

A Highlight of Same-sex Ethics in Baldwin's Novels*

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Abstract—Homosexuality occupies an important place in Baldwin's novels. The paper interprets the desire, dilemma, frustration and the final fruition in same-sex, especially in male homosexuals. In Baldwin's eye, love between the homosexuals can also be a way out to solve the race conflicts. He believes that homosexuality is a natural and normal behavior like heterosexuality. His intention is to try to break the existing duality relations that are generally considered to be reasonable, and to rebuild the harmonious sex relations without the differentiation of gender. His writing of the real life of homosexual is rather helpful to demonstrate the development and change of the life and ideas of that special group in that generation.

Index Terms—ethics, homosexual, Baldwin, pedagogy, critical, school teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality is always a difficult subject to touch upon for the writers. To Baldwin, a Negro in America, due to the mystification surrounding the Negro and his sexual prowess, the difficulties are even greater. In Baldwin's time, seen from the aspect of mainstream culture, homosexuality is a negative identity. The reason that it is regarded as negative perhaps lies that it suggests possibility that otherwise heterosexuals are drawn to. Homosexuals become even a marker for immortality in much the same way that black sexuality does for whites. Most importantly to Baldwin, for both the mainstream and the marginalized, the very existence of identity categories in the culture might ruin the prospect of healthy sexual relationships. As a black, gay man, Baldwin does have a particularly vivid awareness of this cultural problem. But, through his efforts, Baldwin adds a new dimension to sex in Negro novel, even if Baldwin's ethics of same-sex embedded in his novels have reversed the ethics of tradition to some extent.

II. DESIRE AND DILEMMA: "LOVE" DENIED

Besides the inharmonious relationship and the denied love in the black family, desire for the same sex is another hinted topic that Baldwin emphasized in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The abuse and contempt of the hero's stepfather and brother give the teenager a spiritual wound that cannot be healed. However, the mother withstands the pressure of his father and gives her considerable care in every possible way. Psychoanalysis believes that when the man in childhood is lack of an appropriate gender role of father, but he is influenced by the tender mother who has a good image of women, he will not completely identify the self of being a male.

Gabriel, John's stepfather, refuses to love, even accept John although he had once made a promise to Elizabeth to care for her illegitimate son. The phallic imaginary used to convey John's fear and hatred of his father's body is extended to fear of his own and hatred of the heterosexual relationship, which, as it is the product of "hideous nakedness" is itself, hideous: "I heard you, spitting and groaning, and choking – and I *seen* you, riding up and down, and going in and out. I ain't the Devil's son for nothing" (Baldwin, 1968, p.227).

Symbolically emasculated by his stepfather, John is sexually attracted to the three-year older, more virile young boy Elisha for his compensatory affection. Denied by father's love, John manages to find a homosexual surrogate. John's severe Oedipus complex propels him toward homosexuality and his abhorrence of the copulation between the sexes is in sharp contrast with his relationship with Elisha.

In the novel, Baldwin uses the way of an implied narrative to portray John's homosexuality with Elisha, that is, the narrator does not directly or clearly articulate his point of view, but arouses the reader's suspicion by describing the actions and mental state of the roles. For example, in the portrayal of Elisha in John's eye, Baldwin writes that John was distracted by the new teacher, Elisha, and he stared at Elisha almost without blinking all during the lesson, "admiring the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admitting the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday Suit" (Baldwin, 1968, p.13). The almost empathic relationship between the two boys is actually a form of latent homosexuality. Homosexuality is implied here thoroughly in the text but without using the term such as "gay" or "homosexual". Certainly, Baldwin does not put John in the pole of homosexual or heterosexual, but in

* This work is one of the results of "Research on Ethical Dilemma in Baldwin's Works" (14YJC752036) program supported by the Humanity and Social Science Youth Foundation of Ministry of Education of China. This article is also supported by the Doctoral Fund of Shandong Jianzhu University and the phase result of the program of Funds for the Research on Humanities and Social Science of Shandong Colleges (J13WD51).

the middle of two vaguely.

