Chapter Three

Dream and Reality

Few black American writers have had a more profound impact on black American culture than James Baldwin. Through his intensely personal art, Baldwin has achieved an extraordinary popular appeal, which has made him one of the most widely, read black writers in the twentieth century. He has been a spokesman of the blacks, an activist in the struggle for social, economic and political justice for the black minority in American society. Out of Baldwin’s experiences have emerged certain recurring themes in writing, the most important of which is the search for self-identity. Like innumerable other black artists, Baldwin also, has been forced to deal over and over, again with that inescapable dilemma of the Black American – the lack of sense of a positive identity.

The crises in Baldwin’s life, most often communicated in this work as artistic, religious and sexual have given rise to a single-minded dedication to the search for discovery of the self. Baldwin was aware of his situation and failings, in his endeavours to discover the “surrendered identity” in himself and in his black brothers. Time after time in his writing he has shown an awareness of the fact that identity contains as Erik Erikson so accurately indicates, “a complementarity of past and future both in the individual and in society.” [Erik Erikson, Identity 310] Baldwin wrote in ‘Many Thousands gone “we cannot escape from our origins, which contains the key… could we but find it … to all that we later become “ [Baldwin, Native Son, 27] and again he
notes in *A Rape on Race* “If history were the past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present, present you and I are history.” [Margaret Mead & Baldwin, *A Rape on Race* 188] Baldwin’s experiences with race and sex that find expression in his works assisted the positive growth of self-understanding in others also. The self-knowledge he gained from his Negro heritage, from the awareness of his role as a writer and in particular from his terrific experiences as a black homosexual artist in America, has contributed to his act of self-definition, and his sense of a shared destiny with his community.

To Baldwin,

Negroes in this country… are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks. And the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. [Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* 36-37]

Most of man’s problems arise from his identity confusions. A man’s life is a never ending search for self and identity. For Baldwin, the act of writing was an obsessive need as well as the most meaningful way in which he could speak for himself. His quest had been to discover his self, his identity and the
force that had gone into the making of his life. He saw search for identity as an American problem. In *Nobody Knows my name*, he says: “but I didn’t meet anyone in (Europe) who didn’t suffer from the very same affliction that all the people (in America) suffered from and that was that they didn’t know who they were” [Baldwin, Nobody Knows 122]. But Karin Moller finds that for Baldwin the theme of identity is not limited to white or black but to all men or it embraces a common humanity” [Karin Moller, The Theme of Identity 135].

True to this argument, Baldwin’s experiences and his struggles to find a pattern from these chaos, helped the evolving of his vision of the oneness of all humanity and of the forging of his identity in complete communion with that of all mankind. He is almost obsessively concerned with the writers responsibility to save the world. Introducing the theme of self examination in *Nobody Knows My Name* he asserts that “one can only face in others what one can face in oneself” [qtd. In Kenneth Kinnamon James Baldwin 6]. The relationship between the subjective vision and the external world is repeated at the end of The Discovery of What It means of Be an American where he claims that “though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world” [Kinnamon 7]

James Baldwin has been shaped by the age in which he lived. The bitter struggle of his early life, suffering the pain of being black and poor in America, supporting younger brothers and sisters in Harlem, experiencing religious conversion have yielded brilliant fruit in the passion and humanity of his work.
He has been a subject of controversy both as a man and as a writer. The rebellious nature of his ideas can be explained as a result of the developmental changes in his self and identity all through his life.

Even the briefest summary of Baldwin's biography makes clear the dues he paid, the oppression he faced, the oppression he overcame, and the strength he gained from the battle. Growing up in a squalid Harlem neighbourhood young Baldwin was ill-equipped to cope with the poverty of his family, the taunts of his schoolmates concerning his diminutive size and physical ugliness, the very real danger of the streets. Baldwin himself describes Harlem ghetto in the following way… you haven’t got to be sweet to survive in a ghetto, you’ve got to be cunning. You’ve got to make up the rules as you go along, there aren’t any others. You can’t call the cops” [Bigsby, James Baldwin 212]. It was this environment that impressed upon the sensitive young Baldwin the crucial choice which he would ultimately be compelled to make. He must summon every available ounce of stamina and courage to escape the sordid world of pimps, junkies, prostitutes, racketeers and common men or he must abandon his search for identity, surrender himself and become engulfed by the vicious circumstances of his surroundings. Thus he was engaged in a perpetual battle and so he commented.

We are very cruelly trapped between what we would like to be and what we actually are and we cannot possibly become what we would like to be until we are willing to ask ourselves
just why the lives we lead on this continent are so empty, so tame and so ugly… [Standley, Critical Essays 375]

In Baldwin’s opinion all human beings are trapped between self-imposed image and reality. So they are unable to release their full energies in the identity quest. They are prisoners of the undiscovered self. The complicated amalgam of the psychological and social elements that went into the making of Baldwin the man and the artist would be revealed only after a closer examination of his personal life.

Michael Fabre calls Baldwin’s *Go Tell it On The Mountain* as an honest, intensive, self analysis, functioning simultaneously to illuminate self, society, and mankind as a whole. [Louis Pratt, Baldwin 50] The numerous autobiographical similarities in his novels and the details of childhood given openly by Baldwin himself in his personal essays, reveal the picture of a poor, hungry, fear-ridden sexually troubled black Harlem boy, struggling under the strict religious disciplines of a stepfather, who hates him with all his heart. David Baldwin, who married Baldwin’s mother in 1927, when James was three years old, became a center of conflict hate and respect in Baldwin’s early life and in some of his best writing. He is Gabriel Grimes, the stepfather in *Go Tell it On The Mountain*, whose death and funeral frame the oft-reprinted essay “Notes of a Native Son” first-published as “Me and My House” in Harper’s Magazine 1955. Impossible to get along with, hated by his children while he was alive, David Baldwin nevertheless became for Baldwin emblematic of the pain of being black and male and poor in America. Baldwin said in a 1976
“His pain was so great he translated himself into silence, rigidity… sometimes into beating us and finally into madness” [Sylvander, James Baldwin 3] Baldwin’s title essay in *Notes of a Native son* is an autobiographical ‘tour de force’ [Jordan Elgrably, James Baldwin 59]. He begins his essay on a universal note, connecting his life and his family’s life to all mankind. A man dies, a child is born. He tells in his opening sentence, “On the 29th of July in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later his last child was born”. [Baldwin, Notes of a Native son 17]. He shows dramatically how his father’s bitterness and fanatical asceticism deeply affected the lives of his nine children, so much, in fact, that they resented his very presence. And their father in turn believed, Baldwin says, that his children “had betrayed him by …. reaching towards the world which had despised him”. [Native son 20]. Baldwin is the chief among the traitors. His father warns him of the poisonous effects of white prejudice and hatred. Baldwin rejects this warning. This among other disagreements, compels him to leave his father’s house. In the final section of the essay *Notes of a Native son*, Baldwin explores the significance of his father’s life and death. And through that process, he discovers something about the nature of the hatred and bitterness he carries in his heart. He reminds the reader’s that the day of his father’s funeral had also been his own nineteenth birthday. He had spent most of the day downtown at the apartment of a girl he knew. They celebrated by drinking and tried to focus on Baldwin’s birthday rather than on the funeral that night. The birthday celebration was for Baldwin a permanent departure from
his father’s house. But at the same time the young Baldwin yearned for his “real” father. Why had he deserted him, denied name and legitimization? Was it a matter of an unworthy son or of an irresponsible father? [Standley, Critical Essays 133]. The sensitive mind of Baldwin eagerly craved for the love of his father. But it was this father himself who made him aware of his physical ugliness and it was this hatred which Baldwin wanted to fight against with all his strength. This later developed into a tendency to rebel against father-figure. The awareness of his father’s hatred and his own ugliness drove him to seek love through friendship and homosexual relations, to get confirmed that he was wanted by somebody. This love-hate relationship to his father naturally led to the formation of a shy and insecure state of mind and also a yearning to assert his own identity.

