CHAPTER -VI
ARTISTIC QUEST

In his writings, James Baldwin displays the nature of his own specifically artistic quest, which includes the search for the real, and the development of his personality as an artist. He impresses the readers by his powerful, moving and ennobling account of the nature and development of his extraordinary soul. He describes his struggle against the perverted human contexts in which he grew up. His experiences vividly explain what sources of strengths were needed to protect his own individuality, innate talents, and his humanity from dissipation and degeneration. His dilemma was essentially that which has always faced that artist who is also, consciously or not, committed to a specific social problem. Baldwin endeavours through his art to express the enduring truth of human experience. The quest for the real takes its birth in a drive which pushes one into the depth of ordinary, everyday occurrences and opens out to the extra-ordinary dimensions of life, it unveils the real, which is to be found in and through the essential core of one’s experience.

Baldwin aimed at demonstrating a certain competence in dealing artistically with the raw material of his experiences: his commitment was to see his aesthetic and social responsibilities as constituting a whole that does not discard the meaning of his experience and his desire to express this in an artistically satisfying way. To him the development of a purposeful public voice
was as essential as the formulation of an artistic vision of life. With his experiences Baldwin accomplished “the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.” (N.N.S. 7)

This quest for turns inward in order to perceive one’s own potentialities and limitations and steps outward toward the others in the society and understanding their past. Accepting “one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it, it is learning how to use it.” (T.F.N.T. 111). Central to Baldwin’s essays is his concept and use of history. The inability to face one’s history means a lack of maturity and “until we excavate our history, we will never know who we are” (M. Preston, ed.“The Image:Three Viewers, Opers News-8th Decemr1962,p.10). Baldwin is of the view that the black is ill-treated in America because history is written in the colour of his skin. This is the central fact in the history of America. No matter how much he must suffer in America, no matter how much he fears and hates the torture rouse into which he is cast, Baldwin realizes that, he must live in America. It is only after his return from Europe then he makes his odyssey to the south that he is able to appreciate the positive results, the strength and beauty of the people who have suffered slavery and the most appalling social and economic inequalities.

Whether one believes every sordid details of Baldwin’s particular experiences or not, his portrait of black life in general impresses the readers as true. Baldwin does not exaggerate the dread, despair and depravity of the lives of
the blacks in America. Through his artistic portrayal Baldwin makes the readers wonder what sort of commitment and strength could have overcome the forces seeking to knock him down.

Protest literature, Baldwin argues, is false because it seeks to deny man’s freedom; and its murky sentimentality, and the tendency to offer the facile explanation of man as a social being devoid of all complexity are the defects of such literature. Protest fiction and the naturalistic novel treat man as a simple product of biological and environmental determinism. They deny the possibility of escape from these external forces. Fantasy and escapism are unknown elements in the actual lives of black people, but the literature that presents and interprets their life is firmly rooted in realism. The black writer seeks to present a picture of experience and also attempts to re-order the chaos of reality.

All art may be seen as protest by virtue of its commitment on the one hand to offer mechanical reproduction of reality and on the other to suggest a radical revision of that reality. Baldwin’s views on the hidden truth of the protest novel are well-known. Far from being to tool for liberation, the protest novel merely perpetuates the false image of blackness, an image that the white American cherishes. Baldwin explains the psychological necessity for the white man to construct an image of black inferiority and to hold this image between himself and the truth. Paradoxically the image reflects not black reality but white guilt.
Baldwin in his fiction presents his characters with their faults and strength, as full human beings, not as propagandistic caricatures of good and evil. He has recognized the danger to artistic and realistic rendering of character that are presented with an intention of propaganda. He was committed to present his characters without minimizing their faults or extrapolating their virtues. His writings may serve as a powerful weapon in a just cause, but the fact that it is essentially a protest does not deter him from telling the story of his own soul. His writings besides telling the story of the development of his personality as an artist, reveals what his life may have in common with the lives of others. It show how Baldwin is moulded, through a struggle with stifling and hostile forces and gives the meaning of his artistic endeavours and achievements.

