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The Black Woman's Prison: Church in Baldwin

One of the most outspoken African-American writers of the past century, James Baldwin, effectively mirrored the flaws, injustices, and hypocrisies of the United States social system. He often zeroed in on gender and sexual oppression facing African-American men and women, using the church as his backdrop. It is no small fact that the church plays an enormous role in the lives of African-Americans, largely defining their family and gender relations. The church wields a mixed influence, however: it gives blacks a reason to hope for change—to have faith that God will deliver them from oppression—but in the same sense it cripples them, especially the women. The church paralyzes the women, filling them with a fear of hell, and as a result, they lead inactive lives, afraid that with one wrong step they will be condemned. In a sense, they subconsciously re-enact the learned helplessness of the slave woman's experience. Where the slave woman often willingly yielded to her master to avoid severe punishment, Baldwin's women characters develop the same fear-based relationship with God. The Christian God becomes their master and eternal damnation the punishment.

Baldwin emphasizes the ambiguity of Christianity's role, in two of his most celebrated novels: *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. He reveals the ways in which the church's teachings fuel hostility among women and cause them to be passive and inactive, fearful and imprisoned. The problems the church presents to women coincide to some extent with the black woman's past as a slave and the commonplace sexual exploitation and degradation that occurred. In addition to the misogynistic doctrines of Christianity, which imply

that all women are sexual temptresses and the bringers of sin, slave masters conditioned black women to believe they were inherently barbaric and sexually depraved. Baldwin contrasts elderly women and young women, churchgoing women and non-churchgoing women to reveal the significance and oppressive nature of the church in their lives. This institution represents salvation, the route to forgiveness for their inherent sinful nature, and some women are willing to sacrifice anything to obtain such salvation.

The glaring contradictions in the role of churchwomen stand as the most apparent revelations of Baldwin's two aforementioned novels. Baldwin's churchgoing women are the most tormented or often the most hypocritical women in the novels. Rachel and Elizabeth's aunt in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and Mrs. Hunt in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, epitomize the hypocritical elderly churchgoing woman, while Florence and Elizabeth in the former novel represent the most tormented churchgoing women. According to Trudier Harris in *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, these women can thus be put into two categories: the seemingly positive churchgoers and the skeptical churchgoers (Harris 6).

The women most solidly steeped in the traditional roles represent the positive churchgoers; they are usually older, middle-aged women, particularly the church mothers and those who serve as religious mentors to younger people in the church (Harris 6). As one of the most important figures in the church, an exceptional older woman traditionally earns the title "church mother," such as Praying Mother Washington in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Often addressed as "Mother," she is the woman whom other members seek out for advice and guidance. And viewed as an excellent example of Christian principles, "she is surely an expert on the Bible. . . [her] opinions. . . sometimes prevail[ing] over the views of the male preacher" (Cole, Guy-Sheftall 116). She and other women of her status probably never miss a Sunday

service, and they take it as their duty to lead other women. Rachel and Mrs. Hunt are the primary examples. The younger women, on the contrary, are the skeptics who seek independence from the male-dominated church society, but they often never gain that long-sought independence. Not as outspoken as the older women, their faith and commitment waver.

Through their guidance, the positive churchgoing women keep the younger, skeptical women in bondage: bondage to men, bondage to traditional roles, and bondage to the fundamentalist church. Rachel, for instance, uses God and religion to threaten her daughter Florence, who attempts to escape her mother and the church's ideals by fleeing to New York. She tells Florence that if she leaves her sick mother, she will have to face God and the threat of hell. Even as Florence is leaving, Rachel cries out for God to show Florence some mercy: "hold her back from the lake that burns forever!" (Baldwin 99). Rachel simply wants Florence to stay at home, be a dutiful daughter and sister, and "be content—helping with the washing and fixing meals and keeping [her brother] Gabriel quiet" (Baldwin 89). In a sense, she wants Florence to sacrifice her entire life for Gabriel, the "manchild" of the house (Baldwin 89). Florence does flee to New York, but not without the constant fear that she will have to face condemnation for her actions. And as much as she tries to escape the church, she ultimately still finds herself in church, bowing before an altar, a fear of condemnation consuming her (Harris 15).

