CHAPTER III

THE BAPTISM
The play, *The Baptism* represents a *tour de force* among Baraka's plays on account of its addressing itself to the principal issues which define the character of his plays. Moreover, it presents an ironic version of the morality play bordering on the obscene which should not be allowed to influence any assessment of it because it marks the integrity of Baraka's vision just as the puerile and obscene figuring in King Lear's fantasy in the Storm Scene do in respect of Shakespeare's vision. The fact that the play is set in a church and the characters unnamed points to its universal verity. Further, the play is predicated on the conflict between Good and Evil on the theme of Good and Evil which represents the tradition inaugurated by morality play with startling modifications. The play projects an inversion of what signify Good and Evil since the forces of Evil are shown to be centred on the Christian church while the cardinal values of Christianity—love and charity are associated with Homosexual regarded usually as a symbol of moral and sexual perversion.

The experience of play's protagonist, a fifteen-
year old Boy spells a struggle that implies the conflict between Good and Evil for his soul which is both traditional and non-traditional demanded by the ironic design of the play. The play is about a Boy accused by an Old Woman of masturbating while appearing to pray and its action concerns an on-going struggle for the soul and even the body of the Boy between Satan as Homosexual dressed in red colletals and the pompous cliche-uttering Minister. The struggle involves a confrontation between the Old Woman and the Minister of the church and the Homosexual who bluntly accuses them of being hypocritical towards love which Christianity advocates and sexuality which an honest appraisal of the human condition demands.

The Minister and the Old Woman behave in an obnoxious manner not because of their puritanism but because their puritanical postures conceal their own sexual desires which they cannot give vent to openly. As the struggle becomes violent they assault the Homosexual knocking him to the ground and in turn
they are struck by the Boy, with long silver sword having failed to who claims to be the Son of God, Christ since they show neither charity nor love. The play ends with the Boy being carried by a motor cyclist who is presumed to be a messenger of his father.

At the beginning of the play, the Minister bemoans the absence of love and the prevalence of hypocrisy:

Break the chain of ignorance. Lord, in his high place. What returns to us, images, the tone of death ... Not love. Not love. The betrayed music. Stealth. We rise to the tops of our buildings and they name them after us. We take off our hoods (removes red hood) and show our eyes. I am holy father of silence. (Kneels.)

the Homosexual echoing his words (not love not
love) remarks sarcastically:

The man kneeling is only suppliant. Tarzan of the apes of religion. Lothar in the world. Weakling and non-swimmer. Manager of the Philadelphia Phillies. Not a good person to sleep with. Gags on all flesh. The flesh hung in our soft sleep. That thin Jewish cowboy.

Ignoring the Homosexual's outburst, the Minister spells out his vocation:

(running in place): the place of the soul is its virtue. It is man's music. His move from flesh. When you are strapped in sin, I pray for you, dear queen. I stare with X-ray eyes into your dark room and suffer with you. I smell your lovers, and pray that you be
redeemed. I bathe them in my holy water, and they are as baptized children.  

Unable to bear the Minister's hypocritical outpourings, the Homosexual exclaims:

You are filthy with success, you religious motherfucker. Who, may I ask, is your tailor?  

Their exchanges are interrupted by the entrance of a Boy with a bag on his back who is to be baptized. The Boy straightaway enacts the role of a repentant sinner:

(looking up with feigned humility):
Father, pray for me. (Kneels quickly, sobbing.) Father, pray for me. I've sinned. (Weeps and sprawls on floor.)
When Minister assures him:

Raise your head, my son. Nothing puts you outside of God's wisdom and mercy. Ours is a God of charity.  

Homosexual starts running towards them stopping to drop his trousers to reveal red leotards. Boy looking over Minister's shoulder at Homosexual implores the Minister to help him as he is to be baptized that day. Minister finding his attention distracted looks around to see what has caused it, rushes at Homosexual and grapples with him saying:

You've cheated in the collections. Withheld the beautiful money of the poor. Shouted the chorales out of key, and groped the organist in the trustees' room.

