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Queer Temporality and Fatherhood in James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*[1]

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Abstract:

The theme of fatherhood in James Baldwin's novels and essays has frequently been the subject of analysis. An examination of the same topic in the single short story collection published in his lifetime, *Going to Meet the Man*, sheds a new light on the topic given the disruptive and anti-closural potential of the short story cycle, as theorised by critics like Rolf Lundén. By applying theories of queer temporality to these anti-closural strategies, it is easier to understand how Baldwin subverts the role that fatherhood plays in his short story collection. Special attention is drawn to three of the stories.

Keywords: Black American short fiction, racism, sexuality, inheritance, anti-closural strategies.

1. Introduction

While the short story cycle has existed as a literary genre for centuries in many different cultures around the world, during the twentieth century in the United States the genre took on a new significance as one often favoured by authors from marginalised groups. Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan and Julia Álvarez are examples of non-white, female authors based in the U.S. who chose to write works variously described as composite novels or short story cycles instead of more formally traditional novels. This choice of genre can be understood with regards to the status of the U.S. as a cultural melting pot; Michelle Pacht, introducing her analysis of an exemplary overview of US short story collections,

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comments that: "These texts exploit the fragmentation and inherent lack of cohesion of the genre to reflect the changing realities of life in America" (1). As such, the short story cycle is perhaps the literary genre that is most closely aligned to the real lived experience of marginalised communities. Attempts to neatly categorise the short story cycle or find coherence in a work of partially-related stories often baffle readers: for example, James Nagel writes that after the publication of Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, "there was widespread confusion about the genre of the volume, and none of them [the reviewers] made reference to it as a short story cycle" (18-19). Even within a cycle, this confusion of genre can—and indeed often has—led to what Rolf Lundén terms the "tension between the individual stories and the total composite" (81). By embracing this tension and rejecting coherence, authors from marginalised backgrounds have been able to use the short story cycle to transcend the possibilities offered by the novel or other more linear literary storytelling genres: for example, by giving voices to multiple characters; seamlessly switching between narrative perspectives, physical locations and timeframes; and ultimately de-centring one individual protagonist.

Another work by a marginalised author, James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*, was first published as a collection in 1965. It offers a good example of the disruption of genre and form typical of the short story cycle, featuring stories largely themed around race relations and family dynamics but with distinct characters, settings and timeframes. It is important to note that Baldwin experienced marginalisation in his lifetime owing to his sexuality and race, which informed his often semi-autobiographical writing as observed by, among others, Peter Freese (171). This collection was collated by the author—possibly with input from the original publishing house Dial Press—and five of the eight stories were previously published in various magazines.

The three stories first published in the collection—"The Rockpile," "The Man Child" and "Going to Meet the Man"—are particularly noteworthy in the ways that they appear to simultaneously offer more coherence and more disruption to the collection as a whole. "The Rockpile" features the same characters as another story in the collection—"The Outing"—as well as Baldwin's 1953 novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain* but acts as a prequel to the events of the other works, giving it a clear purpose as the

opening story of the collection. Conversely, "The Man Child" and "Going to Meet the Man" seem to be anomalies in the cycle as they focus on white protagonists in rural areas, unlike almost all of the other stories in the collection which feature Black protagonists in metropolises like New York and Paris. What the newly-published stories add to the cycle is a continuation of the thematic coherence through a focus on the topic of family, and specifically of fatherhood and inheritance. Arguably the inclusion of these stories makes clearer the presence of these themes in other stories where they may appear slightly more obscure—most notably in "The Outing" and "Sonny's Blues"—both of which feature less clear cut father figures and explore their positive and negative influence on their sons. Critics like Sara Taylor believe that the order of the stories and the inclusion of the new stories means that it is best to analyse "the collection as a whole" (43) rather than each individual story. While this may be true, it is also important to understand that each story can be considered as its own "closed" piece of work and that any attempt to understand the choice of the order of the stories and the thematic intentions behind the three new stories must be at least partly a matter of conjecture.