Elizabeth's aunt attempts to control young Elizabeth in the same way. She constantly criticizes Elizabeth for being too proud and vain. Her aunt complains incessantly about all the sacrifices she has made to raise Elizabeth as a nice Christian lady. Elizabeth later recalls how her aunt used to say threateningly, "You little miss great-I-am. . . . You go walking around with your nose in the air, the Lord's going to let you fall right on down to the bottom of the ground" (Baldwin, 210). Yet, Elizabeth's aunt, as well as Rachel and many of these "positive"

churchgoing women, are just as tormented as the skeptical women. For instance, Alice Walker writes in *Anything We Love Can be Saved*, that though the ministers consider these women to be sages, knowledgeable about “the spirit, and the soul, [they are] never asked to speak to the congregation” (12). They play ambiguous roles as church members: although they are esteemed church members, they are still unworthy. This ambiguity and its effects upon the mind possibly form the basis of their harshness toward the younger, less devoted women. Their oppressive domination over the young women merely represents displaced anger and frustration concerning the patriarchy and sexism in the church.

The younger women like Elizabeth and Florence have lost interest in the church. They desire little part in the traditional notions of the woman’s duty that the church instills in them, for women learn quite early that it is their Christian duty to accept their inferior places as “wives, mothers, sisters, and to feel guilty if they do not” (Harris 5). Women learn to be selfless. They learn that thinking of themselves or having pride will only lead to God’s wrath and judgment. It becomes virtually impossible for them to consider themselves first and to think of their own needs; ultimately, escape from the church’s prison of guilt and obedience becomes practically impossible. They believe themselves to be eternally guilty of “some crime or condition of existence that demands their doing penance” (Harris 5). The women, in addition, subconsciously consider their aversion to the church a grave sin. Like Elizabeth and Florence, they view themselves as spiritually unclean and willingly suffer in order to receive redemption for said sins. And because they are willing to suffer, churchgoing women doom themselves to an existence of “psychological discomfort. . .self-accusation. . .and repression” (Harris 5). They imprison themselves.

For instance, merely thinking of themselves leads such Christian women to believe they have committed the sin of pride and guilt consumes them. This is the case with Florence when she leaves her sick mother to go to New York. Years later, when Florence is terminally ill, she still fears condemnation, thinking, “her mother would be there, leaning over the gates of Heaven, to see her daughter burning in the pit” (Baldwin 115). Florence and others become servants—servants of God, servants of their men, servants of their family—in hopes that such servitude will redeem them of their sins and lead them to Heaven. Elizabeth represents this notion largely; her servitude leads her to suffer willingly psychological and physical abuse from her husband. The idea of servitude essentially leads the churchwoman to live a God-centered, dormant life, where she sits back, silently, and allows things to happen. If she decides to put herself first and help herself, she may be perceived as proud, as Florence is often viewed. The women, nevertheless, become fatalistic, trusting in God and waiting for Him to intervene in life’s affairs. This life of inaction cripples them and can be linked to the slave mentality: a condition of learned helplessness ingrained in them by the brutal treatment of their masters and their endless suffering.

During slavery, masters intimidated black women, teaching them the role of the submissive servant, a key notion that the church later enforced quite overtly to free black women. According to bell hooks in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, “Since the slave[master] regarded the black woman as a marketable cook, wet nurse, housekeeper, it was crucial that she be so thoroughly terrorized that she would submit passively to the will of the white master, mistress, and their children” (20). Masters often employed rape to gain the desired result, though usually it began with sexual advances. Slave women were led to believe that they were sexually “wanton” by nature and, as a result, the masters could not be held responsible for

raping them (hooks 34). Viewed as no more than valueless prostitutes, they were responsible for their rape. And this notion of being the sexual temptress, further enforced by the religious doctrine taught to the slave women, ultimately made them resigned to defeat. They accepted their inherent inferiority and deviance as women and black people. “Christian slave women,” hooks writes, “resolutely believed that it was natural that they be subservient to men” (44). They internalized the oppression.

Masters implanted a sense of worthlessness as women through the systematic practice of rape and various other practices. Black women, for instance, received severe floggings while stripped naked, essentially stripped of their dignity and humanity (hooks 37). Furthermore, they forced slave women to choose other slave men with whom to breed, dehumanizing the slave woman even more by equating her with an animal; and “slave women who refused to choose a man and mate with him had men forced upon them by their overseer or master” (hooks 40). The slave system completely crushed the morale and dignity of the black woman in every way imaginable.