The efforts of Baldwin to protect himself against the violence of oppressive white society and the corrupt and oppressive forces of the ghetto life are vividly delineated. Normally, the powers of a black man are allowed to dissipate in a self-consuming way, whether he knows his place and retains it or drowns his desires in drugs and sex. At times he releases his rancor in crimes of wanton destruction and endless violence, or in religious frenzy. But Baldwin is not destroyed in his attempt to withstand the pernicious forces; he learns to endure, he is even tempered by them. The meaning of his blackness is contained in having endured these forces. All his powers are concentrated and converted into creative and transformative fire.
This struggle to revive and nurture the positive human qualities is led by the struggle to feel and record human suffering and hurt. To feel and to be hurt is a necessary condition for meaningful and committed action on behalf of others in pain. Pain and suffering are universal themes in literature, if art is a criticism of life. The most authentic quality of the black writer’s life is not alienation, certainly not the complacency of affluence, but a seemingly inescapable hurt. His commitment is to record this hurt and while doing this he has to retain sanity and to keep his feet firmly upon the ground of his unique experience. As he records his hurt, he conceives himself as an artist. Baldwin thinks of his art as a high calling for his commitment is to the human race and his responsibility is to the future.

He sees all about him moral bankruptcy and raises the cry of what to do to save the world. He confronts the sordid facts of American life and attempts at an imaginative grasp of the complex aspects of the human conditions, and a creative perspective on future possibilities. He sees the object as in itself it really is. To do this demands disinterestedness that is especially difficult for Baldwin. Rage sometime overpowers, and hate gets the upper hand. Baldwin is convinced that “the artist cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being” and that the ultimate concern of the writer is to examine Sattitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source.” (N.N.S. 6). This implies that the role of
the artist is to present the real life experience to others. The artist corrects the distortions to which the society falls a prey in its efforts to avoid this knowledge. The artist explores and expresses an adequate perspective of the disturbing complexity of the people and enables them to discover the power that will free from their foibles and illusions.

He is convinced that Americans must take an honest look at themselves and their country, especially in their dealing with the blacks. He warns the whites to mend their ways to avert their doomsday and look objectively at themselves and at others so that they can perceive who and what they are. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted. Therefore the writer’s duty as artist imposes on him the role of a warrior. The exercise of such responsibility by the artist involves risks and requires extraordinary power and dedication. The society isolates its artists for their vision and penalizes them. This is not the artist’s fault, though the artist will have to take the initiative in changing this state of affairs. “One is always in the position of having to decide between amputation and gangrene.” (N.N.S. 112) Amputation means restructuring and gangrene means allowing the status quo to continue. Baldwin’s language from his first writings has been distinguished, precise, well-ordered, very sophisticated, it could describe extreme experiences with chill casualness, and apparently trivial experiences with a simple but effective use of extreme language that conveyed the underlying importance of the apparently trivial.
One can change the situation, even though it may seem impossible. To accomplish this task he must be influenced by wholesome forces. Baldwin’s influences were the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in black speech. “My models – my private models – are not Hemingway, not Faulkner, not Dos Passos, or indeed any American writer. I model myself on jazz musicians, dancers, a coupling of whores and a few junkies…” (Ferry Marja Eckman, op.cit., 242).

Baldwin’s autobiographical intimacy with such materials required and received artistic skill and distance. Baldwin created fiction that transcended racial and religious categories became an evoked image of man facing the inscrutable universal forces. Baldwin examines closely his own experience through his act. He never attempts to ignore his blackness. He acknowledges both the sweet and bitter influences that have shaped his life and art. Neither does he base his artistic motivation upon the desire to escape his blackness. He would like to transcend or obliterate all structures, stereotypes, superstitions, whether they are imposed by white men or set up, defensively, by blacks.

Evidently, Baldwin wishes to reduce the importance of his blackness, not because of the shame which he has been forced to feel but rather because in emphasizing this essential fact, he is that much further alienated from his perceived ideal of himself as a human being and artist. Perhaps he sees that being
a black man in America tends to frustrate the achievement of the emotional distance necessary to artistic creation.

The unique feature of his style is his tendency to relate his personal life and experiences with whatever commentary he offers on social and moral questions. His caustic comments on social realities evolve directly from his personal experiences. He, therefore, speaks with an authority. His astonishing flow of high eloquence is denounced by critics as speechmaker’s prose. Baldwin seems to have lost respect for the novel as a form, and his great facility with language serves only to ease his violations of literary strictness. Like Baldwin’s stepfather, Johnny, the protagonist of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was an incongruous mixture of piety and cruelty. “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (16). But Johnny, like Baldwin, “would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life.” (Go Tell, p. 18) Baldwin committed himself to be a writer. This eventually made him famous.