There might be several factors that make Baldwin not give us a clear and definite conformation to John and Elisha's homosexual relationship even at the end of the novel. On one hand, as a black writer and former church pastor, Baldwin employs black's suffering experiences of slave history and values of black church as the theme of his first novel. He puts more emphasis on the "racial issues and culture of black religion". On the other hand, due to the strong influence of social conventional values of heterosexual orientation, he does "not dare" to dig and interpret in-depth the issue of homosexuality. This is a product of that particular era, when homosexuality is "not a public topic discussed openly" (Mi, 2012, p.89). In that period, it is not only impossible for such a young boy to clearly recognize this affection, but also lack of the courage for him to admit his inclination publicly.

bell hooks (1993) has once said that "race and sex have always been overlapping discourses in the United States" (p.57-59). To be frank, Rufus is in one way a victim of racism in America in its various forms. The vivid portrayal of Rufus' death by Baldwin as "black corpse floating in the national psyche" is a real charge against the "hostile and malicious conventional social ethics which are based on the rigid racial identity categories in America" (Leeming, 1994, p.201). Rufus' tragedy is actually an example of the result of both the denial of his racial identity and sexual orientation by the traditional social ethics and social bias, which is already roughly mentioned in his relation with Leona in the previous chapter. Baldwin's inquiry into the complexity of sexuality, especially his personal preference for homosexuality as a vehicle for the expression of love, is demonstrated more directly in *Another Country*.

The complicated same-sex romances among Eric, Rufus and Yves, including shy Richard are carefully described in *Another Country*. The relationships, especially the sexual ones of the characters in the novel are extremely chaotic. Much of Rufus' immediate despair derives from his tormented affair with Leona. Vivaldo, Rufus' best friend from Brooklyn, struggling to write a novel, falls in love with Rufus' sister Ida. Richard, Vivaldo's former teacher, and his wife Cass, as we exposed before, are an oddly matched pair.

From the beginning to the end, *Another Country* is filled with prevailing homophobia in New York, which can be seen through Rufus's fear of confronting his sexual orientation and the intolerance of his "abnormal" "deviant" same-sex attractiveness from people around him. By nature, Rufus distrusts all whites he comes in contact with. However, this cannot prevent him from getting along well with white Vivaldo. For the cause of the same experience of coming from poor neighborhoods and living through a difficult adolescence, they have formed a sincere friendship, regardless of the difference of their skin color. Rufus had tried to overpass the barriers between heterosexuality and homosexuality to obtain Vivaldo's love.

Although Vivaldo's friendship with Rufus has a kind of an obvious gay color, yet, facing Rufus' inquiry, Vivaldo has retreated. His refuse to Rufus also made himself be trapped in absolute loneliness (Zhang 2002, p.61). He had often thought of his loneliness as a condition that "testified to his superiority". Vivaldo's own loneliness magnified so many million times that it "made the night air colder" (Baldwin, 1968, p.60).

Compared with the detailed description of the intimate relationship between Rufus and Vivaldo, the relationship between Rufus and Eric is not so laboriously portrayed. We mainly know some of the detailed information from the fragmentary memories, but the mentioning of it does have a very significant connotation. Despite Rufus' prostituting himself to other white men for being destitute and desperate, Eric is the only male figure arranged by Baldwin to have homosexual sexual behavior with Rufus. Although despising and ridiculing Eric for his homosexuality, Rufus believes that Eric loves him. However, Eric's departure for France has left Rufus in a state of great confusion. In the bottom of Rufus' heart, he refuses to accept the fact that Eric and Leona are exceptions although he knows that both of the two do not really have any kind of a racist attitude toward him. Rufus is unable to confront his own homosexuality aroused by Eric. Gounard argues that we "should understand [Rufus'] homosexuality as a deep and intense desire to return to a state of pure innocence which would place him above American's social, racial, and sexual norms" (1992, p.239). Recalling their romance, Eric wonders more than one time if he earned Rufus's hatred just for his own unconsciousness to racism. He ponders if he had ever really once loved Rufus and Rufus' hatred had simply been rage, nostalgia, guilt, or shame. He is not sure whether it was the body of Rufus to which he clung or the bodies of dark men. Because Rufus believes that being homosexuals is to violate the social ethics and norms, his behavior of ridiculing and feminizing Eric is probably one way of achieving his goal to convince himself of his black masculinity, to keep a seemingly safe identity of being social normal, and to seek release from his emotional quandary of the guilt of being homosexual.