Becoming passive and submissive during slavery, black women learned to willingly comply with the demands, usually sexual, of their master, for those women who did not suffer the most brutal consequences: because the threat of rape remained a certainty if she refused to comply with the master’s sexual demands, “passive submission” was the only safe option (hooks 26). The ultimate goal of this “categorical rape,” according to hooks, was to force the slave woman into complete obedience and allegiance to racist order (hooks 27). In other words, the power structure between the black slave woman and her master demanded either submission or torture. Certainly, the mentality created by the slave woman’s powerlessness remained ingrained in the minds of free black women many years later. Drawing upon the history of slavery,

Baldwin often presents women characters as completely submissive to God's will, the patriarchal structure of the church, and the traditional female roles; he, thus, implies that the slave mentality still lingered as late as the mid-twentieth century.

As shown in the two novels, the women's fervent adherence to the patriarchal church and its long-held gender ideals greatly influences the relationships they form with each other and with men. Relationships between women are particularly rocky and often hostile or oppressive. The relationships, for instance, between Florence and Rachel or Elizabeth and her aunt are extremely oppressive and unhealthy; the older women try to lock each younger woman in a personal and mental prison, succeeding largely. hooks put it simply in her piece *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

“Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience” (43).

Rachel's affection toward Gabriel, who is described as the “apple of his mother's eye,” exemplifies the idea that a woman's worth is determined by her relationship with men. The only constructive relationship women can have with each other is a mentor-learner relationship, with the more learned women teaching the younger ones how to pray and become good Christian wives and sisters. In Baldwin's novels, the negative effects of such ideology strike the reader as tragically evident between older women and young women. Relationships between the two groups are often unhealthy, trapping the young women in a state of torment, guilt and self-hatred.

Yet women who share the awareness of their bondage can form fulfilling relationships. Elizabeth and Florence form a rather soothing relationship, due primarily to their similar feelings about men and church. The interaction between these two women is the only one between an

older woman and a younger woman in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* not fueled with hostility or oppression. Florence and Elizabeth view themselves as victims of men and the church and, because of this commonality, they easily form a mother-daughter bond. Florence tells Elizabeth that she believes women will always be “dragged down in the dirt” by men (Baldwin 246). Elizabeth, in turn, tells Florence many things about her life—her illegitimate son and her guilt and fear of hell—as a way of confessing and purging herself of her sins (Harris 20). Therefore, though the two women liberate themselves to an extent, Elizabeth’s confessions show how they always consider themselves guilty and find the need to avoid God’s wrath by confessing. It shows that their relationships always revolve around church and their oppressive male-dominant environment.

The power of the church, in addition, can be seen in Elizabeth’s relationship with Gabriel, Florence’s hypocritical brother, a minister, whom she despises. Spiritual guilt, as ingrained in Elizabeth by the religious doctrine, plays a large role in this particular relationship. She even admits, “his voice made her feel that she was not altogether cast down, that God might raise her again in honor” (Baldwin 251). Elizabeth takes Gabriel as a sign of God’s mercy (Baldwin 254). She feels that if a righteous minister can accept and forgive her for her sins, then perhaps God has forgiven her. Although Florence warns Elizabeth about him, Elizabeth simply refuses to see the bad in him. She deludes herself into believing that he is the devout minister he claims to be. This blindness to reality not only shows her need to find self-worth by bonding with a man but also reveals her “desperate need to find a source of comfort and support in some man, and to absolve her guilt” (Harris 20). It reveals her subconscious need to be close to a God figure who can offer her forgiveness for her sins. Gabriel makes her feel that maybe God has given her a second chance, that He has not “judged her too harshly for the sin she committed by

bearing [her son] out of wedlock” (Harris 21). If Gabriel, who symbolically represents God to Elizabeth, does not condemn her, then perhaps she will not have to face eternal Hell.