Baldwin had always been as much a preacher as a writer. In his style, there remained the atmosphere of the pulpit. In his works a sublime rhetoric rushes out, as in a sermon. Baldwin includes a number of sermons in his novels and short stories.

The profession of preaching served as a launching pad for Baldwin to enter the realm of literature. The synthesis of down-to-earth parables and biblical
examples is an exercise for anyone who wishes to master the technique of writing fiction. His prose has rhythm, and an irresistible charm of the evangelical oratory. Gabriel Grimes’ sermon, for example, blends logic and passion and becomes at once rational and emotive: For let us remember that the wages of sin is death; that it is written, and cannot fail, the soul that sinneth, it shall die. Let us remember that we are born in sin, in sin did our mothers conceive us – sin reigns in all our members, sin is the foul heart’s natural liquid, sin looks out of the eye, amen, and leads to folly, sin sits on the tongue, and leads to murder. Yes! Sin is the only our natural father, that fallen Adam, whose apple sickens and will sicken all generations living, and generation yet unborn! It was sin that drove the Adam out of Eden, sin that caused Cain to slay his brother, sin that built the tower of Babel, sin that caused the fire to fall on Sodom – sin, from the very foundations of the world, living and breathing in the heart of man, that causes women to bring forth their children in agony and darkness, bows down the backs of men with terrible labor, keeps the empty belly empty, keeps the table bare, sends our children dressed in rags out into the whorehouses and dance halls of the world !(116).

The subject of his sermons is invariably the life that lacks live, but his real audience is white America, in spite of the fact that his following among black Americans as large and loyal. He committed himself to be the messiah of the maltreated and therefore his words are aimed at those from the through as their
tormentors. He also imbibed a sense of theological terror engendered by man’s unequal relationship to the Heavenly Father rather than his equal relationship to his brethren, both black and white.

This sermonic style of the black ministry is ideally suited for personal testimony, for the conveyance of faith, passion and commitment. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is saturated with a religious perspective drawing from the Christian tradition. The entire text is peppered with scriptural references, allusions, images, symbols, names, concepts and rituals. The title of the work is derived from the combination of the Christian plantation song, “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and scriptural passages from the Old Testament. The novel’s epigraph is also derived from the same sources. Each of the three sections of the novel, both in sub-title and epigraph, is drawn from Biblical sources.

A study of Baldwin’s use of irony and sly teasing reveals his artistic distance from the characters and his attitude toward their religious beliefs. The narrative technique as used by Baldwin reveals an internal and subjective point of view limited to the though, feelings and perceptions of Johnny. Baldwin uses irony of statement and event in the action and ironic voice on the whole as a character. Johnny “wanted to obey the voice, which was the only voice that spoke to him; .......... only the ironic voice insisted yet once more that he rise from that filthy floor if he did not want to become like all the other niggers.” (Go Tell p. 220). Although Johnny speaks in the third person, the point of view is
strictly maintained, so that even the physical appearance of the hero is described subjectively through comments he hears from others and the images he sees in the mirror. The readers follow Johnny through the course of his fourteenth birthday, as if they were experiencing the events with him.

Baldwin’s excellent command of language and his penchant for poetic expression are used to present the thoughts of a Harlem Youth without restriction to his grammar and vocabulary. Baldwin’s ear for language and his skill at representing it in print are demonstrated throughout the novel. The subtlety, accent and rhythm of black vernacular English can be experienced in all Baldwin’s fiction. The contrast between the narrators’ diction and the dialogue of the characters emphasizes both the universality of their inner conflicts and the particular circumstances of their lives as blacks in America.

Baldwin introduces verbal irony when he describes human motives in terms of divine providence or when he uses Biblical allusions to imply an action contrary to the meaning of Biblical context. For example, the description about Gabriel and Deborah when they were going to be married informs the readers:

She, prince of darkness! And he smiled, watching the elders’ well-fed faces and their grinding jaws – unholy pastors all, unfaithful stewards; he prayed that he would never be so fat, or so lascivious, but that God should work through him a mighty work: to ring, it might be, through ages yet unborn, as sweet, it
might be, solemn, mighty proof of His everlasting love and mercy. (Go Tell .123).