With this in mind, and in order to more clearly analyse the disruptive element of the work as a whole, this paper will focus on two of the stories first published in the collection—"The Rockpile" and "Going to Meet the Man"—along with a third story first published in the magazine Atlantic Monthly in 1960—"This Morning, This Evening, So Soon." These three stories have widely variable physical and temporal settings and present distinct community and family dynamics by focusing on characters of different races and ages. What they do have stylistically in common is a non-linear and often warped temporality, with short diegetic time frames—in all three stories the action takes place over a matter of hours—contrasted with lengthy flashback sequences and the use of inner monologues.

Considering patriarchal lineage as one of the most traditional ways of measuring time in literature, this issue of temporality can be linked to the topic of fatherhood and inheritance. In all three stories, Baldwin examines how sons do or do not act as inheritors to their fathers. The non-traditional roles that fathers play in the stories can be

understood as inherently queer, as has been argued by Matt Brim, who racialises the queer, complex version of fatherhood presented in the collection:

> Reading Going to Meet the Man as a neo-passing narrative in which homo-productive interracial male union produces racially ambiguous sons requires, suddenly, that we re-evaluate all 'white' children, tracing their parentage back to their multiple fathers as well as their mothers and fathers. (Brim 150)

This multiplicity of childhood racial identity also suggests a multiplicity of pasts; for this reason, this paper will focus more specifically on the queer temporality of the short stories. Therefore, this paper will argue that in *Going to Meet the Man* Baldwin uses an inherently queer temporality to subvert the role that fatherhood plays. It will posit a theoretical framework by synthesising the concept of anti-closural literary strategies specific to the short story cycle, according to Lundén and Nagel, with the idea of the queer rejection of futurity and non-linear temporality, as theorised by—among others—Heather Love and Lee Edelman. This paper will contest that the unique genre of the short story cycle allows a particular anti-closural queer temporality, and that this is key to understanding the role of fatherhood in the stories. After laying out the theoretical framework, each story will be analysed in turn, before examining the collection as a whole.

2. Anti-closural Queer Temporality

The issue of openness in the genre of the short story composite has been seen by many critics as one of its defining characteristics. Rolf Lundén argues that "in a continuum from closure to openness, the average short story composite finds itself closer to the latter than the former pole" (86). This openness offers a conundrum perhaps unique to the short story composite as a genre, as the very concept of a cycle means that, as James Nagel puts it, "the stories that comprise cycles were nearly always complete aesthetic works by themselves" (15). In other words, the short story composite can be understood as an "open" whole made up of "closed" parts. This apparent contradiction can be

achieved by what Lundén terms anti-closural strategies (87). Two will be given more attention in this analysis: discontinuity, or the lack of a continuous narrative between the short stories in a collection (Lundén 89); and the multiplicity or polyphony of voices that is inherent to the short story composite with multiple narrators and narrative perspectives (97).

These anti-closural literary techniques can be mapped onto queer understandings of temporality. José Esteban Muñoz writes that queer identity is inherently "ephemeral," defined as it is by extremely short-lived actions (5). Furthermore, Lee Edelman in *No Future* says that queer identity is defined by a rejection of futurity: "We [queer folks] choose, instead, not to choose the Child, as disciplinary Image of the imaginary past or as site of a projective identification with an always impossible future" (31). Queerness, Edelman argues, is seen as incompatible with parenthood, therefore queer temporality must be immediate rather than future-oriented; it must "insist that the future stop here" (31). For queer theorists, this is not necessarily a negative thing. In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love takes the idea of queer immediacy and queer rejection of futurity—as theorised by Muñoz, Edelman, Judith Halberstam and others—and forms a new "backward" concept of queer temporality (145). Queer identity is so often alienated from its history and its past and therefore queer storytelling is not and cannot always be concerned with a drive to futurity (146). Love therefore argues for an optimistic acceptance of this "feeling backward;" what she terms "this disposition towards the past—embracing loss, risking abjection" (30).