The bonds the two women form between themselves and with men mirror the extent to which women are imprisoned. Both women lead lives predetermined by the restrictions of the fundamentalist church. Elizabeth stays with Gabriel, hoping that she will receive redemption, although the relationship is unhealthy for her physically and psychologically. And Florence does not intervene very much because she too, rather subconsciously, believes that there is little else for a woman other than life as a mother or wife. Both women, nevertheless, find it impossible to escape completely the church’s prison and the male-dominated society. According to Harris, all of a woman’s choices are “undercut by her imprisonment” and all her “relationships dictated by her confinement” (23). Because the woman's lifestyle is a fear-based one, with the threat of Hell and God’s wrath constantly lingering in the mind, every decision she makes reflects her knowledge and fear of the future consequences if she dares to initiate action. Thus, women of the church lead fearful, inactive lives. They subconsciously adopt an attitude of learned helplessness, similar to the slave woman’s attitude. Only, this time, their master is God and the church, and the punishment is hell.

The complex sense of guilt and fear that consumes Baldwin’s churchwomen often prevents them from taking action to change their miserable lives. It encourages them to remain inert, bowed down in prayer, constantly attempting to fix what they believe to be a flaw: “that of being black, female, human” (Walker 4). Although this flaw does not exist, except in the minds of the pastors and the chauvinistic churchmen, it has been deeply instilled in them as a truth. Walker illuminates the painful consciousness of churchwomen, relating it to her experience as the daughter of a church mother: “According to the scriptures: we had sinned. . . . Woman was

the cause. . . . [and] all our life we must suffer just because we existed” (18, 19). Churchwomen, terrified by the threat of hell that remains an inevitable end for most of them, suffer and submit to prevent such destruction. They are taught to accept “suffering and degradation as their due” (Walker 19). They must accept any suffering they experience as God’s way of punishing them for being a woman, the bringer of sin into His world.

Walker even lists Biblical passages that further emphasize God’s brutal punishment of women, and their utter worthlessness as human beings. In Numbers, where the Israelites take the Midian women as captives, God speaks through Moses telling the men to kill all but the virgins: “all women children, that have not known man by lying with him, keep for yourselves” (Walker 22). Clearly, as Walker points out, these unfortunate girls become sex slaves and mistresses of the soldiers and priests, forced to service them in whatever manner demanded (22). And, yet, because they are women, the Bible implies that they are responsible for this barbaric treatment and suffering. This rhetoric differs very little from that of the white slave masters and the manipulation they used on the slave women. Just as the Biblical passage blamed the woman for her rape, the master led the slave woman to believe that as a sexual deviant she was responsible for her rape and degradation. The correlation between the oppression of the slave system and the church is quite clear: the black women of Baldwin’s novels are reliving the slave woman’s experience of exploitation, suffering, and inaction. They feel responsible for their suffering because they are women and because they are black.

Baldwin, however, depicts the exact opposite type of woman in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. He does not throw the spotlight on tormented, helpless churchwomen like Elizabeth and Florence. Instead, he focuses on the lives of non-churchgoers—individuals who have grown up in the church but eventually rejected it—sharply contrasting them to the insiders of the church.

He draws a picture of people like himself. People such as Gabriel, who may have falsely presented themselves as virtuous and caring, do not exist in this novel. The hypocritical Gabriel characters do not attempt to disguise their selfishness but are instead openly intolerant, hateful and selfish. Baldwin uses the Christian women, particularly, to show this degeneration in the church.

Baldwin himself witnessed the failures of the church firsthand. Having become a Pentecostal preacher at the age of fourteen, he renounced religion at age seventeen, viewing the institution as a complete debacle. Considering his preaching experience one of the most dishonest periods of his life, he viewed the church as a hypocritical institution. Like Esther, the most liberated woman in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Baldwin exited the doors of the church and viewed it from the outside; he essentially became an observer, as is Esther who observes the hypocritical minister who wants to and eventually does have sex with her (Hardy III, 6). From the outside, he sees the various forms of hypocrisy: how the ministers preach the ideal of the virgin woman and how the men and preachers themselves can go have sexual relations with any number of women with little fear of condemnation.

The double standard is revealed very clearly in the minister Gabriel's sexual affair with Esther. Baldwin shows how Esther's sexually open personality conflicts with the church, but the minister who seeks her receives no scorn. These are the sorts of problems within the church that enraged Baldwin and led him to abandon the institution.