Gabriel employs Biblical quotations to terrify his congregation and to assert his own righteousness. “Set thine house in order”, said his father: ‘for thou shalt die and not live’ “(Go Tell p. 222). The first mention of this text is placed just after the breakfast scene, which reveals the disordered condition of Gabriel’s house and his unhealthy family relationships. A second mention of the text suggests that Gabriel is unaware of his own approaching death.

Deeply rooted in the social realistic tradition, Baldwin’s Another Country (1962) examines the lives of a group of young Americans at a specific period in history. “Talk about art vs. propaganda. Another Country was almost nothing but propaganda; propaganda for homosexuality.” The prose is, in places, clumsy. Baldwin instead of portraying the characters like an artist explains like a spokesman. The novelist and the essayist alternatively appear throughout the novel.

The novel Tell Me How Long the Tran’s Been Gone (1968) is long, but the main effect of its size is to display its faults in abundance. The narrative is presented largely in the form of flashbacks, the language is uninventive. The opinionated voice of the essayist intrudes into the novel. The protagonist Leo’s voice is in fine, Baldwin’s voice.
Leo, his parents, and Caleb his elder brother are evolved in the various episodes. Through experiences of these people, the reader witnesses some of the circumstances and shocks to which Harlem life is heir. Life in apartment houses, juvenile delinquency, crime, police brutality and the evils of racism are dealt with. The quality of coherence in the story is affected because the various episodes that appear to be flashbacks prove to be reminiscences embedded in other reminiscences.

Baldwin took the bold step of making the narrative of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) female. In trying to endow the female narrator Tish with a depth of wisdom and a vocabulary which should have been beyond her capabilities, Baldwin only does her harm, for he deprives her, a character of her own. The hallmarks of black vernacular English are its rich ironic wit, poetic double-edge, and rhetorical ‘ripping’. They are abundantly displayed by Langston Hughes in his simple sketches. But Tish, a Harlem girl conveys her thoughts through an analytic literary medium. This raises the charge that Baldwin has misrepresented and undersold black speech.

One can learn the special features of black speech by going through *Little Man, Little Man* such as “He about the color of chocolate cake without no icing on it. Except when he grin, but he don’t really never grin, except at TJ and sometime he act like he don’t see him,” “Them eye-glasses blinking just like the sun was hitting you in the eye”, “This street long, It real long”, “TJ more like he
in a jungle where he can’t get no satisfaction”, “But she ain’t no boy” (7-33) and so on.

Just Above My Head (1979) contains too many characters, too many long-winding conversations and descriptions, too many rhetorical passages and too much of authorial intrusions. Unlike Tish who tells her own story, Julia has no narrative voice, her life and passions are revealed through the male psyche of Hall. The novel is replete with flashback technique. Baldwin came into contact with a number of artists, both black and white, who were to be major influences on him. Beauford Delaney, a painter, was credited with teaching Baldwin how to see clearly everything with an artist’s point of view and how to trust what he saw and to question the meaning of what he saw. Baldwin has dedicated his books to some of his artist-friends. For example, he dedicated his book of short stories Going to Meet the Man to Beauford Delaney.

It is interesting to note that many of the Baldwin’s heroes are artists by profession, men whose deep sensibility unveils them to the evils of their community and allows them a perception whereby they come up with proper responses. It is by no means a necessary and sufficient condition of success that the responsibility of the artist should end with the lyric expression of frustration and anger. Ultimately, Leo’s final declaration of commitment at the end of Tell Me How Long the Tran’s Been Gone must be seen as an eloquent indication of Baldwin’s advocacy of a new perspective on life. Leo’s commitment to the
politics of active confrontation indicates Baldwin’s belief in the essential worth of man and the responsibility of the artists.

Music and measure lend grace to human personality. It is very important to realize that music, like all art regardless of its form, is ideological. It reflects or transmits certain political, class and national interests. A creative and revolutionary music, however, is more than just are deliberately realistic, and they unfold the sordid details of living. Like A. Murray, Baldwin seems to consider that “the whole point of the blues idiom is to state the facts of life……..the ugliness and meanness inherent in the human condition. It is thus a device for making the best of a bad situation” (Albert Murray, The Hero and the Blues, The Paul Anthony Brick Lectures, Ninth series:Missouri Pres,1973,p.36). To communicate one’s feelings through the blues, one must be frank and upright and one must also have suffered intensively. Only those who have undergone suffering and have triumphed over their torments can understand the message of the blues and can communicate to other sufferers through their music. In the short story “Sonny’s Blue”, the hero’s particular sufferings are his own, but he communes with others through his music. This proves that music unites all the sufferers. The blues music is a sedative both for the singer and his audience. It offers a timely relief from the pains of their daily realities.