Baldwin describes his mother, Emma Berdis Jones Baldwin as “a very tough little woman” both gentle and strong [Sylvander 3] Shrinking from his stepfather’s hostility, James Baldwin became all the more deeply attached to his mother, in an unmistakably Oedipal pattern. But he had to share Emma Baldwin’s love with the eight brothers and sisters born between 1927 and 1943, and since his mother had to work as a domestic to support her family James Baldwin was forced to assume a maternal role towards them, changing their diapers, teaching them to walk, keeping them out of mischief. Needing desperately to receive love, he was constantly required to give it. A lonely child himself, he had to try to alleviate the loneliness of still younger children.
The domestic burden usually prevented his mother from giving all the love desired by her eldest son, but never he blamed his mother for that.

In addition to his family, his Harlem surroundings, the other strong influences on Baldwin’s early life included his religious conversion, his schooling, and his fascination with the theater. His conversion and ascension at the age of fourteen to Junior preacher at a Pentacostal church helped to keep him off the streets, probably kept him from admission of his bisexuality, gave him a separate pride to offset his father’s repeated reminders of how little and ugly he was. By this religious experience, for a time he got an emotional release from his fear and sense of guilt. “I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in life afraid… afraid of evil within me and afraid of evil without” says Baldwin. [Baldwin, The Fire Next Time 34.]

But soon Baldwin found that his craving for self expression and artistic creation could not be satisfied through his career in the church. Moreover, the tension produced in him by his sexual experience in spite of his position produced a split in his mind and so he left the church after three years. But the hold of the Christian church, its music, and excitement, though not the essence, lingered with him and constituted the basis from which sprang Baldwin’s views about human life. He was an ardent licensed preacher of the Gospel for three years. During this time he absorbed all facets of Christian doctrine, denominational practice and most importantly, biblical image, symbol, narrative and meaning. His Biblical allusions and references to the black nations spiritual consciousness are innumerable. The unfailing optimism, seen
in the entirety of his works that only love within and between the races will ultimately save America and its black citizens is rooted in the philosophy of Christian faith. But at the same time it was impossible for him to find salvation in the black church. Baldwin confesses in *The Fire Next Time*:

> There was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self despair. When we were told to love everybody. I had that, ‘that’ meant “everybody”. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all. But what was the point, the purpose of my salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love towards other’s, no matter how they behaved towards me? [Baldwin, Fire 57-58]

The knowledge and maturity he gained as a grown up man, made him reject all socially accepted religious attitudes and question the failure of the white Christian church to provide Negroes with a sense of satisfaction and security. He saw the existing religion not as a survival technique but as a technique of escapism.

When older, Baldwin sought compensation in reading, in his studies generally and in writing. His teachers, black and white at Public School 24 and Frederick Douglass Junior High School in Harlem and De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx were impressed by his brilliance and his verbal facility. In an interview Baldwin later recalled that when he was a student in Public School 24, the school Principal Mrs. Ayer, who liked him,
…Proved to me that I didn’t have to be entirely defined by my circumstances because you know that every Negro child knows what his circumstances are but he cannot articulate them, because he is born into a republic which assures him in as many ways as it knows how, and has got great force, that he has a certain place and he can never rise above it… she was a living proof that I was not necessarily what the country said I was. [Standley, Conversations 40]

A white teacher who encouraged him became for young Baldwin “my first key, my first clue that white people were human.” [Sylvander, 5] He could not forget Orrin Miller because she displayed no trace of racial prejudice to him. She encouraged his playwriting by giving him books to read and taking him to the forbidden theatre. He longed to be a writer and so fiction, poetry, plays and essays began to pour out of his imaginary world. His readings and other literary experiences helped his gradual growth in knowledge and maturity. In his urge to create his own identity, to excel in the literary field, away from the hold of his father, he turned all his attention to writing. In an interview Baldwin told “...It was an attempt not to get the world’s attention, it was an attempt to be loved. It seemed a way to save myself and a way to save my family. It came out of despair. And seemed the only way to another world.”. [Eckman, The Furious Passage 124]
Baldwin’s father died in 1943 and within a year Baldwin met Richard Wright for the first time. It is amply clear from his essays that the twenty-year old youth adopted the older man as a father figure.

When we met, I was twenty a carnivorous age, he was then as old as I am now, thirty six, he had been my idol since high school, and I, as fledging Negro writer, was very shortly in the position of his protégé. This position was not really fair to either of us. As writers we were about as unlike as any two writers could be. But no one could read the future, and neither of us knew this then. [James Baldwin, Noboy knows 148]

Baldwin’s homage to Wright is that of the black expatriate literary son to his adopted spiritual father. “Alas Poor Richard” is Baldwin’s public acknowledgement of the significance of Wright to him. Baldwin considered Wright as the greatest black writer in the world” [Horace, Stealing the Fire, 72] and surely he saw a reflection of his own life in Wright’s. Baldwin reminded the reader and the nation, that Afro American experience, despite poverty and oppression, is rich and complex. In that light, his position reminds one of Wright’s. Baldwin sees Wright as the most famous and successful example of a Negro writer who has been compromised creatively and professionally by race.

Prior to Baldwin’s entry upon the literary scene, the dominant trend among the black artists was Protest Literature, and the hero was Richard Wright. Baldwin was inspired and influenced by Richard Wright’s rich and
powerful prose style and protest writing. Wright viewed the process of artistic creation as a safety valve for releasing the rage and fear which grew inevitably out of the black American experience. Although Baldwin identified with the rage which Wright felt, he contended that the artist must go beyond the mere depiction of that rage. In order to assert his identity as a writer, Baldwin felt compelled to rebel against his literary father. Wright views man solely against the background of reality, what he has been and what he is. For Baldwin this concept is not comprehensive enough. He sought to probe and penetrate the roots of protest literature—the anger and the rage in order to discover a recognizable human emotion which reflected not only the reality but the potentiality of man. So Baldwin severely criticized the protest novels for the dehumanization of the Negro in them. It was his search for identity as a writer that drove him to criticize Richard Wright and end all his relationships with him. Later Baldwin himself confessed that Wright had seen

…far more clearly that I dare to allow myself to see, what I had done. I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddle I had to answer before I could become myself. [James Baldwin, Nobody Knows 157]

The names of William Faulkner and Langston Hughes are also significant as the other father figures of Baldwin whom he had to disown and criticize like he did to Richard Wright. Baldwin can be considered as a true disciple of Henry James. He explains the influence of Henry James on him in
the following way “…reading Henry James helped me, with his whole idea about the center of consciousness and using a single intelligence to tell the story.” [Baldwin, Artist on Fire 86] Like Henry James, Baldwin also left America in his youth, embraced the life of a bachelor and produced many books. He learnt from James the detachment that an artist has to achieve from the social affairs of his period, for artistic coherence and beauty.