In *Beale Street*, he blatantly sketches the church as a place of hypocrisy, devoid of love, a "mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair" (Harris 129). Florence and Elizabeth from the former novel are perfect examples of this despair and self-loathing. The Gabriels of the world, Baldwin realized when he was young, had tainted the Bible, twisted its words. He felt the entire

doctrine needed to be reinterpreted. In this novel, he redefines the church in the way he believed it should be, by portraying those outside the church as the righteous and holy individuals, with the most fulfilling and loving relationships. Tish, her family, Fonny and his father are these individuals. The negative characters exist inside the church: Mrs. Hunt and her daughters.

In *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, people with somewhat strong albeit unhealthy relationships and ties, are the churchgoing people. However, in *Beale Street*, the outsiders have strong, secure family ties. They support their family and always go great distances to support and encourage family members. If a family member gets in trouble, the family eagerly takes action to help the person. Instead of praying and waiting for divine intervention, such individuals take immediate action to solve their problems. Baldwin implies that “being inside the church means waiting. . .and refusing to get involved. . .even for the sake of a loved one” (Harris 130). This dormancy and fatalism that leading a Christian life entails destroys the family; Mrs. Hunt represents such destruction because she lets her son sit in jail and refuses to help him. Through a reversal of this logic in *Beale Street*, Baldwin effectively shows how the true Christian should behave.

The non-churchgoing women in the novel also do not suffer from guilty consciences or view themselves as helpless and inherently inferior. They do not hate themselves for the sins they have or have not committed. They do not feel overwhelmed by the fear of Hell and God’s judgment. And because they reject the ideas and morality of the fundamentalist church, they exist as free beings, free from eternal guilt, despair, and self-hatred. For them, morality lies in taking action and doing everything within one’s abilities to help a loved one in turmoil. They believe that one must take active steps to “see the will of God manifested on earth,” rather than wait around for it to happen (Harris 130). The idea of sitting around idly waiting strikes them as

ludicrous. Unlike the churchwomen who feel guilty for merely existing, “they do not assume that they are forever in the position of praying to be excused for their mere existence on earth” (Harris 131).

In *Beale Street*, the women fall into one of two extremes: the good woman and the bad woman. Those characters such as Tish and her sister and mother whom Baldwin depicts as virtuous are models of Christ, who uphold the principles of the New Testament concerning love. For instance, when Fonny—the father of Tish’s baby—becomes falsely accused of rape and ends up in jail, Tish and her family immediately help him, while his good Christian family deserts him. On the contrary, Mrs. Hunt, Fonny’s mother, represents the other extreme. She has very little understanding of what it means to be like Jesus and to make sacrifices as He did. She refuses to help get her son out of jail: in one passage she says, “sometimes I think that maybe this is the *Lord’s* way of making my boy think on his sins and surrender his soul to Jesus” (Baldwin 54). In addition, she hates him simply because he has dark skin, “nappy” hair, and lacks faith in the church (Harris 130). Mrs. Hunt epitomizes the bad woman.

Mrs. Hunt appears to be a more extreme version of Rachel and Elizabeth’s aunt. She blatantly represents the hypocrisy of the church, the hypocrisy that results from inaction or idly waiting for divine intervention as well as from passing judgment upon others. This inaction destroys the family. Mrs. Hunt, therefore, causes such destruction because she foolishly admits that only the will of God can get her son out of jail, that there is nothing she can do (Baldwin 55). Whereas the church supposedly represents love, she is the exact opposite. For instance, when she finds out that an unmarried Tish is pregnant with Fonny’s baby, she says, “The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb” (Baldwin 57). She actually curses her own

unborn grandchild to death. She essentially personifies evil and hate, yet the paradox is that she represents the traditional, devout Christian woman.

Because Fonny's mother and sisters refuse to help, Tish and her family assume all responsibility for getting Fonny out of jail, viewing him as part of their family. Sharon, Tish's mother, does not care that Tish is pregnant and unmarried. Such a predicament would have surely gotten her exiled from a churchgoing family. Sharon, however, does all that she can to make her daughter happy and to encourage her. She celebrates Tish's pregnancy, considering it a wonderful event that elicits celebration. Because Sharon had not been the most orthodox young woman, she sympathizes with her daughter. For instance, she ran away with Joseph, whom she married within less than a month at age twenty. This experience has granted her with a deep understanding of effect love can have, and she understands Tish's love for Fonny (Harris 149, 150). Sharon exists as an outsider of the church and, therefore, refuses to abide by its traditional rules regarding adultery and fornication, she feels she is committing no sin by elevating her daughter's pregnancy. Tish says that they are Baptists but rarely go to church because "Mama didn't dig the church sisters. . .and Daddy didn't seeing any point in running after the Lord" (Baldwin 18).