The blues seemed a natural vehicle in which to express Baldwin’s ideas. For incidents in his own life had many reflective, but criticizes the very social
mosaic of the society, and ultimately contributes towards giving shape to the reconstruction of that society. Black music is the most socially conscious music. It has been the music called the blues and the jazz. They reveal the realities of self, society, nation and race to their practitioners and listeners. They comfort the people in their hours of pain and encourage them to fulfill their commitments.

The profound suffering revealed in blues music especially in the music of Bessie Smith, seems to have special significance for Baldwin himself if one is to believe that most moving and effective art is autobiographical. Baldwin fled to Europe and in Switzerland he discovered his identity as an American. “There, in that absolutely alabaster landscape, I began to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight.” (N.K.M.N.,18). The blues must have had for Baldwin some meaning associated with the fundamental experiences that mould one’s personality. They had a special significance for Baldwin since they connected him with his blackness, his Americanness, and with that which makes him an individual. The blues are laconic and mellifluous. They similarities to the contents of many blues lyrics: (a) early desertion by the man in his life, for Baldwin was an illiterate child, (b) continued search for love, extreme poverty, hunger and white racism, (c) perseverance to overcome the difficulties and (d) the message as to how the others can survive in a racist society.
Like the blues, Baldwin’s writings proclaim that there is something vitally wrong with this world. Traditionally, singing the blues symbolized the meaninglessness of the pains of the black people and artistically expressed it in words blended with music. It offered the blacks a certain distance from their pains and allowed them to view their pains artistically. That the blacks could master pains without bye-passing meant that they were not subdued by them.

This commitment to survival against odds is persistent in Baldwin’s writings. Baldwin through his writings, like blues singer attempted to teach and to delight, to strengthen and to pull his people together as they stand and serve in spite of the meanness inherent in the human condition. “The blues are an attempt to retain the memory of pain, to transcend catastrophe, not by taking thought …… for that often only adds to the pain…… but by an attitude a nearly comic, nearly tragic lyricism” (135). Only when one is honest about the particulars of one’s own experience can one become stronger because of those experiences; likewise only when one recognize the universality of human suffering can one profit from the particular sorrows of others.

The title of the book *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is from a black spiritual:

Go Tell it on the Mountain,

Over the hills and everywhere;

Go Tell it on the Mountain,

That Jesus Christ is born” (313).
Earlier tentative titles of the book were “Crying Holy” and “In My Father’s House” and “The Birth”. The last title chosen suggests the new birth of John represented in his conversion at the end of the book.

Throughout Another Country Baldwin refers to blues and the great jazz musicians such as W.C. Handy in the epigraph, Fats Walter, Charlie Parker, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday. His intention was to show that these musicians have tremendous social significance. The title If Beale Street Could Talk is a line from an old W.C. Handy blues. Though Beale Street actually offered few opportunities for success to blacks, it grew to fame as the birth-place of the American blues. It is both the evil effect of racism and the value of the blue as a tool of survival that Baldwin is attempting to depict in this novel. The weak and the meek eventually succumb to the racist system, while those who have faith in God and break, their bonds through blues and by extension, through other forms of creative expression are able to survive.

“Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel? And why not every man?"

The song is old, the question unanswered.”

Just Above My Head, the title, is the first line of the song that Ida Scott, the black jazz singer sings in
“Another Country:

“Just Above My Head

I hear music in the air

And I really do believe

There’s a God somewhere” (313).

The joy comes only out of pain and examination of pain. The resolution comes only out of confrontation of pain. *Just Above My Head*, is a gospel tale told in the blues mode. The history of the blacks is in the “sorrow songs” …… gospel, blues and jazz.

In the play *The Amen Corner* gospel hymns are used. They are precursors of the blues as a tool for black survival. As in the earlier black spirituals, the image of heaven served to liberate the black mind. Blacks were able to transcend the difficulties of today and to live as if the future had already come. This faith enables one to gloss over the facts of one’s own life, it is an escapism that permits one to avoid facing the truth, and acts as a mere ruse for survival. It is only after abandoning the escapist beliefs that one can confront one’s failures and frustrations and only then one is fit to sing the blues and to rise above one’s despondency.