The spirit of the blues permeates all the literacy creations of James Baldwin. Only those who have suffered can communicate though blues or in a blues spirit the suffering of the oppressed in an effort to face and survive it. The endless search for love, extreme poverty, hunger fear and sexual ambivalence were Baldwin’s share in life. He examined the various modes of survival available for the Blackman and finally hit upon the saving power of the blues and his Negro tradition. He used the black American blues as a natural vehicle to express his ideas. For incidents in his own life bore many similarities to the content of many blues lyrics. Baldwin’s own nature, too, seems like that of blues. Like a blues singer, he courageously looked at his horrible situation and did not give up. Like Baldwin’ fiction, essays, and plays “the blues… recognize that there is something wrong with this world. Something absurd the way that white people treat black people” [Standley 112]. Like Baldwin “the blues singer articulates his mood, and thus provides a degree of transcendence over the troubles of this world”. [James Baldwin, A Dialouge 88-89]

Traditionally singing blues has promoted black survival. Most of Baldwin’s hero-artists achieve strength and salvation by honestly confronting and
overcoming their pains. In “Sonny’s Blues” the hero regains identity from his and his race’s past through music which is central to black experience.

James Baldwin continued his quest for identity abroad specifically in France. Free at last from the racial pressures of home, as he was treated in France more as an American than as a Negro, he got a chance to look at the reality of his own self. So he says in *Nobody knows my Name*.

It turned out that the question of who I was, was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me...anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me. The question of who I was had at last become a personal question and the answer was to be found in me. [Baldwin, *Nobody Knows* 11]

He also realized the importance of self examination for a writer for his understanding of the world at large. But despite the positive aspects of his experience abroad, he consistently speaks of it as a temporary escape, which reminds him more than anything else that he is, above all, an American and France will never be his home. Speaking of his experience in France he writes in the “*Notes for The Amen corner,* “I had escaped but I had not escaped myself...France was not really my home. I might live there for ever and it would never be my home.” [Baldwin, *Notes The Amen Corner* XIII]. Inspite of all his sufferings in America as a Negro, the love for his country stayed with him till the end of his life. So in France he becomes sentimental about his loneliness for black America. He says in *No Name in the Street.*
I missed the Harlem Sunday mornings… I missed the style—that style possessed by no other people in this world. I missed the way the dark face closes, the way dark eyes watch, and the way, when a dark face opens, a light seems to go on everywhere... I missed the help which had produced me and nourished me and paid for me.” [Baldwin, No Name in the Street 71]

Thus, no matter how much he must suffer in America, no matter how much he fears and hates the situation into which he is cast in this country, no matter how much he dreads the trip back, Baldwin realizes that he, like all of his characters who go abroad, must return to America. So he made tours to his country often, to be in touch with his past and experience, for only by self examination can a writer achieve an understanding of the others. His homesickness marks the end of his alienation from his country and culture, and also the development of his feeling of self-sameness with his country men. Thus after nine years in Pairs, Baldwin returned to America realizing. “It was only here, after all that I would be able to find out what my journey had meant to me, or what it had made of me” [No Name in the Street 51]. The acceptance of his Afro-American identity brings the realization that a person…may leave the group that produced him… he may be forced to… but nothing will efface his origins, the marks of which he carried everywhere.’’[Nobody Knows 22]

After arriving in New York, Baldwin had yet another journey to the south to make in quest of his roots, perhaps the most important of all his journeys. It is important to note here that from slavery till the present century,
black literature, folk tales and songs have portrayed characters who view North as an Eden, a heaven to which they aspire to escape from the South, which they equate with hell. James Baldwin had terrifying nightmares about his proposed journey and once he reached the south, he later declared, “I felt as though I had wandered into hell” [Standley 57]. Commenting upon a white man who directed him to the colored entrance in a restaurant he notes, “he was, indeed, being as kind as can be expected from a guide in hell.”(57)

But if James Baldwin was ever to find his origin and thereby the key to his own identity he had to make that journey to the south. It is only then that he is able to appreciate the positive results of these beginnings the strength and beauty of the people who have suffered slavery and the most degrading social and economic persecution. It is only then he is able to appreciate the real possibility for creativity inherent in suffering and tragedy. It is then he wrote in *The Fire Next Time*.

This past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death and humiliation, fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone…this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering… but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages
to destroy it knows...something about himself and human life

that no school...can teach. [Baldwin, The Fire Next Time 112]

Baldwin found that there was no word to describe so many of the black men he met in south except “heroic” [qtd. in Standley, Critical Essays 58]. He found in other words, that in the midst of horror, tragedy and suffering, out of his painful experience and struggle to survive, the southern Negro has maintained a strength, a purity, a mobility an integrity and a sense of identity that can represent the salvation of the race.

The greatest danger that Baldwin sees in going “home” again is the loss of one’s manhood-the threat of rape, of castration symbolic and real. He is obsessed with the image of the blackman hanging from a tree on a dark southern road, blood gushing from a mutilated sex organ. So Baldwin realized that the black man who goes south, to find his identity, risks his manhood, which is so much a part of his identity. Thus, ironically, having found after much agonizing searching, his home in the south, Baldwin realizes that he cannot go home again. The very place that discovers for him his identity his manhood also threatens to rob him of it and denies him the peace and rest for which he seeks and which he had expected to find at home. He laments:

How bitterly weary I was of wandering how I hoped to find a resting place, reconciliation, in the land where I was born. But everything that might have charmed me merely reminded me of how many were excluded, how many were suffering and groaning and dying not far from a paradise which was itself but
another circle of hell. Everything that charmed me reminded me of someplace else. Someplace where I could walk and talk, someplace where I was freer than I was at home, some place where I could live without the stifling mask made me homesick for a liberty I had never tasted here, and without which I could never live or work. In America, I was free only in a battle, never free to rest-and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle. [qtd in Standley, Critical Essays 61]

Baldwin was not well-equipped to adjust to the horrors of life he found in America. His experiences in the south brought him the awareness that “he was an American to the roots of his being, and all his battles were to be fought in the context of his American heritage of insult and injury, of despair and desperation of hope and freedom.”[Maini, Reconsidering James Baldwin 44]

Baldwin’s search for a better identity took him to New Jersey where he secured employment as a defence worker. The severe racial hostility he encountered there produced in his mind a bitter hatred for both blacks and whites. He was so much a victim of racial self hatred, that he felt ashamed of his father, the member of his church and the other black men. This shows the intensity of Baldwin’s alienation from his people and heritage. He has confessed in “Autobiographical Notes” that as a young man when he looked back he was forced to recognize that he was “a bastard of the west with no heritage of his own, but with the necessity to accept the white heritage and make it as his own” [Note of a Native Son 14]. When a Negro finds himself in
such a situation with no roots and past to sustain him, he lacks a sense of continuity and finds himself in an identity crisis.

