2019

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Cambridge University Press

Artikkelit tieteellissä kokoomateoksissa
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781108636025.025

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Chapter 28:

Sex and the Twentieth Century Novel

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“After all, to write, if taken seriously, is to be subversive. To disturb the peace.”

James Baldwin

One of the crucial roles of literature in society is to narrate issues that are regarded as unspeakable and thereby to test and stretch the limits of propriety. The social conventions attached to sex and sexualities emblematize this. Right from the start of his literary career, many of James Baldwin’s writings have encountered and negotiated the ever-shifting frontiers of the publically accepted and prohibited, especially through his depictions of sexuality, as well as race, gender, and class. He was early in his realization that these and other categories of identity are unavoidably related and intertwined, that is, in other words, intersectional. This becomes evident particularly in his fiction, where the different aspects of identity are explicated through Baldwin’s sophisticated and intimate language. As a result, one of the most constant aspects of his work is the unwavering questioning and challenging of the limits of conventional propriety. Compared to many earlier African American writers, portrayals of sex and sexuality hold a significantly more central place at the very heart of Baldwin’s writing. As Baldwin himself argued concerning earlier African American literature, “there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence.”

In Baldwin’s work, sex, in the context of mutual affection and respect, becomes an act of confession, a moment of transcendence that offers a glimpse of a postcategorical world where the oppressive power of identity categories would lose its hold. Importantly, Baldwin was also at the forefront in his portrayals of nonnormative same-sex desire between men, which has made him an iconic figure for black queer studies.

Literary representations of sex and sexualities have functioned as an important vehicle of changing attitudes in society. As a result of this politically polemical role, literature has often been subject to regulation and censorship. In the twentieth century, numerous novels and
other literary works were censored in different parts of the world due to what was regarded as sexually explicit content and, therefore, as morally questionable. Among the most famous examples of this are James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). These and many other literary works are part of a longer lineage of transgressive literature, exemplified by figures such as Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), who was imprisoned for his controversial, sexually explicit writings, many of which remained unpublished until the twentieth century. It may be argued that Baldwin’s continued political influence and significance is underscored by the fact that some of his work has also been subjected to censorship in some states in the United States and in some other countries for its transgressive sexual content. This stretching and crossing the boundaries of conventions and norms is exactly what gives literature its politically viable role in society.

Sexuality has historically been a domain subjected to the changing tides of strict and, at times, looser regulatory principles and practices. For example, according to Foucault, the relatively liberal ideologies of sexuality in the early seventeenth-century Europe eventually gave way to Victorian puritanism: “On the subject of sex, silence became the rule” and repression a dominant principle. Societal attitudes towards sexuality in the Western world have been strongly influenced and even controlled by the normative tenets of Christian churches, typically advocating marital heterosexuality as the only sanctioned mode of sexuality. Parallel, narrow conceptualizations of sexuality have been supported in scientific discourses, where nonnormative sexual desires have often been categorized as illness. In post-World War II Europe, the strict regulations and narrow definitions of sexuality began to be challenged in increasingly systematic ways, and this culminated in the 1960s, when several social movements adopted a significant role in what is usually regarded as the sexual revolution. Among these were the movements addressing the rights of women and gay people. As Hekma and Giami point out, the endeavors of these movements were based on “the mass of people that wanted to be free from restrictions of the past, whether they were religious, legal, medical, familial or political.” This new wave of liberatory thinking questioned the normative authority of such regulatory institutions as the church, school, and political parties.

The sexual revolution in the twentieth century may be regarded as a culmination of the history of restrictions and taboos and its counterforces. According to Hekma and Giami, the sexual revolution may be understood either as a “long-term development that started with the modernisation of sexuality at the end of the 19th century, or with the sexual
reconstruction in post-war Western societies after 1945.” Alternatively, they note, the sexual revolution may also be seen “as a short, radical phase in the late 1960s when a real sexual explosion took place,” or as a combination of both these ways of periodization. The persistent significance of Baldwin’s literary career, since its beginning in the late 1940s and extending to the present and beyond, is enhanced when read in parallel with this cultural revolution of rethinking and reconstructing sexuality. Depictions of sex and different sexualities are at the very core of his transgressive and subversive writing that persistently contests oppressive social conventions and stands in decided contradistinction to the puritanical tendencies of Western thinking. As far as his fiction is concerned, this becomes increasingly evident starting from his second novel Giovanni’s Room (1956) all the way to his final novel Just Above My Head (1979).