Baldwin shows Sister Margaret in *The Amen Corner* as maturing from being over-dependent on God and gospel hymns to relying on herself and other
blacks and the blues for survival. She was learned the truth from Luke when he advised her son, David: “Son don’t try to get away from the things that hurt you. The things that hurt you – sometimes that’s all you get. You got to learn to live with those things and use them”(James Baldwin, The Amen Corner; New York Dial Press,1968,41-42). Baldwin’s commitment was to show the effect of the blues music and how it enables the blacks to face life’s pains honestly, seriously and optimistically, with a strong determination to survive.

Sister Margaret is a dynamic leader of her flock, but she is fanatical and tyrannical. Like Gabriel Grimes, she advises others to “set thin house in order,” yet her house is in fearful disorder: her son is in the process of leaving the church for more mundane pleasures: her dying husband has returned home, after a long separation, to enable her to face the consequences of her choices; and even her hold on her congregation is slipping. Margaret tries to escape the pain of living in the world by embracing a religious faith that has nothing to do with love. Denying her function as a woman, she has turned from her husband’s arms to the sexual surrogate of religious fervour. Religion is shown betraying the primary relationship as Margaret advises a young woman to leave her husband, as she had done the better to serve God. Betrayed by her followers, scorned by her husband Luke and disappointed by her son David, Margaret in her very defeat, manages to gain clarity of vision that constitutes a kind of triumph. To love God is to love all His children and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never
count the cost. Even in the midst of suffering and frustration “You realize that your suffering does not isolate you; your suffering is your bridge” (James Baldwin with Nikki Giovanni, A dialogue: Lippincott, 1973, 74).

**Blues for Mr. Charlie** constitutes another effort by Baldwin to force white America to confront the plague of race. In his prefatory note Baldwin speaks of the necessity to understand even the most unregenerate white, who is after all a product of the national ethos. He may be beyond liberation, but we can “begin working toward the liberation of his children.” (B.C. p. xiv). Baldwin makes it clear that “All white men are Mister Charlie.” (B.C. 40).

Based on the Emmett Till case of 1955, the play treats the racial murder of Richard Henry, a young black man returned home after living in the north, by Lyle Britten, a white store-owner. The murder scene is presented in full at the end of the play, after Lyle has been found innocent of the crime by a racist court. Within this frame Baldwin explores various aspects of racial life and relationships in “Plaguetown”, “The play then for me, takes place in Plaguetown, U.S.A., now. The plague is race, the plague is the concept of Christianity” (B.C. XV). In probing the causes and effects of racism, Baldwin finds the sexual motive to be its core.

Richard is a jazz musician. Like Rufus in *Another Country*, he attempts to achieve racial revenge through contacts with white women. He is proud and sensitive and tormented, too rebellious to survive anywhere in America.
Richard’s specific torment originated in his reaction to the death of his mother, whom he believes to have been murdered by white men for resisting their sexual advances, and his shame at his father’s acquiescence.

After experiencing white racism, he has reached the conclusion that the only way black men can achieve power is by picking up the gun. To pacify his grandmother, he gives his own gun to his father, leaving himself unarmed for the fatal encounter with Lyle. This surrender of the gun shows his recklessness. He goes to the store run by Lyle. In the course of his conversation with Josephine Gladys Britten, Lyle’s wife, Richard teases her. He also mocks at Lyle telling him that he is impotent. The sexual insult is repeated just before Lyle fires his first shot, and the dying Richard accuses Lyle not only of sexual jealousy of him but also of homosexual interest in him. Lyle’s violence proceeds directly from the vicious combination of sex and race. Even Jo complains of Lyle’s luxuriousness and hints at his infidelity. His past affairs include his clandestine relationship with a black woman whose jealous husband he murdered. At the end of the play, Parnell James, the white liberal requests Juanita, “Can I walk with you?” (B.C. 121) and marches alongside the blacks symbolizing his determination to commit himself to the cause of blacks. The play ends with a note of optimism. To Baldwin the theatre and the pulpit are one and the same. “When I entered the church, I ceased going to the theatre. It took me a while to
realize that I was working in one” (Ibid. 29). Later he abandoned the church and preferred the theatre.