Mrs. Hunt, a direct contrast to Sharon, above all represents the hypocrite and the bad mother. She flaunts an extremely twisted knowledge of the New Testament, and she sees the church as a show, a performance. A "Sanctified woman," she attends church simply to flash her material possessions and to dazzle everyone with her inaccurate knowledge (Baldwin 13). She believes that one is righteous simply if he or she attends church. And although God represents love and forgiveness, Mr. Hunt puts forth no effort to acquire these qualities. Mrs. Hunt personifies the hypocrisy within the church. How can she, of all people, pretend to love Jesus,

pretend to teach her children about the Savior, but then neglect and hate her only son? She neglects him, for instance, in that she refuses to help him get ready for Sunday School or ensure that he arrives there safely. She does not want to get up early to dress him, and more importantly, there is no one in Sunday school “to admire her—her carefully washed and covered body and her snow-white soul” (Baldwin 18).

Churchgoing women like Mrs. Hunt often sacrifice their familial relationships, their autonomy, and their free will for the sake of salvation. Mrs. Hunt surrenders her relationship with her son by hating him simply because he does not fancy her faith; she lets him sit innocently in jail, all because she has convinced herself that he is a sinner and that his jail time is God’s punishment. Like Florence and Elizabeth, these women resign themselves to self-loathing and eternal guilt, ultimately unable to break from the church’s walls. As Baldwin made clear in *Beale Street*, the church is essentially a “long and dark and narrow” place, a hell, a psychological torture chamber for many young, questioning women, women who are not fond of the gender ideals or the hypocrisy (Baldwin 19). The faith destroys their relationships with other women, particularly those with much older women, like Rachel and Elizabeth’s aunt and mother. Threatened into prayer by the Mrs. Hunts and Rachels of the world, they submit to God’s will. Just as many black slave women resigned to defeat at the hands of their masters, who threatened them with violence and rape, so these black women passively suffer at the hands of a misconstrued Christian God who threatens them with eternal flames.

Although the women clearly see the hypocrisy and hate in God’s house, they always find themselves there bowing before an altar, begging for forgiveness. Only the women like Tish, her sister and her mother are able to see the hypocrisy and flaws and escape it. As a result, their relationships, significantly between older women and younger women, exist as the only ones not

fueled by hostility, oppression, or guilt. Tish has a stronger familial relationship than either Florence or Elizabeth had with mother figures in their lives. Tish and her family understand the meaning of action, free will, and freedom. They are proud of who they are, and they cannot be bothered about the Lord's wrath or His everlasting condemnation.

Baldwin's depiction of black women in the church strikes one as compelling, primarily because he was the first black writer to draw attention to the oppressive situation. Other renowned writers during the mid-twentieth century merely painted black women as the oppressors of men. The black woman was often depicted as the rigid, dogmatic mother figure. These writers failed to capture the oppression that the woman endured at the hands of the church and in turn perhaps projected onto her sons and daughters. Baldwin, on the contrary, drew upon the history of slavery and accurately revealed the dynamics of oppression, whether racist, sexist, or religious facing black women. He eerily showed how the white master had merely been replaced by the wrathful God of Christianity, and in each situation his women characters eagerly, though sometimes reluctantly submitted to such domination.

Through his bold characters like Mrs. Hunt and Florence's aunt, Baldwin interrogated the religious system of the black community. He presented a troubling question: although these are merely fictionalized accounts, how much do they resemble the reality handed to black women? Although there is no easy answer to the question, it is impossible to deny the power of the church in African-American culture. Perhaps, since it has been over forty years since Baldwin wrote *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, the church's power has lessened, but it has not disappeared. The oppressive role of religion in the African-American community remains an issue to be examined; and as Baldwin revealed in *Beale Street*, understanding the church's role may be the key to building stronger, healthier relationships among black women.

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