The central role of sexuality in Baldwin’s novels undoubtedly resulted from his endeavor to rectify what he saw as a frequent major defect in earlier African American fiction; that is, its tendency to repress sexuality and replace it with violence. Although there are some violent incidents in his novels, they are by far outnumbered by depictions of sex. It seems obvious, however, that this will to renew the African American literary tradition was not Baldwin’s only or even main motivation in this respect. As James A. Dievler suggests, for Baldwin love-based sex becomes the primary means of transcending the suppressive categories of sex, race, and gender. It is crucial to keep in mind that Baldwin conceptualized love as follows: “I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” This defines the larger social and political context for the role of sex in Baldwin’s novels and confirms that what is at stake here extends far beyond any sense of superficial, hedonistic textual revelry in sex scenes, provided by conventional popular erotic fiction—although his writing occasionally encompasses that dimension, as well, enhanced by the expressive power of his inimitable literary language. Most importantly, however, the sexual act may be conceptualized in terms of love and resistance, of the possibility and impulse to transgress the boundaries of oppressive identity categories.

It is important to note, however, that not all sex in Baldwin’s novels serves a liberating, utopian function. Instead, sex is also portrayed as an instrument of power, especially when combined with violence. The most striking instances of this include Deborah’s gang rape by a white mob in Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and Julia’s incestuous rape by her father in Just Above My Head. When sex is bereft of love and the empty space is filled with
violence, the results are disastrous. This juxtaposition of love and violence further emphasizes Baldwin’s will to set himself apart from his African American literary predecessors. It may also be argued that sex in many other contexts in Baldwin’s fiction, to quote Christopher Freeburg, “is not inherently good, pleasurable, or devoid of consequences.”14 This is what sets limits to the Baldwinian postcategorical love and shows the depth of his critical thinking.

In a diachronic sense, Baldwin’s writing grew more explicit in its depictions of sex towards the later stages of his career. His debut novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, incorporates rather subtle references to sex and sexuality, exemplified by masturbation and implied same-sex desire, whereas his final novel, Just Above My Head, includes several sex scenes, some of which border on pornography in their detailed descriptions, but retain the idea of love in the Baldwinian sense as the ultimate motivating factor. It may be speculated that, as an upcoming, still unknown writer, Baldwin had to tone down the sexual content in his first novel in order to establish his place in the literary world before actively challenging its limitations and taboos. This discussion of Baldwin’s take on sex and sexualities will proceed thematically, starting from the more conventional intraracial and heterosexual contexts and moving on towards more radical and polemical issues, such as interracial same-sex desire, finally arriving at the very limits of his vision in the context of incest and sexual violence.

Although Baldwin is often, somewhat reductively, labelled as a gay writer, many of his novels also explore heterosexual love and sex. There is, of course, nothing revolutionary in narrating heterosexuality per se, but in Baldwin’s hands it becomes a profoundly socially symbolic act in its own right. He often portrays heterosexuality in nonnormative contexts, that is, in extramarital, interracial, and incestuous relationships. In doing so, Baldwin uses his unique literary language to connect the sexual acts to fundamental issues of identity, history, and society. Even when the sexual encounter occurs in a seemingly conventional context, between a black woman and a black man, for example, it is narrated with an acute sense and awareness of the surrounding world and its oppressive forces, which underlie, and also necessitate, the moment of release achieved in the sexual act. This also emphasizes the idea of intersectionality.

This is exemplified in Just Above My Head, as Hall dreams of his brother, Arthur, a famous black gospel singer, who has died at the age of thirty-nine, crushed under the pressure of the racist and homophobic world and the relentless spotlight of the public eye. Hall’s painful memories of his brother, relived in the dream, are provisionally amended through his
wife’s, Ruth’s, touch: “I was so grateful, grateful, I felt such gratitude, and I clung to my wife, who held me tight and waited for me, and then after a pause, a mighty pause, I shot it all into her, shot the grief and the terror and the journey into her, and lay on her breast, held like a man and cradled like a child, released.”\textsuperscript{15} While their love-making cannot permanently erase Hall’s grief, it provides a momentary release and a reminder of the possibility of mutual redemption and salvation through love. Similar patterns may be detected in \textit{If Beale Street Could Talk} (1974), which has often been read as Baldwin’s only “straight” novel in the sense that it does not center around any interracial relationships or nonnormative sexualities. It is important to notice, however, that it is precisely an accusation of rape that sets the novel’s narrative in motion, which may be taken as a thematic flash-forward to the intertwining of violence and sexuality in \textit{Just Above My Head}.

