home. Of course, his manhood is challenged by some factors, especially black people's demonstration at the courthouse that causes him insomnia. The demonstration itself is an expression of manhood, which challenges Jim Crow laws. Especially in the South, a black man needs nerves in order to challenge a white man whether physically or verbally. Jesse remembers the young black boy who has once humiliated him as being the black imprisoned activist he is yet torturing in the cell. Jesse's victim grew from a mere boy to a civil right activist, and even under torture, he retaliates against black misrepresentation in the American society:

““My grandmother's name was Mrs. Julia Blossom. Mrs. Julia Blossom. You going to call our women by their right names yet. – And those kids ain't going to stop singing. We going to keep on singing until everyone of you miserable white mothers go stark raving out of your minds.””<sup>18</sup>

Jesse's abuses reenergize the boy instead of keeping him and the kids' singing silent altogether. The boy's courage and determination to face violence is an expression of manhood. He wins the battle over the Sheriff who is much more emasculated by the inefficiency of his hard and unlawful methods of enforcing the law.

The discourse of manhood also encompasses male sexual performance which accounts for Jesse's incapacity to achieve erection without making connection to any sexual intercourse he had with some black girls or abuses and violence he directs on black people. Jesse's sexual pathology is anchored in Jim

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<sup>18</sup> James Baldwin. *Going to Meet the Man*. (London: Corgi Books, 1965) p. 1752. The subsequent quotations from this edition will be marked (GTMTM) followed by the page number.

Crow tradition: a deliberate satisfaction in abusing and oppressing black people and this cannot account for qualities of a real man, which need to be socially asserted and proven to other real men. Unlike Jesse who suffers from sexual disorder, the account of his parents' love making (*GTMTM*, p.1756) tells of a man who faithfully complies with his marital duties.

The last aspect of manhood discussed here is the scene of lynching that ends with the victim's castration. The argument is the idea behind the removal of the black victim's privates and the very ritual of it. Generally, animals are castrated in order to slow the rate of reproduction, but why does a white lynch mob celebrate and rejoice about the hanging, castration and burning of a black innocent man? Is it not to terrorize the growing black population? To some extent, castration is symbolic of the extinction of the black population, which is worked out by white supremacists. Yes of course! Violence directed on black people is to remove from their minds the idea of equality to their white counterparts, and keep on believing in their inferior status. The scene of lynching which is awkward does not actually refrain black men from asserting themselves. Through the mob lynching, the white man has degenerated into insanity by referring to it as a picnic party (*GTMTM*, p. 1758, 1760).

## **2. The Meaning of Jesse's Sexual Impotence**

James Baldwin raises the issue of manhood in his short story, and focuses on the protagonist's sexual impotence to question what remains of white supremacy in the post-Civil War South. Jesse is spotted in his incapacity to make love to his wife, who actually lies beneath him, waiting for it. His wife wonders: "what's the matter?" (*GTMTM*, p.1750) Jesse's sexual disorder is not rooted in his hard work as his wife argues, but in the fear of black people's demonstration of the next morning: "Goddamn the niggers. The black striking coons. They going to out tomorrow" (*GTMTM*, p.1750). Jesse fears black domination and the awareness of the next morning's demonstration actually disturbs him. He knows ahead the outcome of it in the power relation context. Jesse tries to relieve his

mind: “The niggers are getting ready. Well, they would be ready, too” (*GTMTM*, p.1750). The black demonstration of the next morning awakens him all night and leads him into a kind of madness; talking alone and sometimes to himself. The trouble with him is a result of fear for black people’s overwhelming power.