Baldwin believed that the question of colour, crucially important on a moral level, concealed a more fundamental problem, the problem of self. Baldwin’s life had been an endless struggle to confront his blackness and troubling sexuality in an effort to discover his self and achieve the identity of a proud black American. His life had also been a brave challenge to fate to achieve the identity of a writer from his humble and oppressive circumstances. By accepting the negative aspects of the blackman’s identity like self hatred and fear he worked hard for a collective recovery of his own self and race. Through his preoccupation with such themes as anxiety, fear and man’s estrangement from other men he has spoken for the condition of the exploited all over the world.

Baldwin’s quest for identity has been mainly on two levels; personal and the artistic. There was the grim, religious fanaticism of a stepfather, an evangelical preacher, who hated the bastard son born to his wife prior to their marriage. And there was the elder Baldwin’s repressive dominance over a submissive wife and children, set against the environmental abyss of liquor, drugs, sex and crime. On the artistic level, Baldwin felt that he could not survive the institution of segregation in the country which reduced him to merely a Negro writer. He wanted to discover how the uniqueness of his experience might be used to establish a common bond among humanity.
In order to achieve a personal identity, Baldwin had to confront mainly the demons of his sex and race. His main initiatory experiences have been his spiritual conversion and then leaving the fold after three years, the racial hatred experienced in New Jersey, his leaving of America for France, his emotional salvation in Switzerland and later in the American south, and the murders of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and John Kennedy. His literary pursuits provided him with a way to escape from the painful realities of real life. In his world of imagination, he was not troubled by his physical ugliness, father’s hatred or religiousness, sexual ambivalence or the evils of the street. These crises in Baldwin’s life have given rise to a single-minded dedication to the search for the self-for the creation of his self and assertion of his personal freedom, Baldwin made the irrevocable choice of an honest encountering of the facts of his life in his career as a writer. Robert Bone was one of the first to point out the twin emotions of shame and rage in Baldwin’s works and to note that “The flight from self, the quest for identity, and the sophisticated’ acceptance of one’s blackness are the themes that flow from this emotion” [Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America 218]. Being aware of himself, he realized his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. The result of these self discovery was a series of literary productions of great value and a readiness to face the problems of life fully confident of his identity. Each of his major works at bottom attests to the quest for identity. According to Baldwin his primary aim was “to achieve… a viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life”, [No Name 53] an aim which he claims has
eluded most Americans; Baldwin’s explorations of relationships to himself, his
father and family, his fellow blacks, white men, Europeans abroad become the
central emphases throughout his major works.

Baldwin’s earliest expressed desire in life was to be an honest man and a
good writer. In order to fulfill his mission as a writer Baldwin attempted,
...to go beneath the surface of human experience and to bring
order into being out of the fragmentary and chaotic conditions of
disorder; and he[exercised] a personal and social responsibility
for furnishing himself and his fellowmen with a vision of
themselves as they are. [Standley 373]

For this purpose Baldwin’s journey has been led down to two roads
simultaneously-the personal and public. Harper here explains “In his role as a
Negro spokesman he has been forced into an activism in which he does not
deeply believe. In his role as an artist he is concerned with a problem more
basic, more complex and perhaps even more urgent than the problem of Civil
Rights, a problem of which Civil Rights is only a part. [Howard Harper
Desperate Faith 137-38]. His personal experiences paved the way for his
dealings with universal themes such as the eagerness of man to be loved and
recognized as a person with an individuality. Baldwin announces: “one writes
out of one thing only-one’s own experiences. Everything depends on how
relentlessly one forces from his experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can
possibly give” [Baldwin, Autobiographical Notes P-11]. About the meaning of
Baldwin’s vision there should be no confusion. He determined to examine closely his own experience through his art.

The problem of black identity for Baldwin goes far beyond the matter of one’s nationality. He nowhere attempts to ignore his blackness. He knows that the burden of black humanity in America cannot be ignored or escaped. He distinguishes between his life as a human being and his life as a black man. The one, he believes is his real life, the other a social and mythical life imposed or projected. There is always a conflict between the two lives. Baldwin admits “the most difficult (and most rewarding”) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality.” [Autobiographical Notes 10]. Even then he affirms his black being within the context of the fabric of American Culture. Thus the fact of his blackness precedes all other considerations of human or American identity. Baldwin views identity as something to be achieved, created or shaped.

As an artist the three guiding principles in Baldwin’s life as Louis H Pratt has detected, are his belief that the artist has to accept both the positive and negative aspects of his past, the artist should make his people see their past and free them of their illusions by making them perceive the truth and self, and that love can make people ready to face reality” [Louis Pratt, James Baldwin 17-22]. For Baldwin the motivating force and means for overcoming the existential abyss between oneself and other person is love. Love signifies the ultimate concern for man’s relationship with man and within all vagaries of human experience. Love, for Baldwin; embodies the only redemptive power
capable of aiding man in defining his humanness. Baldwin requests the white man to stop seeing the black man as an abstraction and to recognize his humanity, as white and black are blood brothers and by denying another’s humanity, one is diminishing his own also. Baldwin turns down the idea of black brotherhood in terms of human brotherhood with white enemies, as he cannot make alliances on the basis of colour. In his essay on “A question of Identity” Baldwin sketches the black man’s relationship to America and condemns the moral innocence of whites who seek to escape the importance of this relationship. Baldwin says “we are alone with our unique past on this solid mass of ground called America. There is no hiding place, and if blacks and whites do not face this truth, the day will come when no one has shelter from a cosmic wrath” [Standley 67]. The appeals to “love thine enemies” and to refrain from violence reflect quite distinctly those Christian elements in Baldwin’s thinking which his upbringing had instilled in him. His solution to the race problem is primarily individual redemption. He hopes that the love he has in his heart will serve as an antidote, mitigating the effects of his poisonous, self-destructive bitterness.

Baldwin is unique in his preference to remain as a “witness”. His position during the early period is that of a witness, and to him the artists role is to bear witness to what life is and what life does. Because in church where “I was raised” he says, “you were supposed to bear witness to the truth” [Weatherby 181]. Baldwin defines witness,
I am a witness to whence I came, where I am, witness to what I have seen and the possibilities that I think I see. I began using the word when I began to be called a spokesman. I’m certainly not a spokesman and the only word I could find is that I’m trying to be a witness. A spokesman assumes that he is speaking for others. I never assumed that I could. What I tried to do, or to interpret and make clear was that what the republic was doing to black people it was doing to ….. the society. In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, of course, later on you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is. [Julius Lester, Conversation 225].

It is this need to “bear witness” that gives Baldwin’s writing its urgency and passion. Baldwin was severely criticized by contemporary black writers and critics for putting one leg in Negro community and the other in the white; this is typical of his attitude towards his race and towards Africa. It was a phase in which the feeling of shame about one’s African descent, acquired at a time of detachment from and rejection of Africa went side by side with a strong support for the continent, stimulated by the subsequent period of a lively interest in things African. It was rather a confused mixture with the component parts unevenly distributed.