III. DISORDER AND DISTORTION: "LOVE" SPOILED

People suffer the torment of love in *Another Country*. They long for and pursue love, but they make fun of love and spoil love. Love is turned into deformation, dislocation and distortion. There are divergence, racial or ideological barriers, and gender confrontations among them. All these are one particular miniature of the inner life and emotional disorder in modern American world. One of the important reasons that even the black people are so uncomfortable about the same-sex eroticism perhaps mainly lies in the root of Black Nationalism. The racial conflicts and discriminations have not substantially changed in American society. The discrimination leads to anger and hatred in their hearts, which makes the normal love twisted.

Black nationalists, with Cleaver as the representative, have a strong sense of the danger and threat of their extinction. This threat can be minimized through the sex that does not invoke interracial or homosexual eroticism, and this is what

is called the “appropriate” sex. Rufus’ relations with Leona, the white girl, and Vivaldo and Eric, the white males, signifying the behavior of both miscegenation and homosexuality, obviously go to the opposite direction of this objective. In the eyes of black nationalists, the method to deal with the threat of extinction is to exist and maintain the existence forever. The necessity of the reproduction of the nation through heterosexual and mono-racial sex is primarily significant to their politics. They deem that interracial sex (Rufus’ relation with Leona) cannot deliver the pure “black” children, and homosexuality (Rufus’ relation with Eric) is never able to reproduce the next generation at all. To them, such kind of sexual acts can never serve the purpose to engender a sexually and racially homogenous nation. In the 1960s, for most black nationalists, homosexuality was perceived as the “white man’s disease,” and consequently black homosexuality was viewed as a form of “racial self-hatred”, as the ultimate sign of black male’s exploitation by and “submission” to white society (Cleaver, 1968, p.97-106). Therefore, together with what we discussed in the previous chapter, one of the reasons of Rufus’ suicide might be that he cannot go on living in loneliness for the lack of “real” understanding love he thought from Leona, and Eric’s love has threatened his independence and his freedom of movement in the society he hates.

As the only black figure in *Another Country*, Rufus seems to be “a failure of the idealized image of black masculinity and a weak, craven-hearted ghost who has been slandered by Baldwin” (Cleaver, 1968, p.106). Seen from the principle of black nationalists, Rufus’s suicide is simply another way of failing to be a black man. Actually, in a world regarding phallic normativity and compulsory heterosexuality as norms, the feminization of men will probably lead to the loss of power and authority.

Baldwin, the black writer, is not a heterosexual either. Therefore, it is fairly reasonable for him to be unable and difficult as well to separate the oppression and discrimination against him for his race from that opposed to him due to the orientation of his sex. Cleaver thinks that Baldwin’s homosexuality, embodied in Rufus, is an “interracial homosexuality and he makes black gay characters lose the value of black masculinity” (Cleaver, 1968, p.108). Meanwhile, in *Another Country*, the denial of one’s sexual orientation and racial identity by the traditional social mainstream ethics — whites particularly — is also evidently demonstrated. As a black, Rufus cannot face his own homosexual affections surrounded by the rigid sexual culture, and he cannot liberate himself from the stigma of white supremacists’ racism in history in New York either. As a matter of fact, the causes like these kinds of constant denials of Rufus’ real self result in the pain of Rufus and foretell his fatal tragedy.