Joe Gorman (2009, p.120) writes in *Oppression through Sexualization: The Use of Sexualization in “Going to Meet the Man” and “The Shoyu Kid”*: “While he struggles with sudden impotence, he is also wrestling with his own sense of masculinity. Because he is not able to perform, Jesse’s sense of manhood appears to be slipping out of his reach.” From his sudden sexual handicap raises his fear of being emasculated, which actually seems true. He knows for sure that black demonstrations are legal and nothing will stop them, and the law that he enforces is unconstitutional, but he has to faithfully comply with his duty as the protector of the white race. Gorman (2009, p.120) carries on by stating that, by his position, Jesse is carrying out a self-proclaimed duty of providing a protection not merely for women, but for his own masculinity and white superiority. While Jesse is sexualizing his victim, he is also moving to reclaim his own sexual and racial dominance. In a sense, he, a white male, is raping the hypersexualized African American man, thereby establishing a defined and supreme role.

Considering himself as the guardian of the white race, he must quickly regain his manhood to impose himself in front of the agitation of the black race. His fears shows that he loses control of the situation, and consequently power over black people, and events are likely to overthrow the white tradition to give new alternatives in racial relations. James Baldwin successfully connects the man’s virility to power, and by the time he becomes sexually impotent, his power also fades. In Jesse’s case, sex and power are interwoven to the extent that, the narrator ironically wonders:

He was a big, healthy man and he had never had any trouble sleeping. And he wasn’t old enough yet to have any trouble getting it up—he was only forty-two. And he was a good man, a God-fearing man, he had tried to do his

duty all his life, and he had been a deputy sheriff for several years. Nothing had ever bothered him before, certainly not getting it up (*GTMTM*, p.1750).

Jesse's troubles come from his fears for the black people's demonstration of the next morning. He ahead feels unable to manage the situation and his sexual impotency is the manifestation of his fears which actually are well grounded because of black people's determination to protest against injustices done to them. Nothing bothers a man more than his awareness of his handicap to carry on his ordinary duties, and in Jesse's case the idea of Blacks overthrowing white supremacy makes his blood run cold. The remedy to the fading white supremacy which is manifested in his sexual impotency is the search of manhood, which is the main argument of the coming section.

### **3. Reminiscing Memories: Jesse's Search for Manhood**

James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" is also about a search for manhood by an emasculated man. In the search for manhood at the individual level, which equals to white supremacy at the collective level, Jesse should kill the black male character that is known to be sexually powerful and physically strong. Trudier Harris (1998, p.229-230) writes in "White Men as Performers in the Lynching Ritual," The white male's function, ostensibly, was to protect his home and especially the white woman...The white man's craving for power and mastery [are] indications of his ultimate superiority not only in assigning a place to his women, but especially in keeping black people, particularly black men, in the place he had assigned for them.

By repressing black male's virility through violence, abuses and lynching mobs, the white male is performing the ritual of black male's emasculation. In "Going to Meet the Man" Jesse is appointed deputy sheriff to enforce Jim Crow laws in a context where, black emancipation becomes a threat to white supremacy. In his search for manhood, he fantasizes on hurting powerless people or feeling orgasm with black girls he raped. Jesse remembers the story of a black boy who



humiliated him when he was working for a mail-order house, and who was jailed for activism. Jesse tortured the boy until he felt satisfied, and during his incapacity to achieve erection, he reminisces and enjoys the event. This psychotherapy has successfully worked: the sheriff is sexually enjoying this violent scene which seems like rape:

“You had enough? You going to make them stop that singing now?” But the boy was out. And now he was shaking worse than the boy had been shaking. He was glad no one could see him. At the same time, he felt very close to a very peculiar, particular joy; something deep in him and deep in his memory was stirred, but whatever was in his memory eluded him. He took off his helmet. He walked to the cell door. “White man,” said the boy from the floor, behind him. He stopped. For some reason, he grabbed his privates (*GTMTM*, p.1752).

This scene which is a mixture of Jesse’s sleepless night account and his recall of his private visit to the boy in the cell is all about sexuality. Jesse enjoys beating the boy, just like a rapist or any psychopath would enjoy abusing his victim, and by grabbing his privates, he has reached orgasm.