Free himself from Minister, Homosexual says with
I've done nothing not accounted for in the book of days. Come Judgment, Dick, let's see how easy you get off. 8

When asked to wipe his sins away, Minister assures him that if the Lord is with him he need not fear which makes Homosexual retart:

No one but you, my sutler. My vision of bleakness. My interminable liar, executioner of the ignorant. 9

Provoked by Homosexual's remark, Minister says:

You are becoming unpleasant Miss Cocksucker and I don't like it. 10

The wordy dual involving Minister and Homosexual for
the soul of the Boy is interrupted by Old Woman rushing towards the dais and screaming:

That boy! That boy! He sinned! I watched him. He committed a vile crime against the laws of our Saviour. The Lord, who was resurrected. Who, himself, died for us. Was butchered and lived low with thieves and Jews and had little or no money and walked everywhere. He had to go. Saviour! (Kneels, praying, then rises screaming.) That boy! That lad, there. Agent of the devil. 11

Homosexual calls her noisy old christian which makes Old Woman say God is noiser and that no one could be too noisy in his behalf adding that 'sin is a stealthy beast.' Demanded by Minister what he has to say in answer to her accusation Boy replies:
(Casually, like confident criminal):
I never saw her before in my life.¹²

Thereupon, Old Woman flares up calling him a liar and telling him that she sitting in her kitchen saw him kneeling in his bedroom and pretending to pray and added that he has blasphemed the Lord. Running here and there near the empty pews and casting off her clothing exclaims:

The naked virtue of Your creation.
The virgin of truth. I cast the stone, because of Your son's virtue.
To root the sinners out. Make a list, Lord, make a list of them.
And I'll root them out, and cast them in the pit.¹³

Assuring Boy that the Lord will not ignore him, Minister tells him:

Son, there are no temptations for
the wise man. The sins of the flesh, are not the sins of the leopard. Cast down your lies and fall on me praying.

Amused, Homosexual tossing coloured confetti over the assembly starts singing:

The pride of life is life. And flesh must make its move. I am the sinister lover of love. The mysterious villain of thought. I love my mind, my asshole too. I love all things. As they are issued from you know who. God. God. God. God. Go-od. The great insouciant dilettante. My lovers, priests, immolated queers, how many other worlds are there, less happy, less sorrowful than ours? God. God. God. God. God-od. The thug of
Ignoring, Minister calls upon the Boy to fall on him pray to which Old Woman objects saying that he has sinned. Shouting at the Boy she tries to get at him and collapses trying to clasp the Boy's legs. When Boy is asked by Homosexual to dance with him, Boy refuses to do so in church on the plea that he cannot blaspheme twice in the same afternoon.

To Boy's query whether Old Woman thinks that he is sent by the Devil, Homosexual intervenes saying that the Devil is part of Creation and so that he should not be segregated. Responding to Boy's reference to Satan Homosexual protests:

A victim of ambition. They say that to us. Milton, with the bad ear. Dante, the Catholic, gives him no place. No portion of goodness or human shape. But Milton's bad poetry has it so. Satan threw down
what was only subjection to become a king, unlike this old whore writhing on the floor, singing that old nigger song. Now even our noble pastor cannot put that down. A king! Do you hear that you fraud.16

The Old Woman still singing and waving her hand exclaims:

The Light. The Light. Holy cock of creation.17

Homosexual contemptuously remarks:

Oh, my Christ, what lousy taste. (To BOY.) Is that what you wanted from our dear Satan? Benality? Cock of creation. Bah. She takes flesh, just like you did son, but she makes it abstract and useless. So it is
holy and harmless. I pee on her Jesus if he put dare to tell me who and when I can get laid. And your evil spirit. Hah. A man who made himself a ruler. If God is omnipotent, it is his doing, as well. And who killed all those Egyptians with all that water? Satan? Bullshit. The ignorant woman's lord in his wretched community of sterile evesdroppers. \(^{18}\)

The Boy asks whether he is saved, the Homosexual intervening asks:

Saved? From what? What would you be saved from? \(^{19}\)

to which the Boy replies 'From Satan.'

Stating that none should say that had failed the spirit of Renaissance, he asks the Boy to dance with him. The Boy states that he cannot do so, looks up to
the Minister who declares that he should not dance with Homosexual because he is yet to be saved. Reacting to their statement Homosexual observes:

Can yet be made sterile. Can yet be taught that blank walls yodel the crazy name of salvation. Can yet see thunder in a straw. I make all my beds, any baby, I lie in them. (Laughs.)