The decline of the Civil Rights movements and his contact with the Black Muslims during the 60’s and 70’s also were instrumental in creating in
Baldwin a change in tone from the advocacy of love to rage and despair. Baldwin was becoming more and more aware of the “economics of oppression” and politics of exploitation.” His career was characterized by a challenge to the white institutions, particularly the church, which instead of ameliorating the conditions of Black American culture, was furthering the processes of exploitation by the white world. *The Fire Next Time*, which includes an extended discussion of the Black Muslim Movement, was, in effect a criticism of the failure of Christianity. The aim of Black Muslims, he wrote, was to free themselves from the political tyranny and religious hypocrisy of white American Christians. The Nation of Islam’s basic philosophy was characterized by a passionate belief in separation of races in the United States. Baldwin described his visit to the Chicago mansion of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Black Muslim sect. In Baldwin’s account of how he responded to Elijah Muhammad, he presents himself as a dispassionate and objective observer, weighing the pros and cons of Black Muslim mythology:

> For the horrors of the American Negro’s life there has been almost no language… And in fact, the truth about the black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, has been hidden from him deliberately and cruelly,… why, then it is not possible that all things began with the black man and that he was perfect – especially since this is precisely the claim white people have put forward for themselves all these year? Further more, it is now absolutely clear that white people are a minority in the world – so severe a minority
that they now look rather more like an invention – and they cannot possibly hope to rule it any longer. If this is so, why is it not also possible that they achieved their original dominance through stealth and cunning and bloodshed and in opposition to the will of Heaven, and not, as they claim, by Heaven’s will? And if this is so, then the sword they have used so long against others can now, without mercy, be used against them. [The Fire 83-84]

The influence of Black Muslims is seen in his shift from non-violence to a recommendation of violence as a weapon for blacks whenever necessary. His faith in the potential of his countryman for self – development was gone and he could witness only the cruelty and wickedness of man. Theodore Gross says:

Baldwin’s evolution from a Negro preacher on Harlem to an existential writer who challenges every religious and moral assumptions of the while Christian world is the epitome of the Negro’s historical struggle in this country . (140)

The Amen corner was written during this period. Baldwin says in the Black Scholar interview

… Black America had changed. And had changed forever. In some ways for the better and some ways perhaps for the worse…

In my point of view It’s for the better, on balance, because we know more about each other than we did before. [The Black Scholar, 1973, 174]
When asked about the role of artist, Baldwin commented, “The role of the artist is exactly… as the role of the lover. If I love you I have to make you conscious of things you don’t see. I become conscious of things that I don’t see. (Black scholar, 1974, 156). Baldwin started to support revolution and he began to think that it is time for the blacks to strike back for what is taken away from them.

As a man of letters Baldwin worked prodigiously during the forty years of his career to explore a broad spectrum of topics and themes in his fiction, drama and essays. His search for a better identity continued till the end of his life. Identity comes to the blackman when he whole – heartedly accepts his origins, folk past and rejection in American society. Such a person concentrates on the creative possibilities inherent in this folk heritage and culture and faces the problems in the segregated society with necessary mental strength. As an artist he has constantly expressed the need to see humanity as a whole. He wanted to prevent himself from becoming merely a Negro or even merely a Negro writer Baldwin was concerned with himself “not so much as a Negro, or even as an American, but as a man” [Meserve 173] In the final analysis as observed by Carolyn Sylvander, “Baldwin… not writing about skin color at all, but about pain, commitment, about seeing and hearing about honesty in relation to one’s past, one’s present and one’s future as a person and as a people. [Sylvander 149]

Baldwin readers, even by scanning the skeletal sketches of the events of his life, can perceive how much an uphill struggle his life had been: the yoke he
endured, the toll he paid, the oppression he encountered and the strength he
gained from the battle of life. His honest, thorough personal look at his
childhood and early adulthood reveals how his early life was punctured
frequently by increasing disillusionments and in the world around him, hopes
alternated with defeats. He soon realizes that the hardest thing for artist to do is
to remain an artist: “I have to do what I can do and bear witness to something
that has to be there when the battle is over” [Julius Lester 225]. Baldwin does
not single out blacks as the sole victims of an oppressive society, he includes
white victims too in the struggle for freedom and betterment, for it is the unity
of white and black in oppression that contains some promise for America and
the world at large.

With renewed awareness of his identity and with recharged vitality and
courage he has become the solitary singer with a bleeding throat, chanting from
his soul the bitter sweet notes of his native experience and warbling in
measured artistry his assessment of himself as a person as well as an artist:-
how to rid himself of the excessive burden of hatred, how to transform new
experiences into new perspective and, above all, how to transcend the
difference between the colors of the skin in order for the quality of the soul to
soar. Baldwin’s weapon is love, the underlying principle of the world’s great
religions and moral leaders, temporal and spiritual from Confucius to Lincoln
from Jesus to Saint Paul. Baldwin’s works have been the vehicles for the
expression of his values and beliefs. The search for identity and love of the
urban black in the American North is always his theme.
Baldwin’s reputation as a dramatist rests primarily upon two works. The *Amen Corner* written in 1954-55 and *Blues for Mister Charlie* written in 1964. Even though *The Amen Corner* was written in the fifties it was published only in the sixties in 1968. *The Amen Corner* is built upon the rhythms of the Afro-American Church. The action of the play flows smoothly and effortlessly to the rhythms of the language and of the music of the play. The play is about love-about the enduring strength that love gives, about the love among four people who comprise a particular black family. The genesis of the play lies in Baldwin’s decision to write a play based on his experience with Mother Horn, whom he met in his early church days. The drama revolves around the life of her church and her relationship with her rebellious son. Though much of the criticism on *The Amen Corner* is centered on its religious aspect, Louis Pratt has described the categorization of this play as “religious” inappropriate. To him, those who described the play cannot view “the whole drama of interpersonal conflict” in black community [Louis Pratt- James Baldwin 84] To subistiate the proposition, Pratt points to the openings of the play and says that it is obvious that Margaret Alexander, the church pastor had fled the world of reality to take refuge-not in religion but in illusion and self deception. *The Amen Corner*, though apparently a play about Christianity, subtly projects the disunity among the blacks themselves.

*The Amen Corner* is a moving story of a black family who are members of the Harlem Storefront church. Though the play’s central character is a Negro pastor the plot is woven around three major characters, each facing a dilemma.
Sister Margaret has rejected her husband Luke, and dominates son David and forces him to embrace Christianity. She struggles to protect her son from the destruction which she believes awaits any one foolish enough to emulate her husband. Her dilemma is “how to treat her husband and son as men and at the same time to protect them from the bloody consequences of trying to be a man in this society (Baldwin, The Amen Corner XV1) Her strictness is a defence against her own inclination to worldly happiness. Margaret undermines religion and creates a church which is removed from the reality of life. To Margaret church is a refuge which she expects her son to turn to. Luke is being deserted by his wife, partly because of his failure to sustain the family together with the meagre income he earns as a jazz musician and partly as a result of the break of communication among themselves. This failure to fulfill the responsibility to support their family makes black men often feel inadequate. The results were frequent separations and house holds where mother and grandmother became central figures. Margarete’s family is representative of such a matrifocal black family.