The problem of race has always been complicated by “inhibitions, fears and false conceptions about sex”, and it is therefore necessarily to “conquer the sexual fears and frustrations before one can move into assigning the race problems to its proper role” (Brown, 2010, p.153). The homosexual figures in the novels have the necessity to fight against prejudice and discrimination surrounding them.

Baldwin, with profound sentiment, has depicted the unfulfilled desire for the same sex of John, and the tragic fate of Rufus. Seen from the analysis, most of the male figures in Baldwin’s novel are actually denied by “love”, heterosexually or homosexually. Actually, Baldwin wishes to speak of men’s hopes and their disappointments from the aspect of the sole nature of human being rather than from the angel of heterosexual or homosexual.

IV. FRUSTRATION AND FRUITION: “LOVE” FULFILLED

Baldwin has illustrated homosexuality from the aspects of social ethics and personal experiences, which is different from Freud’s focus on the psychological mechanism on homosexuality. He denies the dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual, advocating that homosexuality is a personal choice rather than an innate quality. He believes that there is not any kind of release channel of sex which can be considered to be normal, orthodox, typical, or representative.

His viewpoint on homosexuality is the critique of modern capitalist system which despises human eros and damages humanity. He has proposed the idea of the freedom of sexual orientation, verifying the possibility of the establishment of a non-repressive sex civilization. He recognizes the sex anomaly, believing that the basis of such behavior is the release of the repression of human potential and spontaneity.

Eric is the significant character in *Another Country* who himself feels that he “grew up” in Paris. He has homosexual experiences with Rufus, Yves, Cass and Vivaldo respectively. Some critics have argued that Eric represents himself like the almighty Redeemer who heals the wound of every suffering being with the sexual love and settles all the sexual identity confusion of other characters in the novel.

When Eric returns to New York, his sexual affair with Cass seems to restore her to herself by helping her face courageously her marriage in-name-only with Richard, for whom she has no love left. To Vivaldo, Eric’s sexual encounter reconnects him to his fears and allows him to face his feelings toward his intimate friend Rufus.

Baldwin shows to us, that pain, suffering, and removal of safety might enable one person to begin another way of leading life, which is quite different to one’s past type of life style, but it may be a perverted one. That is probably one of the reasons that have caused Vivaldo to love Eric. It is Eric, being regarded as a symbol of love by Baldwin, who has saved the lonely Vivaldo from harassment of social prejudice and made Vivaldo unfold himself to echo Eric’s love boldly. To some extent, Eric’s sexual affair with Vivaldo symbolically enlightens Vivaldo on his long repressed homosexual desire and enables him to have a renewed recognition of himself of confronting the sexual secrets that alter the way of his life.

According to Baldwin’s portrait, Yves and Eric seem to be the only pair of homosexual harboring true love without

being interfered. Evidently, compared with other figures in the novel, Eric is not a victim of New York's suffocating culture and social ethics, at least after he moved to Paris. The relationship between Eric and Yves is ideal and free of the plague of lack of understanding that the other characters are invariably confronted with. In Baldwin's opinion, "the love between Eric and Yves is not being polluted by social attitudes and conventions" (Zhang, 2002, p.181). Therefore, their love is sincere and divine. And they two have lived relaxed and comfortably.

When Baldwin writes about Eric's sexual experience with Yves, he also describes the scenic surroundings of the bedroom. The bedroom also has an entrance on the garden and the mimosas press against the window. There are two or three orange trees beyond these, "holding hard, small oranges, like Christmas balls" (Zhang, 2002, p.195). Through the environment Baldwin created for them, Baldwin seems to try to defend Eric's homosexuality with Yves by depicting the place they live as an idyllic and paradisiacal picture. Their affairs, in its peace, tranquility, and unsulliedness, remind us the Garden of Eden, which are free from the suffocating prejudices of race, class, and sexuality in New York. Baldwin's real purpose might be to express his longing for the kind of freedom that transcends any racial and sexual categorizations or norms.