Love's focus on what is missing and what exists in the past, rather than the future, echoes the "negation and absence" which Lundén says is inherent to the discontinuous nature of the short story cycle (89). In this way, his anti-closural strategies are inherently queer in terms of temporality. There is a lack of temporal coherence in the short story cycle when seen as a whole; the temporal neatness comes only in small, ephemeral windows into the characters' lives—in each individual story. The short story cycle can be understood as possessing what this paper will term an anti-closural temporal queerness. The topic of fatherhood offers a good way of understanding this anti-closural queerness thematically. While many novels from Thomas Mann's

Buddenbrooks to Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* are concerned with neat, closed portrayals of inheritance and fatherhood—and what goes wrong when these patterns are disrupted—the anti-closural queerness of the short story cycle rejects clear, linear stories of fatherhood and inheritance outright. This theoretical framework will be used in an analysis of each of the three short stories by Baldwin which have been selected.

3. "The Rockpile:" "Unalterable Testimony"

As with the other stories that will be discussed in greater detail, the diegetic timeframe of the first story in the collection—"The Rockpile"—is extremely limited, barely covering a few hours, and it largely follows a linear temporal progression with few flashback sequences. Nevertheless, the past hangs heavily over the events of the story, most notably in the very existence of John Grimes, the main focaliser of the story. The story is told in a third-person heterodiegetic non-omniscient narrative voice. At first glance, John occupies a clear role within the contained story: he is the eldest child of Elizabeth, who with Gabriel has three further children: Roy, Delilah, and Paul. He is the sensible one entrusted to protect the others, and when Roy is hurt playing on the rockpile he fails in this role (Baldwin 19). But the fact of John's paternity makes him a living reminder of the past outside of this contained story, almost an anachronism in the Grimes' domestic life: "Only John was nameless and a stranger, living, unalterable testimony to his mother's days in sin" (18). Baldwin's refusal to give us the real name of John's father while at the same time reminding the reader that John himself is "living"—a real person with a real personal history—is an anti-closural technique.

The order in which the incident on the rockpile plays out within the text offers insight into the priorities of John and the other characters. After short flashbacks in which the reader is informed that Elizabeth has previously warned the boys about the rockpile in the street (11) and in which the rockpile is associated with a boy who "drowned in the river" (13), the reader is informed of Roy's injury in terms of his father's return: "On Saturday, an hour before his father would be coming home, Roy was wounded on the rockpile and brought screaming upstairs" (13). Semantically, this centres Gabriel's return as the main event of the day; Roy's accident can only and must

be temporally measured in terms of Gabriel's arrival. Only after that are the events that led to Roy's injury explained: how John attempted to stop him; how he notices that Roy is taking longer with his friends than the promised five minutes. Crucially, John becomes "engrossed" in his book and "when he looked up again he did not know how much time had passed" (14). Temporarily, John is adrift, but the reader is constantly aware of Gabriel's imminent return home as the passage has already been introduced.

Through these anti-closural techniques, John becomes a temporally queer figure; he is placed almost outside of linear time, as he is unaware of time passing, and he himself is a reminder of the past and does not represent inheritance or futurity as might be expected of a son. This is once more made clear in the short story's denouement, when Baldwin shifts the focaliser of the story from John to his mother, Elizabeth. The reader is reminded of the physical connection between John and Elizabeth—"'He ain't got your big eyes for nothing, does he?'" says Gabriel (20)—before Elizabeth confronts Gabriel when he wants to punish John: "And she found in his face not fury alone, which would not have surprised her; but hatred so deep as to become unsupportable in its lack of personality" (21). Because of the link that has been established between John and Elizabeth, and because most of the action up until this point has been fed to the reader via John, the reader understands that this fury is, at least in part, intended for John. This subverts traditional father-son relationships; a father expressing such anger is in stark opposition to the nurturing fatherhood a reader might expect—for example when Gabriel holds the injured Roy in his arms: "'Don't cry. Daddy ain't going to hurt you'" (19-20). Roy is the inheritor; John is outside of the clear binary of primogeniture.