Their conversation is interrupted by the entry of six young girls wearing gauzy gowns with huge numbers pinned to their chests as they were marching rhythmically. The Old Woman stops singing and rises from the floor and breaks into a off-time seductive dance. When she asks the Boy to dance with her the Boy replies:

You are a holy woman. A devout person. You know I can't dance with you.
Just as he has done so with the Homosexual who repeats his request. The Boy is aware that it will be sacrilegious to dance on the altar which is the scene of action of all the play. The Homosexual turning to the Women asks who they are calling them 'paraplegics.' The Minister replies that they are the hosts of the Lord, the virgins of Christ's love. Calling them harpies and asking them to go back to their apartment and wait for a phone call and asking them not to try to queer 'my, ahem, scene.' The Women ignore his advice and start singing loudly:

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me, cause the Bible tells me so.

The Old Woman tells the Homosexual that they are hosts of the Lord, the wives of His Son. Referring to the Old Woman's description their being the wives of His Son, the Homosexual remarks that they also have extremely bad taste and turning to the Women tells them to go home to their 'wretched Electra complexes:'
Boy feeling that the sin is returning to him indicating by hardness in his flesh tells the Minister that he must baptize. The Women turning to the Boy exclaim:

The Christ child come back. He is the Son of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ. Chief Religious Jelly roll of the universe.  

The Boy is too startled to say anything and the Women believe:

He is the Son of God. Our holy husband. It was he who popped us in those various hallways of love and blessed us with the beauty of Jehovah.  

The Minister too, sharing their belief goes down on his knees, asks the Boy:

You? The Christ? The Messiah? The
The Old Woman also joins them saying:

Yes, Jesus. Bless us. Please, bless us. We are only useless human flesh, but we love your word and have placed our lives in your service.

Overcome by remorse, the Boy also sinking to his knees tells the Minister:

Father, I'm not the Christ. I lied. I am only flesh.

The Boy confesses that he has lied to the Women and denied being the Christ the Women who are swaying in ecstasy do not at first believe him. In proof of his confession he tells them:

See my hands. (Holds up his palms.)
There are no holes, no rents in my flesh. I am a whole and ignorant youth. I thought I might save the girls by telling them I was related to God. I didn't say Son. They only assumed. 28

The Homosexual comments complimenting the Boy:

(Pats BOY on shoulders.) I might try that idea myself. Yeh. Related. Hah. (Muses.) Only my friends are so much more sophisticated than yours. 29

When the Minister and the Old Woman persist calling him the Son of God and asking him to bless them, the Homosexual intervenes saying:

Hey. Hey. Why don't you dopes get up? You heard what the kid said.
It's all a Joke. He just put these art majors in a trick. Get up. Take a look at genius. 30

Hearing the Boy admit that he has lied all except the Homosexual become furious and ignoring his plea for mercy to be shown to him telling them:

I am not, not, evil. (Weeps.)
Father. (Looks toward heaven.)
Why have you forsaken me? Again? 31

The Minister, and the Old Woman are so shocked by his admission that they decide to kill him. As they move towards him, ignoring the Homosexual's plea to stopping and throwing him out of the way, the Minister tells the Boy:

You must be sacrificed to cleanse the soul of man. As the true Christ died for man. So you must die so that He should not have died for
nothing. You must be sacrificed.  

As they prepare to exorcize the Devil from their 'holy place' through a ritual of sacrifice the Boy suddenly turns upon them screaming:

You have no charity! No humanity. No love. (Pulls long silver sword out of bag.) No sense of yourselves. It is not right that you should die to cleanse your stinking hearts! I am the Son of God. The Christ. (Begins to strike his attackers down with the sword.)

No Charity! No love!  

The Boy murders the Minister, Old Woman and the 'Brides of the Lord's Son' stating that there will be no second crucifixion. At that point of time the Messenger arrives sent by his father (The Man) who has become furious at his son's failure on the earth and he wants the Boy to
return before the destroys 'the whole works.' The Boy remonstrates that he has brought love to many people and refuses to go with him but the Messenger tells him that he has to carry out the orders as the Man is destroying 'the whole works' that night with a hand grenade. He refuses to accompany him and tells him saying:

He's not going to destroy this place. I won't let him. And I'm not going anyplace with you. 34

The Boy kneels in supplication saying:

Father. Father. (Looking toward ceiling.) Don't give up on me. You have no charity. 35