In order to achieve his goals of racial equality and sexual freedom, Baldwin boldly arranges the characters to be involved in a series of interracial and bisexual eroticism. His face is "a footnote to the twentieth century torment", in precisely the way that great music depends, and on great silence, this masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by "something which was masculine" (Zhang, 2002, p. 330). It was a quality that a great number of people would respond to without knowing to what it was they were responding. That is, Eric's face is neither masculine nor feminine, and it is not even "androgynous". It is unidentified and would only be another limited identity, but it suggests the truth about human nature, and suggests to the other characters in the novel an alternative to live and love.

Talking about being "androgynous", Freud has a say based on the observation of man and woman. He believes that for humans, from sense of psychology or biology, "pure male or female does not exist". On the contrary, everyone shows its sex characteristics as a way of the "mixing with the features of the opposite sex", and the "combination of activeness and passiveness", regardless of whether such characteristics are in line with their "biological characteristics" or not (Freud, 1987, p.79). Anima (femininity) is also hidden in men's psyche and animus (masculinity) is lying in women's psyche as well. However, because western social ethics attach too much importance on the consistency of person's character while discriminating the femininity on man and the masculinity on woman, the archetype of anima and animus is often not fully developed but in a depressed state.

Historically speaking, the development of gay literature and its comments are closely related to its historical and cultural backgrounds, value orientations, and social structures. In ancient Greece and Rome, male homosexuality is a relatively common phenomenon, which is presented mostly in myth and poetry. But in general, it fails to integrate into the mainstream literature. Moreover, it falls in darkness and doldrums in the Middle Ages when gays or free sexes are subject to severe repression. The authorities at that time did not approve of the mention of homosexuality and even banned the homosexual acts. Nevertheless, Homosexuality in this period does not really vanish, but the manner of its performance is even more obscure. From the Renaissance to the 19th century, the gay literary writing and its comments present a phenomenon of "pendulum", that is, sometimes profound and clear, sometimes hesitant and obscure. The pluralism of ideology and the two World Wars lead to the great change of people's ideology. They begin to treat homosexuals in a more scientific and objective attitude. The writing of gay literature and its comments appear a protruding tendency and begin to seep into mainstream of literature (He and Ou, 2011, p.84). Under such circumstance, it is relatively "safer" to explore the topic for Baldwin in that period, which is also echoing Baldwin's interpretations of the cause of homosexuals from the perspective of human nature. Perhaps one of Baldwin's purposes is to avoid emphasizing the racial cause of Rufus' sexual orientation and avoid the misunderstanding of the readers that homosexuality is a black matter. Although the state of bisexuality is also absolutely against the principles of black nationalists who abide the assumption that an individual's sexual identifications should be necessarily stable or singular, yet, compared with the absolute gay or homosexuals, it is safer to tap this topic by portraying them as bisexuals, because their behaviors are almost similar to that of the heterosexuals, which are much easier for people to accept.

Baldwin concludes the novel with the wise maxim that love, equality, and brotherhood are the indices of a just society. According to Baldwin's ethics and norms, the "other country" should be the country where equal protection and equal access would be guaranteed to all the people without regard for one's gender, race, or sexual orientation. And all these good things should be realized in America, which are what Baldwin most desired to see. Furthermore, Baldwin's satisfied ideal is to see a country in which both Americans and African Americans, together with other minorities, whites or non-whites, would have one's own nation's history respectively but they together solve the persistent problem of racial caste and live in harmony.

Baldwin's ideal of hoping to redeem the human mind through love without gender differences has been fully embodied in the relationship of Eric and Yves. He shows his particular high expectations to the homosexuals. In Baldwin's eye, love between the same sex can also be a way out to solve the race conflicts and rescue those people living lonely on the margins of society (Mi, 2012).

In fact, Baldwin's role, in the tumult of the nineteen sixties, is to claim the spirits by preaching love and harmony between blacks and the white Americans. However, if we examine Baldwin's mind closer, we can perceive that, just like what Bone declares that, in the portrait of Eric, Baldwin has desired above all to be "faithful" to his own experience.