Baldwin’s experience as a preacher made him believe that the church is not only the place where man meets God but it is often the place where he makes his stand against God” [Standley, James Baldwin 379]. Baldwin gave up church and turned against religion because he had learned that a truly moral human being had to “divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrises of the Christian church” [qtd in Davis 225]. Baldwins writing career had been shaped by his childhood understanding of the nature of the Christian
experience. The play reflects Baldwin’s contempt for the church and project the idea that Christian God is a white God. Margaret is in the church “because her society has left her no other place to go and becomes her sense of reality is dictated by the society’s assumptions which also becomes her own, of her inferiority” (Amen Xvi). Luke appears in Act I and one soon discovers that David believes his father had abandoned him. But it is Margaret who is guilty of desertion. She had interpreted the death of their second baby as a sign from the Lord to leave her husband and find a “hiding place”. She finds sanctuary in the church because all other doors are closed to her, and she begins her quest for self as a minister of God. But she has made a tragic mistake which is revealed when Mrs. Jackson comes forward to have Margaret pray for her ailing baby.

Margaret: - May be the Lord wants you to leave that man

Mrs. Jackson: No! He don’t want that! [Amen 14]

Mrs. Jackson refuses Margaret’s advice because she has already discovered that her identity can only be achieved through an open line of communication with her husband. Margaret has yet to realize this. The parallel story of the two women becomes even more significant when one considers the sharp contrast which Baldwin makes. In act III after her baby has died, Mrs. Jackson tells Margaret “I ain’t like you Sister Margaret. I don’t want all this, all these people looking to me. I am just a young woman, I just want my man and my home and my children (66) Margaret too had lost a child when she was a young woman but instead of standing by Luke, she nagged him to drink
because she felt that he was responsible for the baby’s death. She deprived Luke and David of the family relationship which each needed so badly, though no more than she herself required. And as Mrs. Jackson stood alone in the church, a young woman who had just lost her second child she is bewildered and perplexed. She begins to see her own mistake from the past. Realizing that she has taken the wrong road, Margaret reverses the advice that she had given to Mrs. Jackson prior to the baby’s death. “Go on home to your husband” and she advises compassionately “Go on home to your man” (67).

Luke is the most sensitive and perceptive character in the play. In one of the most memorable scenes he describes his suffering. He tells David that he has failed in his quest for identity not because of his music but because he has been denied the most basic human quality—love. Luke realizes that Margaret’s distorted sense of reality has precluded the extension of her love and understanding thereby denying David the pursuit of his manhood. He knows that any efforts either to prescribe the terms of that quest or to protect him from its consequence can only result in the pain and misery of failure which he himself knows only too well. Luke has learned that a man must strike out, against the odds, if necessary to discover the meaning of his own life. And he encourages David to take the first step toward reaching that goal.

Baldwin skillfully uses the contrasting qualities of vision and blindness to symbolize Margaret’s lack of inner sight as compared to that possessed by Luke. This juxtaposition becomes particularly significant near the end of the
drama, as two parents discuss the boy—Margaret as if he were dead, Luke affirming that he is alive.

Margaret: He’s gone

Luke: He’s gone into the world. He’s gone into the world!

Margaret: Luke, you won’t never see your son no more

Luke: But I seen him one last time. He’s in the world, he’s living.

Margaret: He is gone, Away from you and away from me

Luke: He’s living. He’s living. Is you got to see your God to know he’s living? (86)

Luke’s subsequent death occasions Margaret’s remorse and enhances the cognizance of her own identity. She is forced into a reexamination of those values that have precipitated her misfortune and she emerges in the final scene with a fuller understanding of the error of her ways:- “Her triumph is that … although she has lost every thing, she also gains the keys to the Kingdom. The Kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself. (XVI)

Sister Margaret undergoes an evolution from her earlier desertion of the family to embrace Christianity. She propounds the need for a love which can encompass every aspect of human condition and still endure.

I’m just now finding out what it means to love the Lord. It aint all in the singing and shouting. It aint all in the reading of the Bible. It aint even in running all over everybody trying to get to heaven.
To love the Lord is to love all His children—all of them! And suffer and rejoice with them and never count the cost. (88)

_The AMEN Corner_ pleads for a group consciousness among the members of the black race. Black American’s hope lies in loving, trusting and recognizing each other and restorting the lost pride in themselves rather than in supplicating themselves to the “mercy of God’s cruelty”. The play is also a direct attack on Christianity which is devoid of love and compassion. The blacks in America often embraced church but it prevents the black masses from attaining their identity. More over Christianity is projected as an inherently corrupting tradition which makes it difficult for the black man to experience love and sexuality to the fullest. The strained relationship between Luke and Margaret can be seen from this perspective. Baldwin’s attack against Christianity is the result of his early experiences in life.

_Blues for Mister Charlie_ tells the story of Richard Henry, a black youth who temporarily found success in the entertainment world in the North before drug addiction ended his career. When he returns to his home in the south, he discovers love, which gives him a new strength. But unwilling to relapse to the subordinate position required for blacks in his community, he provokes a confrontation with Lyle Britten, a white store-owner whose murder of a black man has been overlooked by white keepers of law and order. Because Richard Henry insults the white store—owner by asserting his own economic and sexual superiority, Richard is killed. The white murderer is acquitted, however because his wife claims that Henry tried to assault her. The traditional lie
succeeds because another witness, Parnell, who considers himself a friend of black people, cannot force himself to deny publicly the words of a respected southern white woman. As the play ends the Reverened Meridian Henry, Richards father has begun to understand that he cannot depend upon white men of good will to effect improvement in inter racial relationships. Instead blacks themselves must effect the change, and must arm themselves for protection against whites.

When Baldwin wrote, the play, protest marches were timely and popular subject matter. It obviously reflects the authors participation in the Civil Rights Movement, for the play is based on the case of Emmett Till a black teenage youth from Chicago who was murdered in 1955 in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Further more the play appealed to many young balcks because Richard Henry was the first black character in their lifetime to attack white society boldly.

Richard Henry to whom everyone in the play reacts or responds is a black American Youth who claims that “he has seen more than his father” [Blues 33]. His comprehension of the reality of the racial situation in the south has led him to a refusal to believe in God, and has resulted in his attitude to whites as expressed during a conversation with Grandma Mrs. Wilhelmina Henry in Act I “I am going to treat everyone of them as though they were responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world- Oh yes The (Whites) are responsible for the misery I’ve ever seen (35). It is only
that Richard understands the reality but he also traces the root cause of the racial injustice to a lack of power…

… It is because my Daddy got no power that my mama’s dead. And he aint got no power because he’s black. And the only way the black man’s going to get any power is to drive all the white men into sea. (35)

Having been overwhelmed by the suffocating oppression of Harlem and having found in drugs a refuge from his own solitude he returns to the south bringing with him a fury which expresses itself in contempt with which he confronts the white community. Richard says to Mother Henry in Act I.