Richard’s father, a black preacher says, “You know, for us, it all began with the Bible and the gun. May be it will end the Bible and the gun.” (B.C. 120). He puts Richard’s gun in the pulpit, under the Bible. Baldwin’s life too began with the Bible but did not end with the gun because he committed himself to the theatre, to art and to the positive power of love.

The title story of Baldwin’s collection of short stories “Going to Meet the Man”, presents Jesse, a white police officer, who wants to make love to his wife but is unable to do so. He lies in bed, and recollects a lynching that he witnessed when he was a boy. It tells the readers about the castration and burning of a black man. The readers can feel the action taking place in their presence. One almost hears the howls of the black victim and smells his burning flesh. Baldwin, once again, succeeds in his commitment to portray the relationship between race and sexuality, between white guilt and black anguish.

In his short stories, Baldwin begins by creating a situation, goes on to introduce a conflict or complication and concludes with a resolution of the conflict. “Sonny’s Blues” is the most perfect realized story. There is nothing wasted in the story. It moves from situation to situation. Sonny, like the other artist-protagonists of Baldwin’s novels, is the artist-in-exile. He is out of step
with mainstream society. He marches to the beat of his own drum. He will eventually develop into Rufus or Richard of Baldwin’s other works.

Like Rufus and Richard, Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues’ is musician. He is not able to secure the emotional support he needs from his family. Unlike Rufus, Sonny becomes a dope addict rather than committing suicide in response to his suffering. Through musical expression, he transmutes his own this commitment to love and to share the sufferings of others that constitutes the theme of “Sonny’s Blues”. Baldwin’s message is as basic as it is undeniable. If we do not love one another, we will destroy one another.

Baldwin’s experience as a minister and a playwright is so vigorously applied to his prose style. Role-playing, folk-story telling techniques, repetition for intensity, rhythm and rhetorical flourishes of the sermonic style are found in Baldwin’s prose. Baldwin employs these stylistic features of preaching for secular purposes. Instead of redemption in the eyes of God, Baldwin is committed to the redemption in the eyes of men. God is replaced by love for humanity and morality. It is relevant to note here that Stowe presented Tom in her Uncle Tom’s Cabin as pious, patient and timid. He is murdered by Simon Legree for refusing to betray his escaped fellow slaves, Cassy and Emmeline and for refusing to capitulate to Legree’s demand that he renounce his Christian beliefs. His death results from his aggressive non-violence and Stowe’s representation of Tom as the Christ-figure. Besides Tom, Stowe’s typical Christ-
figure is Eva, the book’s most powerful evangelist. These characters direct suffering and that of his family. Thus he redeems himself and expands his elder brother’s moral awareness.

Sonny’s brother, a conventional, middle-class black man who teaches in a Harlem High School, narrates the story. He keeps himself aloof from the pain surrounding him. He comes to know of Sonny’s arrest on a heroin charge. He also learns more about his brother through a friend of Sonny’s. The very way in which he learns of Sonny’s trouble is a measure of his failure to be his brother’s keeper. This, precisely, was the charge imposed by his mother. Love and support were necessary to save one another from the pervasive darkness or to enable one another to survive it. He recollects his mother’s advice: “You got to hold on to your brother,” she said, “and don’t let him fall, no matter what it looks like is happening to him……”(James Baldwin, Sonny’s Blues, Going to Meet the Man; New York Dial Press, 1965, 118).

After the death of their parents, he has to look after Sonny. He cannot reconcile Sonny’s commitment to jazz. His daughter, Gracie’s death from polio stirs the feelings of his own vulnerability. He is forced to renew his contacts with Sonny. His plan made him realize Sonny’s pain. It is the reader’s sympathies away from the issue of slavery into sentimental feelings. Stowe adopted the sentimental mode in the presumption that emotion is superior to reason, and sensibility to logical ratiocination. Baldwin disapproved sentimentality,
emotional exaggeration and the implicit argument that persistent purity ultimately overcomes vice. He was for the novel of sensibility, which allowed one to feel deeply about any situation without having compunctions that something must be done to rectify it.

In Baldwin’s fiction characters, especially women characters, progress from trying to secure sanctuary in the church to realizing that it offers none. In their lives, Community replaces church, and secular, social commitment replaces traditional religion and the hope of heaven. Baldwin’s women always mean business, they do not wait passively for things to happen, they act. “To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.” (T.F.N.T. 17). Society offers no protection to these women, they are thrust into a world hostile to their very existence. Baldwin’s women study and evaluate circumstances, choose their own destinies in spite of the pressure of family and society. Baldwin’s portrayal transcends race and colour. Through the portrayal of Leona, Cass and Barbara all white women and Florence, Ida, Tish and Juanita all black women, Baldwin proves that the function of a woman is not just keep a house clean and bed warm. Baldwin’s women possess amazing insight, startling depth of compassion and commitment.