Central to his experience is a “rebellion” against the “prevailing sexual” attitude, the same as “racial mores”. Baldwin can neither “falsify nor go beyond it”. But on either plane of experience, Baldwin faces “an emotional dilemma”. It is painful to persist in his rebellion, and it is suffering to give it up. Just like “Satan” and the “fallen angels”, it is “unthinkable to defy them totally, but to reconcile with it is also difficult” (Baldwin, 1968, p.235). It is just this awareness that gives him the strength to rise and achieve a final acceptance of his sexual orientation and play the role of angel to help others who are suffering in the same dilemma with his former self. And the love of Eric himself also gets its fruition with Yves, that is, his homosexual love is fulfilled finally after the frustration though.

The gay literary writing characterizes the collision among the replacement of combination and separation, hope and despair, and puzzlement and expectation. It has explored the essence of human nature and the origin of life. As a black homosexual writer in the 20th century, Baldwin plays a very important “transitional” role to be brave and bold in facing the challenge in the development of the gay literature of the United States (Mi, 2012). Goldstein(1989) has pointed out that “the sexual issues are always closely related to racial issues, and if Americans can be mature enough to deal with racial issues, then they will also be mature enough to cope with the problems of sex” (p.173). Baldwin tries to explore the issue of homosexuality, the problems both whites and blacks are likely to face. He focuses on the society as a whole rather than merely blacks to explore a common social problem—alienation between people, between ethnic minorities and mainstream culture, and between the gay community and the entire moral society. By doing so, the writers can inquire into various problems and puzzles that the human being as a whole have faced in society.

Although the gay literature is often in the state of marginalization, yet, because it stresses ethics of the individual and society and describes the personal experiences and pain for being excluded, its topic about human nature is universal, and it is an inseparable part of American literature. The rise of this narrative form in American literature abandon the previous description of homosexuality as a pathological practice, deconstructs alternative myth of homosexuals depicted by the mainstream society, and negates the opposite and incompatible binary mode of thinking toward heterosexuals and homosexuals. Baldwin makes great efforts to seek a breakthrough in the cracks of the conventional ethics of racial ideology and gay conception. Just like a number of homosexual writers of his times, he manages to persuade the heterosexuals to fix their attentions on the similarities that they shared with the homosexuals.

V. CONCLUSION

Brown (2010) comments Baldwin’s achievement in homosexuality as “for the first time we have the exploration of homosexuality and black emasculation, and not only are they fully treated but a philosophy is worked out around them” (p.133). Baldwin believes that homosexuality, the same as heterosexuality, is not an abnormal but a natural and normal behavior. The sentiment of homosexual is also the real revelation of human nature. He opposes to divide persons into two poles, and he believes that human sexual relations are one unity of heterosexual and homosexual. The essence of his intention is to try to transcend the differences of race and gender, to break the existing duality relations that are generally considered reasonable, to subvert the bottom line that only heterosexual is the orthodoxy, and to rebuild the harmonious sex relations without the differentiation of genders.

Baldwin has promoted the experience and expression of individual desires that were prohibited in both white and black cultural traditions, most notably interracial romance and homoerotic love. In his novels, Baldwin manifests the theme of interracial homosexual issues and defends homosexuality. Therefore, it is inevitable to touch off people’s controversial debate on issues of ethic and morality in his novels. Although his description of sex and homosexuality has its negative and obscene side, yet, he focuses on the individual and the social relationship, describes the experience and personal pain of the “other”, pours forth his unique experience of survival and life, and interprets the objective substance of human sex. He believes that the acceptance of the “forbidden” desires would help to remedy racism – the most extensive, virulent, and destructive manifestation of the denial of desire.

Baldwin’s efforts have promoted the development of the homosexual liberation movement and gay literature, which has special historical significance in leading homosexuals to seek identity. His intentions of writing the real life and the inner world of homosexual are helpful to demonstrate the development and change of the life and ideas of the special group in that generation.

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