Richard: I didn’t want to comeback here like a whipped dog. One whipped dog running to another whipped dog. No I didn’t want that . I wanted to make my Daddy proud of me (34)

Richard understands but at the same time felt ashamed of his fathers inability to save his mother. He says to his Grandma:-

Richard: …But I just wish, that day that mama died he’d took a pistol and gone through that damn white man’s hotel and shot every son of a bitch in the place. … I wish he’d shot them dead. I been dreaming of that day ever since I left here (35)

Richards mind has been warped by the degradation to which he has been subjected by the white power structure. The corrosive fires of hate burn brightly within him and he is obsessed with the idea of revenge. This preoccupation, however has its roots firmly planted in the dominant motif of
power. Richard feels certain that his mother has been murdered by whites, and he experiences a sense of frustration because the perpetrators of crime have gone unpunished. He secretly wishes that on the day of her death his father had been able to stand up in a courageous assertion of his manhood, but instead, he remembers his helplessness: “He couldn’t say nothing, he couldn’t do nothing. I’ll never forget the way he looked – whipped, whipped, whipped” (35).

Meridian Henry becomes a living example of the traditional ineffectuality of the black man within the white power structure. Realizing this Richard has lost hope for correcting this legal imbalance within the system. Frustrated by the miscarriage of social justice, he can only counsel the power of violence. As Richard nourishes the valid but unproven suspicion regarding his mother’s death, he begins the construction of a solid, impenetrable wall of bitterness. He cannot single out his mother’s murderers for a confrontation, and so he begins to transfer his hostility to whites in general. But the root of these atrocities, he reasons, stems from the helpless condition of black people. Mother Henry counsels her grandson that hatred is a poison which will ultimately destroy him, but the vivid memory of his mother’s needless death, his father’s powerlessness and his own disillusionment have already been transformed into vials of hatred:

I’m going to learn how to drink it – a little every day in the morning, and then a booster shot late at night. I’m going to keep it right here, at the very top of my mind. I’m going to remember Mama, and Daddy’s face that day and Aunt Edna and all her sad
little deals and all those boys and girls in Harlem and all them
pimps and whores and gangsters and all them cops. And I’m
going to remember all the dope that’s flowed through my veins.
I’m going to remember everything – the jails I been in and cops
that beat me and how long a time I spent screaming and stinking
in my own dirt, trying to break my habit. I’m going to remember
all that, and I’ll get well. (36)

Richard’s tragic fate is precipitated by the evils of a depraved society.
The play is set in Plague town, USA and Baldwin clearly defines the term
‘Plague’ in the introduction of the play. The Plague is a race, the Plague is our
concept of Christianity and this raging plague has the power to destroy every
human relationship.” (7) Baldwin argues that our society thrives on the
inhumanities and indecencies that have been heaped upon its black citizens. It
offers a false concept of religion as an escape from the injustices of a white-
oriented, white controlled society on one hand and as a rationalization for these
humiliations on the other. It leads the social order – blacks and whites alike –
along the road to perdition, destruction and chaos.

Having been denied the opportunity to influence the swing of the social
pendulum, Richard takes pride in the only realm of authority in which he feels
himself capable: sexual power – He boasts to Pete about his sexual exploits
with white women in Greenwich village as a means of increasing his own self-
esteeem “…they can’t get enough of what little Richard’s got – and I give it to
them, too, baby, believe me. You say black people ain’t got no dignity? Man,
you ought to watch a white woman when she wants you to give her a little bit. They will do anything, baby, anything… (41)

Pete is somewhat amazed that he has taken money from these women, and as the conversation continues, Richard’s attitude towards his own sexuality become even more apparent: “Every one of them’s got some pissed-assed, fagoty white boy on a string somewhere. They go home and marry him, dig, when they can’t make it with me no more – but when they want some loving, funky, down – home, bring-it-on-here-and put-it-on-the-table style” (42) Juanita interrupts, “They sound very sad… and Baldwin continues to probe deeper into the recesses of Richard’s mind. These adventures are motivated not by lust or revenge, but by the sheer satisfaction of power. “Well I want them to be sad, baby, I want to screw up their minds forever… (42). For Richard these women have become symbols of white domination and oppression. By virtue of their color alone, he has identified them as accomplices in a massive conspiracy to which his mother, his father, his aunt and he himself have fallen victims. In fact this is his opportunity to retaliate on behalf of every black man on the face of the earth. And he welcomes the chance to strike back.

Richard dies expressing his contempt for the white world. He is killed essentially because of his refusal to conform. He steps, apparently with all the deliberateness of the conscious rebel, outside of the pattern imposed on him. Baldwin has always been supremely conscious of the rage with which the Negro confronts the white world and has insisted that “the first problem is how
to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you”. (Bigsby, James Baldwin 42). Richard’s rage is the substance of his rebellion and if it destroys him, it also constitutes his strength. The white world can afford to ignore and persecute the non-violent demonstrators. Organized by Meridian it cannot avoid the direct challenge represented by Richard. Richard’s rage is not unrelenting. He surrenders the gun which he has carried with him for ‘a long, long time” (54) to his father. He establishes a genuine relationship with Juanita, a Negro student, and the complexion of his immediate world changes. “I been in pain and darkness all my life. All my life. And this is the first time in my life I’ve ever felt- may be it isn’t all like that. May be there’s more to it than that.” (19) In Act III Junita, states firmly his new vision:- “he wasn’t going to run no more than white folks… but was going to stay and be a man – a man - right here (131). Richards single minded intensity seems to be purely destructive. Self effacement has given way to self assertion.

Self-discovery for Baldwin is not always a result of private anguish and loving commitment to another individual. It is also dependent on identification of the individual self with group experience and tradition. A relationship between self and community emerges in *Blues for Mister Charlie* In the beginning Richard perceives the humiliates of his racial past as signs of weakness and tries to define himself in opposition to that collective experience. But as the play moves along, he becomes increasingly sensitive to the beauty and strength that have come out of the appalling suffering of his people. It is in
his gradual identification with the collective, communal black experience from which he had originally alienated himself that he finds his self and strength.

The pressures which had torn the son also threaten the father and Baldwin continues the debate between passivity and active revolt in the tortured self examination of Meridian Henry. For the man who had himself born his wife’s murder without striking back and who had watched the young demonstrators beaten and reviled comes, after his son’s death, to question both the virtues of non-violence and the values of christianity. Yet Baldwin has said of this play that it is “one man’s attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light” [Blues Notes 8] and one must Presume that for him this light consists of the refusal of the Negro to retaliate and destroy. In a sermon which Meridian delivers over the dead body of his son he confesses his fears and doubts but re-dedicates himself to a continued faith in the power of love: “What hope is there for people who deny their deeds and disown their kinsmen and who do so in the name of purity and love and in the name of Jesus Christ? What a light, my Lord, is needed to conquer so mighty a darkness. This darkness! rules in us, and grows in black and white alike. I have set my face against the darkness, I will not let it conquer me…” (105) This declaration of faith is tempered, however by a demand for a sign which can give him some hope.