The effect of this is once more that the character of John queers linear temporality. Unlike Roy, he is not Gabriel's "heir." John becomes a character who invites openness; his narrative voice, his role as (step-)son and his very existence all mean he does not fit into any linear temporality. He represents Lundén's "negation and absence" (89); he is a discontinuous and multiplicitous character in himself; he is at once the son, and not the son; he is outside of linear time. John's very existence could be an abject one, but it is ultimately the genre of the short story composite—offering, as it does, only an ephemeral glimpse into John's life—that means there is hope for him. This is added

to by the reader's knowledge that another, disjointed narrative within the same collection—"The Outing"—as well as the novel Go Tell It On the Mountain—will continue John's story. He has a future, and yet that future is temporally queer, rejecting as it does the linear progression of boy to man; of son to father.

4. "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon:" Nightmares of the Future

The father-son bond at the heart of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" is extremely different to John and Gabriel's fraught relationship. The unnamed main character, nicknamed Chico, is a first-person narrator with a young son, Paul, and it is indicated that he had a difficult relationship with his own father. Again, the diegetic narrative time is extremely limited—one night—but several flashbacks punctuate the narrative. The future also hangs over the whole story—Chico and his family are leaving to move to the U.S. the following morning. Chico is plagued by "nightmares" which amalgamate the past he ran away from and the future he fears (Baldwin 168). For Chico, the U.S. is the country of his past; for his Swedish wife Harriet and their young son Paul, it is the country of their future.

In terms of temporality, the successful self-made Chico is well-aware that the linear progression of his life and his role as a father has been anything but clear:

> Perhaps, if I had stayed in America, I would have found another woman and had another son. But that other woman and other son are in the limbo of vanished possibilities. . . . All the sons I might have had mean nothing, since I have a son, I named him, Paul, for my father, and I love him. (Baldwin 150)

Chico is conscious of the branching possibilities of his life and that his role as father was an active choice and not inevitable; there is a polyphony to Chico's identity. He also made the active choice to name his child for his own father. Through this passage, the reader knows Chico's version of his identity as father is anti-closural; while his hypothetical, multiple other sons "mean nothing," the reader is keenly aware that they may in some sense exist. Baldwin perhaps deliberately chooses the name "Paul" for the

baby in "The Rockpile"—this baby's life in the low-income African-American neighbourhood of Harlem could have mirrored Chico's fictional "other sons" had he stayed in the US.

As the story progresses, Chico's positive relationship with his son—"we get on pretty well, my son and I" (148)—becomes complicated by the way he projects it into the future: "Paul and I kiss each other on the cheek. We have always done so—but will we be able to do so in America? American fathers never kiss American sons" (154). Chico cannot escape the future even in this moment of perfect father-son harmony in the present. In a queer fashion, the temporality of Chico and Paul's relationship becomes warped—the present, past and future become simultaneous. Within the diegetic timeframe of the story, and the limited narrative voice of Chico, the reader of course never knows if this comes true. In this sense, the story is different to "The Rockpile," in which a reading of the discontinuous short story that follows—"The Outing"—can give some insight into the development of the relationship between Gabriel and John.

Baldwin maps an anti-closural queer temporality onto the relationship between Chico and Paul. This is at its clearest regarding the role that race plays in the story. At the heart of the story is Chico's visit to a nightclub where he meets some African-American visiting students who accuse Chico's acquaintance, a North African boxer, of theft (192). This tension between the U.S. Black characters and the African character is set up by Chico's concern about what legacy to pass on to Paul. Vidal asks him "'Did it never occur to you that he might wish one day to see the country in which his father and his father's father were born?'" to which Chico replies "'To do that, really, he'd have to go to Africa'" (168). By invoking the inherited trauma of slavery, and also passing the buck, Chico is denying any responsibility to pass on his heritage to his son. Chico is embracing loss, as Heather Love would put it, and refusing to acknowledge that his son returning to the US might offer any kind of catharsis. His role as both father and son therefore becomes subverted by the queer anti-closural temporality of the story.