Stubbornly refusing to go back with the Messenger the Boy declares:

Neither God nor man shall force me
to leave. I was sent here to save
man and I'll not leave until I do.
Nothing will make me forsake this
flesh. (Screams at ceiling.) I
will not leave! 36

The Messenger quoting the well-known line from Robert
Frosts's poem, "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy
Evening" meaning thereby he has many other things to
attend to, hits the Boy on the head with a tire iron
and hoisting the Boy's body on his shoulders goes away
with the Boy on his motorcycle. The Homosexual who is
knocked down by the Minister and the Women, revives and
makes an emigmatic statement on the happenings in the
play:

Good Christ, what's happened in this
place? (Turns to Minister's body
over with his toe.) Serves him
right for catering to rough trade.
All out like lights. I better get
out of here before somebody comes
in and asks me to help clean the place up. Damn, looks like some really uninteresting kind of orgy went on in here. (Looks at watch.) Hmmmmm. 1:30. I got about an hour before the bars close. Think I'll drift on up to 42nd Street and cruise Bickford's. (Starts to leave.) Wonder what happened to that cute little religious fanatic? (Does his ballet step. Starts to sing his song.) God, Go-od, God, etc. 37

The play, The Baptism presents a blending of the commercialization of church services and the sexual perversion inherent in religious ecstasy, which implies a satirical comment on the American christian church and its failures which are both moral and spiritual. Baraka is relentless in exposing the hollowness and the hypocrisy of the christian church and traces the religious zeal to sexual fantasy. Ironically, the Boy appears as a distortion of or failed Messiah of who
kills the Minister and the Old Woman and the Women in the name of charity or compassion and so has to be forcibly taken back to the man in view of the impending apocalypse. Significantly, at the end of the play, there is no purifying of the corruption which marks the church and its followers but a pile of dead bodies suggestive of the remains of some uninteresting kind of violent orgy. It is the Homosexual, the survivor of this orgy who as a symbol of the spirit of Renaissance and spokesman for Satan brings out the thrust of the argument that the play presents, the vision that is embodied in the play is of the forces of Evil in the West which in his representation appears as being sterile and corrupted.

It is apparent that Baraka learnt from Genêt, the views of

the device of figures of monumental
and powerful identities who are in reality weak and servile creatures
(The Minister, for example, shares
a great deal of the role, fantasies and power obsessions of the Bishop in *The Balcony*). Like Genêt's maskers, Baraka's characters almost seem to be replaced by the symbols they create for themselves: the Old Woman becomes a type of matriarchal dominance, "leaning, leaning"; the Minister, a typical hypocrite who robes his illicit dreams in "our cloak of color, our love for ourselves and our hymns." They are "characters" in appearance only, for as symbols of their own self-projected functions they reflect back upon themselves and thus reveal themselves in their essential nothingness.

The action takes place mainly on the altar:

a speaker-stand with two microphones
and a plaque with the inscription "WHBI RADIO" stapled under the letters "IHS." Above the altar is a "huge white cross of glass with the inscription 'HIS' written on the crossbar," and the decor of the altar itself is red velvet gold. The action played out on this altar is a series of mock-religious rituals, with each figure dancing and chanting his or her own erotic rite, supplicating the false messiah for his 'holy' love, and then — showing the underlying cruelty of these desires — joining in a ritual of "sacrifice."

The play represents an uncompromising attack on the American Christian church shown to be corrupt, hypocritical and sterile. It may be regarded as a Passion play marked by mock rituals and sacrilegious doings. Like _Dutchmen_ and _The Slave_, the play, _The_
Baptism in its singular way presents an act of exorcism as also a dramatic endeavour exploring the chances of achieving Black liberation. Further, though hypocrisy seems to be theme of the play, the drama recalls one of the directions figuring Baraka's essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre":

It must kill any God any one names except Common Sense.  

Arguing that the holiness of life is a constant possibility of widening the consciousness, Baraka says:

any agency including christianity represented as mental slavery that attempts to prevent this widening must be struck back.
Notes


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p.12.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p.25.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p.27.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., pp.28-29.
34 Ibid., p.30.
35 Ibid., p.31.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., p.32.

39 Ibid., p.201.

40 LeRoi Jones, Home, p.211.

41 Ibid.