Meridian Henry, stands as the symbol of religion in the black community. Having been deprived of the dignity of manhood, in the secular world, he seeks this respectability in the world of religion: “I’ve had to think
would I have been such a Christian if I hadn’t been born black? (56). For him, dignity is defined in the simplest terms which any husband and father might require - the protection of his wife and his son. He uses religion as an escape mechanism to protect himself from the stark realities of life. In strictly ostrich-like fashion, he has struck his head into the sand of religion, using the Bible as a shield and a solution to the multiplicity of real problems in a real world ruled not by the word of God but by the written and unwritten laws of men. He seeks to deal with the secular world strictly in accordance with Biblical percept, and he finds that this course of action is insufficient. His son and his wife have been wantonly killed by the plague of hate. Slowly he becomes aware that yesterdays ineffective solutions will not provide answers to the problems of today. Established values must be re-examined and new values created in order to deal effectively with these issues. He acknowledges his role as a leader of his people. It is to him that generations yet unborn will turn for a sign, and he does not yet know what that sign must be: “Now, when the children come, my Lord and ask which road to follow, my tongue stammers and my heart fails…” (105). Meridan begins to move towards new values and in Act III while standing on the witness stand his faith has begun to falter under the oppressive forces exerted by a society that has been blinded by the plague of race.

The State : - And you raised your son according to the precepts of the Christian church?

Meridian: - I tried. But both my son and I had profound reservations concerning the behaviour of Christians. He wondered why
they treated black people as they do. And I was unable to give him – a satisfactory answer (134).

Thus Meridian has begun to come to grips with himself. He comes to the awareness that being a man in the sight of God is not enough. But he must in fact, stake his claim to manhood in the world of men. He now feels compelled to stand before the court, a microcosm of the local power structure and declare:

Meridian: … I am a man. A man! I tried to help my son become a man. But manhood is a dangerous pursuit, here, And that pursuit undid him because of your guns, your hoses, your dogs, your judges, your law makers, your folly… and your churches. Did you think it would endure forever? that we would pay for your case forever. (136)

Parnell James, in *Blues* is the editor of the liberal local news paper. In contrast to the rest of the white community he refuses to accept the values in which that society has come to rest. Even qualities like lust and lack of moral strength, weakness for which black Americans stereotypically have been demeaned, are reversed and are shown as weakness of white characters. And godliness, courage, strengths for which white American have been praised, are attributed to black characters. Parnell has neither the power to persuade his white friends nor the willingness to change white society. Instead he requests his Black friend Rev. Meridian Henry “to start from scratch” and to forget about all- all the past injustice” (42). When called as witness during the trial he
refuses to contradict Lyle’s wife’s account of what happened in the store. He never denies that Richard might have committed rape and this helps to acquit Lyle. Baldwin provides a clear insight into this phenomenon in his introductory notes. He explains that this self-delusion is psychologically necessary for survival.

What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then in order to protect himself closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe” (6).

Through the character of Lyle Britten Baldwin explores the theme of sexual exploitation. In Richard’s words, Lyle is symbolic of white man who is free “to rape and kill our women and we can’t do nothing. But if we touch one of their dried up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off” (41). It is through two characters, Lyle Britten and Meridian Henry, that Baldwin hopes to give flesh to his concept of the fatal interrelationships of blacks and whites in America, an idea he treated at length on The Fire Next Time, published a year before Blues was produced. Until the whites give the blacks the freedom to choose their fate, which is not the same as demanding that they accept white values, neither race can escape a relationship based on distrust and hatred.

Baldwin’s female characters in Blues are credible and dynamic. They weep, they laugh, they strike and they bleed. There is no aura of mystery about
his female characters – they enjoy sex, they exploit sex or they fear sex and Baldwin feels no hesitation in delving into female psyche concerning sex or anything else. They scrutinize life, come to some kind of grips with it and transcend their old existence in a beautiful but understandable way. Junita, in a moment of self-realization, declares to Pete that Richard’s coming back has forever changed her life. She realizes that she has never really known who she is – she recognizes the whole ignorance of her previous existence. And the knowledge she has gained tells her that life is too complex for her ever to understand herself. The one being who could call himself a man has been cruelly torn from her and she begins to perceive her need for a ‘flesh and blood’ lover. She transcends the Juanita of the first act and resorting to her gift of creation, passionately hopes that she is, indeed, pregnant. She sees the means of salvation within herself – in the womb that could nourish the life of a man, a man who could begin to save her people.

I’m not afraid. I hope I’m pregnant. I hope I am! One more illegitimate black baby… And I am going to raise my baby to be a man. A man you dig? Oh, let me be pregnant, let me be pregnant, don’t let it all be gone! A man. Juanita. A man. Oh, my God, there are no more… Let me be pregnant! Let me pregnant! (125).

Before our eyes Juanita enters womanhood in a most profound sense. Few such moments of realization have occurred in literature; fewer moments have involved women.
Just as Juanita Jo also grows and develops to a level of deeper insight. She recognizes that her choice to marry Lyle is an attempt to invest her life with meaning. She realizes her intellectual superiority to her husband, and she is aware that she moves in a very limited circle. Yet within the feminine mystique Jo’s mind questions and she acts. She discovers that Lyle could have loved a black woman with more intensity than he has felt for her and that such a forceful passion could have led him to kill Old Bill. If Lyle were capable of committing one murder, he could commit another, and Jo startlingly concludes that her husband is a murderer. Before she is to testify, Jo recalls her fears of old-maidenhood and her desperate need for a husband. She realistically surmises that her means of identification and her meaning in life are inextricably tied to her marriage vows. She chooses to protect the life that means so much to her and of her own volition perjures herself on the witness stand. This act is a drastic one for a woman so seemingly timid and pallid as Jo.

Women play a different role in black community. They cannot wait and cannot be passive. In the matriarchal black community the woman has an active role in survival. Thus it is easy for Baldwin, as the product of such a community to picture woman as strong, dynamic active and even dominant. In Baldwin’s couples the woman always possesses greater personal and world insight. More than this, the woman is often more aggressive, more intelligent and more successful. In Blues Juanita is the most dynamic, intelligent, clear sighted and aggressive character in the drama.
Baldwin was obsessively concerned with the writer’s responsibility to save the world. He wanted to change the social position in America through love. He does not question the basic operators of American society, but accepts his special place in this scheme, otherwise he feels he would have no places in any scheme. He changed his attitude towards the problem of race. But the change he wanted to effect was not in social, economic and political system which perpetuates racial exploitation, but in the minds of both black and white masses. As a writer he is concerned with the most personal and intimate access of experience. As Lyall H. Powers argues Baldwin wanted,

to examine the problem of learning to live in a ‘civilised’ society whose manners, conventions, prejudices often threaten individual integrity of coming to terms with that society’s demands, and of managing to make the necessary compromises – but without giving up one’s essential self. [qtd in Weatherby 85]

Baldwin has succeeded in his mission to shake up the White and wake up the Blacks, a mission which was followed by Amiri Baraka more vigorously in the ensuing decades. To be free from physical and mental bondage one must understand the true meaning of freedom and remember at heart the Biblical adage: Truth shall set ye free” Baldwin expresses this idea eloquently:

Human freedom is a complex, difficult and private thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is fire which burns away illusions… If we are not capable of this examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failure in the
history of nations… yet it only when a man is able without bitterness or self pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free – he has set himself free – for higher dreams, for greater privileges. [Baldwin, Nobody 116-117].