5. "Going to Meet the Man:" "A Mighty Test"

The final story of the collection is both its namesake and one of only two that feature a white protagonist. Of the three stories subject to analysis in this paper, it is the one in which the most action takes place within flashbacks; the sleepless Jesse relives both incidents from his work as a sheriff and from his childhood during the course of one night. For Freese, this non-linear temporality provides an insight into Jesse's mind: "The missing link between past and present is suddenly brought to light, the behaviour of the brutal racist is exposed as the inevitable result of his socialization, the victimizer revealed as the victim of his diseased mind" (177).

This queering of linear temporality and Jesse's obsession with a past and his subjective view of what happened there also make clear the influence of Jesse's father on his developed dual role as victim and victimiser. Jesse himself is obsessed with fatherhood—the reader is led to believe that he and his wife do not have children but much of the action is centred around Jesse's attempt to become aroused enough to have sex with his wife. Eventually it is the memory of the lynched Black man that arouses him enough, inherently queering any children he might father through such a union (Baldwin 252). Earlier, he also connects fatherhood with the rape and abuse of Black women—"'You lucky we pump some white blood into you once in a while — your women!'" (237) he tells a Black young man he has been arrested. The stumble on "your women" is telling—he must remind himself that the procreative sexual act must take place between a man and a woman, despite the desire he feels for other men.

Jesse, therefore, like John Grimes, is adrift in time; apparently unable to procreate and become a father himself, while at the same time idolising an idealised version of his father and his father's generation: "These men were his models, they had been friends to his father, they had taught him what it takes to be a man" (239). His own relationship with his father has to be understood through its subjectivity; while the story is told in the third person, Jesse is the only focaliser and the reader is forced to rely on the mixed-up memories of a half-asleep man of events that took place decades earlier. As in "The Rockpile," the events of the flashback do not take place in chronological order. First, Jesse remembers his parents driving him home from the lynching whereafter they

have sex, which Jesse hears and "it frightened him," until "His father's breathing seemed to fill the world" (243).

For Jesse, his father is literally all-consuming and is connected to his own self-loathing for his inability to have sex with his own wife; his father represents procreant, heterosexual manhood, creating for the future. Only afterwards does the reader learn what has so aroused Jesse's parents—the sight of the lynching of a Black man, which is also sexualised as it focuses on his genitalia. Jesse is forced to watch by his father—"He felt his father's hands on his ankles slip and tighten" (250)—and ultimately is grateful for the experience: "At that moment Jesse loved his father more than he had ever loved him. He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, and revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever" (251).

The flashback involving Jesse's father not only makes the short story anti-closural—suggesting, as it does, still more passages from Jesse's past to which the reader does not have access—but also shows how subjective the influence of the father is. Jesse loves his father for the cruel thing he did, and yet is also frightened of his sexuality. This is achieved through the non-linear temporality—the fact of his loving his father is only presented to the reader towards the end of the story, once the reader has already learned about Jesse's racist cruelty and the fear he felt of him at other points, as well as his own sexual struggles. In this way, the anti-closural queer temporality of the short story subverts the role that fatherhood plays.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper argues that the queer temporality used to show the father-son relationships at the heart of the three stories selected for analysis subverts the role that fatherhood plays. Despite this common thread, the reader is presented with three extremely different types of father-son relationships. This discontinuity and multiplicity of voices is Baldwin's ultimate strategy to complicate and subvert the father-son relationships at the heart of the cycle. By presenting such varying versions of fatherhood in different time periods and with different diegetic and non-diegetic timeframes, Baldwin is queering the whole concept of fatherhood. The text as a whole therefore

becomes anti-closural; even if each story can be understood as "closed" or self-contained in some way, overall there are no absolutes in Baldwin's representation of fatherhood. Fathers fail to understand their sons and they pass on trauma and prejudice, willingly or not, and for their part sons fail to act their part as inheritors.

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