Toni Morrison, a black woman writer praises Baldwin thus:

“You made American English honest-genuinely international. You exposed its secrets and reshaped it until it was truly modern, dialogic, representative, and
humane. You stripped it of ease and false comfort and fake innocence and evasion and hypocrisy. And in place of deviousness, clarity. In place of soft plump lies was a lean, targeted power. In place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called “exasperating egocentricity,” you gave us undecorated truth. You replaced lumbering platitudes with an upright elegance. In your hands language was handsome again. In your hand neither bloodless nor bloody, and yet alive” (20).

Baldwin’s words can be angry, sarcastic and apocalyptic but they are always urgent, intended to egg on the readers to realize the gravity of the explosive situation in America and to stimulate them to take appropriate timely action. His major thrust is not to impart knowledge but to provoke and propound eternal truths in order to alleviate human suffering. “Whether or not the United States is a place where persuasion and example can undo the injustices of which Mr. Baldwin speaks, we shall know within a matter of years. It is certain those only years, not generations, are left in which the injustices can be undone” (Dan Jacobson, James Baldwin As Spokesman, Commentary(Dec-1961,502).

The obligation of bestowing universal understanding on human motive and action invariably remains to be performed by the artist. The concept of commitment may include the notion of risk to expose. When the artist witnesses and exposes the realities of existence, the society may not like to be exposed since the society find such exposure embarrassing. “It is for this reason that all
societies have battled with that incorrigible disturber of the peace – the artist……
The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.” (The Price, 316)

The artist finds himself intensely alone in his moments of creation. But this experience of aloneness, in now way prevents him from involving himself actively in political or social affairs. Detachment is essential for the sake of maintaining an independent and impartial perspective. Money, fame and blind acceptance by the society might place the artist in a precariously tight spot where his power of discernment is in peril. The artist must overcome these temptations. Baldwin has served as a spokesman for the artistic conscience in its struggle with its Black inheritance, in its aspiration to a human estate.

Baldwin’s voice sought to reason with the white Americans even as it exposed their equivocation and evasion. He appealed to the decent and humane in the whites, he tried to make them realize that a real egalitarian society served the interests of the humanity of all hues. *The Fire Next Time* announced the threat about the fire next time. At the same time it stressed the virtues of love and brotherhood as a *sine quo non* for averting the imminent disaster. Like the protagonist of one of his short stories, Baldwin realized that “hatred had corrupted me like cancer in the bone.” Peter, the protagonist of the story “Previous Condition” is a young actor. He finds it difficult to identify with the
black or the white society. This difficulty represents the source of his alienation as a black in the white society and as an artist-intellectual in his own society. When he returns to Harlem and takes a drink in a bar there, he muses: “But there was nothing except my color. A white outsider coming in would have seen a young Negro drinking in a Negro bar, perfectly in his element, in his place, as the saying goes. But the people here knew differently as I did. I didn’t seem to have a place.” The last portion of this musing and Peter’s answer to his friend Jules earlier, “No room at the inn” (James Baldwin, Previous Condition, Going to Meet the Man: New York Dial Press, 1965, 94-100) may be juxtaposed with the answer that the parents of Jesus Christ got at Bethlehem. The artists are always kept out of the society, irrespective of their race or colour.

The artist functions as a social palliative and corrective. He alone is capable of striking a balance between the images of Americans both black and white with the truth about them, which they try to evade. He is committed to disturb the complacency of the people and to prepare them to deal with the calamity. His objectivity enables him to perceive the realities and to illuminate the defects of the society. In its sensitivity to shades of discrimination and moral shape, and in its commitment despite everything to America, his voice was comparable in importance to that of any person of letters from recent decades.

To call Baldwin a black writer, then, is to condemn him to a literary ghetto; it is to disengage him from his testimony. Despite all his experiences,
despite all that has been done to him, his response is not a literature delineating the barrenness in which so many Americans wallow. He responds with abundant love and unwavering commitment. The objects of his love and commitment are blacks, America and the humanity as a whole.