Heterosexuality assumes a decidedly more overtly political tone when placed in an interracial context. The political urgency becomes particularly acute in Baldwin’s depictions of intimacy between a black man and a white woman, which is historically an especially trouble-laden mode of interracial relationships. It connects with the myth and white fear of superior black male sexuality and the consequent white compulsion to prohibit all sexual contact of this kind. In contrast, white males have traditionally had a silent social permission to take advantage of black women, particularly during slavery.\textsuperscript{16} It is precisely the explosive issue of sex between black men and white women that Baldwin explores in \textit{Another Country} (1962) and \textit{Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone} (1968). Set against the socio-historical background of anti-miscegenation laws, which were not ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court until 1967, Baldwin’s writing once again adopts a polemical role in challenging the conventions of propriety. \textit{Another Country}, set in the bohemian circles of the Greenwich Village in the late 1950s, addresses interracial sex as Ida, a black woman, and Vivaldo, a white man, make love: “Her head hit the pillow from side to side in a kind of torment which had nothing to do with him, but for which, just the same, he was responsible.”\textsuperscript{17} The torment that Ida feels harks back to the traumatic cultural memory of slavery and the concomitant history of oppression in the United States, for which Vivaldo is not directly or personally responsible but which he unavoidably represents for Ida. A more tangible example of this cultural trauma appears in the violent sexual encounter between Leona and Rufus, where the latter’s ability to love has been completely obliterated by his experiences of this history of oppression, which eventually leads him to his tragic end. These are instances of Baldwin’s insightful and politically charged manner of depicting sex and
sexuality, which often comes across as an ecstatic and, simultaneously, anguished balancing act between liberation and its opposing, conservative forces.

*Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* largely focuses on the interracial relationship between Leo, a black actor, and Barbara, a white actress. Baldwin’s description of interracial sex between Leo and Barbara in a forsaken, secluded hotel is an instance of the utopian role of the sexual act, not as a trivial, impossible daydream, but, rather, as a culmination of the desire towards alternative futures where oppressive identity categories would be bereft of their oppressive powers. As Leo and Barbara make love, they construct a space where the boundaries of these categories temporarily dissolve: “It was as though we were not only joined to each other, but to the night, the stars, the moon, the sleeping valley, the trees, the earth beneath the stone which was our bed, and the water beneath the earth. With every touch, movement, caress, with every thrust, with every moan and gasp, I came closer to Barbara and closer to myself and closer to something unnameable.” The text is quick to remind us, however, that this Edenesque microcosm is temporary: “Then, the sun was high, warning us that the world might be on the way, and we got dressed.” Regardless, this transitory utopian space may be read as a viable, socially symbolic act that challenges the conventions of sexuality and race.

Following the lead of several other protest movements of the 1960s, the gay and lesbian movement played an important part in improving the social position of nonnormative sexualities. Baldwin’s work has been considered as a central forerunner of articulating the black queer experience. It may seem peculiar, therefore, that he personally refrained from publically participating in the gay rights movement: “I have nothing against Women’s Liberation or Gay Liberation at all, but they are essentially à côté, they are not really one of my primary concerns. I have not really got to join a club in order to go to bed with a man or fall in love.” Baldwin insisted that, from his perspective, love did not need any labels attached to it, which falls in line with his persistent resistance of social categorization: “those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual are 20th-century terms which, for me, really have very little meaning. I’ve never, myself, in watching myself and watching other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were.”

Despite his prioritization of the issues of race over those of sexuality in his strategies of public social activism, Baldwin’s writing frequently revolves around same-sex desire and its unavoidable connection with race. With the possible exception of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, all of his novels contain the element of same-sex desire, particularly his ground-breaking *Giovanni’s Room*, but also *Another Country*, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, and
Just Above My Head, all of which place sexual relationships between men in focus. This is a prime example of how Baldwin’s characters negotiate the dilemma that he articulated in an interview as follows: “In the lives of Black people […] love has been so terribly menaced. It’s dangerous to be in love. I suppose, anytime, anywhere. But it’s absolutely dangerous to be in love if you’re a slave because nothing belongs to you, not your woman, not your child, not your man.” In Baldwin’s work, all love occurs in a hostile, threatening context. Considering the social context of heteronormativity and homophobia that surrounds his entire oeuvre, his depictions of same-sex desire assume a particularly urgent political significance.

In Giovanni’s Room, Baldwin chose to explore a theme that was to remain paramount in most of his later writing, that is, dishonesty and lack of courage to accept love, and what happens to the “victims of the universal fear of love,” who face “the absolute impossibility of achieving a life without love.” The fact that the text centers on the issues of nonnormative sexualities in a normative society without emphasizing the questions of race shows the depth of Baldwin’s thinking and implies the intersectionality of such categories as race, sexuality, gender, and class. Sex occupies a central place in the narrative, although it is depicted in a subtle way, far from the much more graphic descriptions to be found in his later work. As elsewhere in Baldwin’s fiction, in Giovanni’s Room sex constructs a space of provisional transcendence, as characters transgress the socially and legally regulated boundaries of normativity; in this case, same-sex desire between men. This is exactly where the novel resists the persistent strain of the puritan ethic, which Baldwin sees as “the […] idea that the flesh is something to be ashamed of.” By discussing same-sex desire, widely considered as taboo in the 1950s, Baldwin was fulfilling one of the major duties of a writer as a disturber of peace.