Jesse also wishes to be sexually efficient like black males, and his failure to make love to Grace, his wife, increases his fears of being completely emasculated. Sexual prowess enters the spectrum of manhood, and Jesse’s impotence is a sign of a declining white supremacy. He is a law enforcer, and he should not be the weakest link in the chain. The scene of the mob lynching with the ritual of the removal of the black victim’s privates is a transfer of sexual prowess. This ritual may have received all males’ approbation, since it emasculates the Black and empowers the white male. The narrator explains how Jesse enjoyed the scene, when the man with the knife

took the nigger’s privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them. In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger’s private seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, huge, much bigger than his father’s, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. The white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them (*GTMTM*, p.1760).

From this ritual, white males are energized since the lynched victim's manhood has been removed, but still they admire his genitals. On the victim's castration, Harris (1998, p.303) comments that, "the black man is stripped of his prowess, but the very act of stripping brings symbolic power to the white man." Especially for Jesse, only the reminiscence of the scene of lynching, the story of the boy he beat in the cell and his sexual abuses on black girls can help him perform and reach orgasm:

Grace stirred and touched him on the thigh: the moonlight covered her like glory. Something bubbled up in him, his nature again returned to him. He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow; She stared at him in a moonlight which has now grown cold as ice. He thought of the morning and grabbed her, laughing and crying, crying and laughing, and he whispered, as he stroked her, as he took her..... (GTMTM, p.1761).

The sexual performance has not been completely transferred through the ritual of castration in the narrative. This is to sustain that, the removal of the black victim's genitals does not help Jesse to completely recover from his handicap and the following passage shows it: "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar and love me just like you'd love a nigger" (GTMTM, p.1761). The black man's sexual prowess is acclaimed through Jesse's invitation of his wife. He is unable to make love to his wife without first shifting his psyche into a black man's skin. This justifies the black man's emasculation in the narrative and which is symbolized by the castration of the lynching victim. The scene is actually a transfer of psychological satisfaction. All of the white people gathered for the lynching party would want the huge genitals, to fill the gap of white sexual impotence as Trudier Harris (1998, p.302) well explains: "the white men involved in the lynchings and burnings spent an inordinate amount of time examining the genitals of the black men whom they were about to kill...there was a suggestion of fondling, of envious caress." Seen as an actual ritual to improve white men's sexual prowess, the narrator recalls Jesse's parents love scene, upon their return from the lynching party. That night,

Jesse was awakened and he could hear “his mother’s moan, his father’s sigh; he gritted his teeth. Then their bed began to rock. His father’s breathing seemed to fill the world” (*GTMTM*, p.1756). This seems to clearly demonstrate that, the ritual was a success, and from then, Jesse had sex with many black ladies. He groans to the boy in the cell: “You are lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while---your women! Here’s what I got for all the black bitches in the world” (*GTMTM*, p.1753). His fondness for black women is a sign of sexual satisfaction with them, which is not the case with his wife Grace. The Sheriff is in need of courage to enforce the law, and at the same time sexual virility to comply with his marital duties, and he knows that black people already fully enjoy them. From this discovery, the Sheriff transfers his fantasies into a black man’s self to fully fulfill them. Especially, Jesse must abuse black people to establish his authority, and must also emasculate them and transfer their manhood in his psychology and feel like a man again. This argument is valid when white supremacy is exercised: superiority is expressed in reference to something that is inferior, to mean that, Whites always need Blacks to be a benchmark for comparison. Of course, it takes more than one item for comparison, and in this context, White must forcibly invent and enforce rules making them superior and Blacks inferior.

#### **4. Jesse, the Protagonist versus the Legendary American Jesse James.**

In this section, the work focuses on the legitimacy of the protagonist’s manhood by contrasting his character to the legendary Jesse James. The idea behind this is to unveil James Baldwin’s intentions when giving his coward protagonist the name of a courageous and legendary American figure. Who actually was Jesse James? Allen M. Sherrill (2015, p.6) in his work entitled *Based on a True Story: Jesse James and the Reinterpretation of History in Popular Media*, briefly presents the man: “Jesse James was one of only a handful of individuals throughout the course of American history that could truly be called a “legend in his own time.” Well

before Robert Ford murdered him, James was an icon to many who dreamed of living a life of excitement and daring." Jesse James was a legend, just like Robin Hood or Zorro, who actually had existed in real life. My concern in contrasting the story's protagonist with the legendary Jesse James is to draw attention on Baldwin's deconstruction of the Sheriff's legal authority. Jesse James was a legend and embodied the American hero, from his outlaw and robbery life, whereas James the deputy sheriff represents an illegal power. Jesse James was well known for his enrollment in the Confederates during the Civil War:

In the spring of 1864, the lanky 16-year-old with sharp blue eyes joined a bloodthirsty guerrilla group led by "Bloody Bill" Anderson. They terrorized pro-Union enemies in the Missouri countryside. Still an impressionable teenager, Jesse participated in multiple atrocities, including the notorious Centralia massacre, in which 22 unarmed Union soldiers and a hundred other Union soldiers were butchered. These experiences helped define the man he would become.<sup>19</sup>

At sixteen, Jesse James was already a good fighter and distinguished himself in different military operations, including atrocities in which he killed a good number of enemies. Here is no intention of praising Jesse James for his barbarous achievements, but this is a parallel with Baldwin's protagonist who is impotent and enjoys abusing helpless people. I argue that, Baldwin intentionally names him after the legendary Jesse James to draw the large gap that exists between coward white racists who are resentful to black people's advancement and their fellow whites who see no fear about it. The Sheriff's emasculation makes him unfit to embody the American hero, whereas Jesse James' courage as an outlaw and Civil War soldier makes him famous and a heroic figure. By enjoying abuses on defenseless people, the Sheriff hopes to recover from his impotence and gain back his psychological balance, but black people's emancipation agenda will not

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<sup>19</sup> From <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/james-jesse/> Accessed 24/03/2021 at 21:20

play in his favor, because “They had this line you know, to register, and they wouldn't stay where Big Jim C. wanted them” (*GTMTM*, p.1751). At the Emancipation era, many black people viewed protest as the only way to get what they have been denied from since they set foot on the American soil. Nothing can stop them from fighting to get their freedom.

### **Conclusion**

The current study has discussed James Baldwin's protagonist journey to manhood in both the marital and professional contexts. The study stems from the protagonist's psychological disorder, which clouds his state of an emasculated sheriff deputy. The analysis has found that, Jesse the protagonist is actually afraid of being unable to handle the black people's demonstration before the court house. The fear of the next morning's troubles with black demonstration makes him impotent to make love to his wife. Conclusively, Jesse's impotence is actually a result of fear generated by black people's assail to release one of theirs, who is jailed in the context of civil rights activism. The next step which is the protagonist's search for manhood is discussed as a process of healing from emasculation. As a sheriff deputy, Jesse must enforce the law, which means that, he must overcome all fears and make keep order in the town. His double impotence (marital and professional) must be healed through the reminiscence of violence and torture on some black people. To gain back his manhood, Jesse must emasculate the black man (whom he thinks is sexually efficient and physically stronger than him). The scene of lynching and castration of the black victim's genitals is seen as the ritual of Jesse's recovery from sexual impotence. Jesse also remembered how he once tortured a young black boy at the jail in order to gain self-confidence and courage. Through these series of memories associated to violence and sexuality, Jesse is working out to recover from emasculation. The last issue developed in this work is a personal thought where I contrasted the protagonist with the legendary Jesse James. In my analysis, I argued that, Baldwin intentionally named the

protagonist Jesse to ridicule the way he struggles to reach fame and manhood in comparison to the legendary Jesse James (who was well known for his bravery in the Civil War and his outlaw character). This comparative approach makes Jesse the protagonist a coward and Jesse James, an American legendary hero. In a nutshell, this work has unveiled the white racists' strategies to maintain white supremacy by psychologically and physically emasculating black men. James Baldwin, through "Going to Meet the Man" is actually puzzling the issue of manhood: who between the white oppressor and the black oppressed embodies manhood? The answer may come from the interrogation: why do white racists oppress black men? The same question is central to the current movement of Black Lives Matter: why is the police shooting at some black defenseless and unarmed young men?

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