The depictions of sex between men grew increasingly more explicit towards the later stages of Baldwin’s career. This becomes evident already in Another Country, but particularly in Just Above My Head, where his expressions approach a vocabulary more typically found in pornographic contexts. What is even more remarkable is that Baldwin’s final novel provides the most inclusive exploration of same-sex desire between men, in both interracial and intraracial contexts, and also between black adolescents. It is important to keep in mind that, in 1979, Just Above My Head emerged into a different social and political context than Giovanni’s Room had twenty-three years earlier; that is, into a much more tolerant and accepting world, as far as different sexualities and portrayals of sex are concerned. What must be stressed, however, is the fact that, despite the successes of the gay
liberation movement in facilitating attitudinal and legislative changes, homosexuality would remain prohibited by law in many states until the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of sodomy laws as unconstitutional in 2003.\textsuperscript{25} Put in this perspective, Baldwin’s depictions of same-sex desire in \textit{Just Above My Head} are politically charged.

\textit{Just Above My Head} also shows the widening out of the horizons of Baldwin’s thinking from the American context towards an international and transcultural one. This becomes evident particularly in the interracial same-sex encounter between the protagonist, Arthur, and Guy, a white Frenchman. The serious discussions between them about their identities, heritages, and histories, about racism and colonialism, also enter the depiction of them having sex: “the one lying still, then the other, each becoming more and more helpless and open to the other, using themselves in defiance of murder, time, language, and continents.”\textsuperscript{26} The references to murder and continents read as allusions to the history of the European colonialization of Africa and the memory of slavery, which haunt the cultural memories of both men. As they are joined together in the sexual act, these complicated, trouble-laden histories are negotiated and provisionally reconciled, and Arthur and Guy are “at home in each other.”\textsuperscript{27}

Not all portrayals of sex are positive and empowering in Baldwin’s novels. Incest is an apt example of this, although it is important to notice that the effects of incestuous sex are also heavily dependent on the context. In \textit{Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone}, brothers Leo and Caleb share an intense, intimate moment of cross masturbation, which functions as a source of solace for the elder brother, Caleb, who has just been released from prison. What renders this sexual contact an empowering one is the fact that it is completely consensual and devoid of any oppressive power relations. For Baldwin, it is precisely when violence and oppressive power are involved in a sexual act that it becomes a harmful and destructive one. This is what happens in a brutal account of incest in \textit{Just Above My Head}, as Julia is raped by her father when she is fourteen years old. She is permanently damaged physically, as the violent penetration renders her infertile. As a result, the rest of her life is marked by her attempt to come to terms with the traumatic memory of this brutal act of sexual violence. The introduction of violence into the sexual act is exactly what indicates the ultimate limits of Baldwin’s ideal of postcategorical love.

Reading Baldwin’s oeuvre in conjunction with the sexual revolution of the twentieth century provides intriguing insights into the political functions of his writing and, by extension, of literature in general. He systematically opposed the tenets of puritanism by elevating narrativizations of sex and sexualities to an integral position particularly in his
novels. In so doing, he worked in parallel with other pioneering twentieth-century writers, such as James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Maya Angelou, Erica Jong, and Samuel R. Delany, who challenged and stretched the limits of conventional propriety in their writing. Despite all the legislative and attitudinal changes facilitated by the sexual revolution, it is important to remember that, as Hekma and Giami point out, “[t]he sexual revolution may have challenged many dogmas and boundaries, but new and old ones continue uninterrupted. Sexual liberation remains an ideal which is worth fighting for.”

This underscores the persistent significance of Baldwin’s writing, which continues to resonate with the utopian longing for a world in which social categorizations of identity would not function as a basis for discrimination. In this sense, the way in which the strictly regulated taboo subjects of sex and sexualities become a source of redemption in Baldwin’s work and contest the social conventions of propriety retains its political urgency.

Notes

7 Ibid. pp. 9-10.
8 Ibid. p. 9.
9 Ibid. p. 9.
10 Ibid. p. 2.
11 Ibid. p. 2.
19 Ibid. p. 308.
20 Standley and Pratt (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 197.
21 Ibid. p. 54.
22 Ibid. pp. 183-84.
24 Standley and Pratt (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 72.
27 Ibid. p. 487.