

## **PinkMonkey® Literature Notes on . . .**

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"Go Tell It On the Mountain"

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# **Go Tell It On the Mountain**

## **By**

### **James Baldwin**



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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The novel is set in Harlem in New York City. The Grimes migrate to the North in search of new opportunities. Elizabeth bids goodbye to her aunt in Maryland and leaves with Richard. She arrives in New York with great expectations but she is sorely disappointed. "Here, in this great city where no one cared, where people might live in the same building for years and never speak to one another, she found herself, when Richard took her in his arms, on the edge of a steep place and down she rushed, on the descent uncaring, into the dreadful sea." New York is a big and bustling city but.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major

**John Grimes** - The teenaged son of Elizabeth, he is intelligent and sensitive. The novel traces his growth from childhood to adolescence.

**Gabriel Grimes** - Stepfather of John, he is a hypocrite. As a dean of the church at Harlem, he appears respectful and just but nurtures feelings of prejudice against John and behaves sternly with the boy.

**Elizabeth Grimes** - John's mother and Gabriel's second wife. In youth, she elopes with.....

#### Minor

**Deborah** - The unfortunate teenager who is raped and discarded by a white man. She is selfless and devout. She gives moral support to Gabriel after the death of the latter's mother and later, marries him.

**Esther** - The charming girl who ensnares Gabriel to share a relationship with her and.....

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - John Grimes is the protagonist of the novel. The book dwells into.....

**Antagonist** - John's stepfather, Gabriel is the antagonist in the novel. Gabriel dislikes .....

**Climax** - Gabriel's authoritarian ways and severity create animosity in John and makes the boy rebellious. John desires to taste the pleasures of life and enjoy freedom to indulge in activities of his choice. However, after he watches a movie, he feels guilty about doing so. He is also angry with his father for.....

**Outcome** - He falls down near the altar and imagines being punished for his sins. Torn by.....

### PLOT (Synopsis)

James Baldwin opens his novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* with John entering his fourteenth year. On this day, he realizes that he should do something different from what his father expects him to do. From the time he is conscious, he has been told that he should become a preacher when he grew up. On this birthday, he is not sure whether he wants to satisfy others by becoming a man of the church.

John recollects certain incidents from his childhood that had cast an impression on his mind. He remembers their visits to the church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized every Sunday at Harlem. His father was the deacon of the church and thus, it was an occasion to visit the church. They would all dress up in their best clothes and walk through the streets passing the hospital where his brothers and sisters were born. After reaching the

church, they would seat themselves in different portions of the church according to their age groups. John and his brother, Roy occupied their places with other boys of their age group and were attended by Elisha, the young but talented preacher.

On his birthday on Saturday, John wakes up with a fond hope that his family members would come.....

## **THEME (S)**

### **Major**

The major themes of the novel are 'Search for Identity' and 'Quest for Love.' On his fourteenth birthday John experiences a crisis in his identity. All along he had been expected to become a preacher when he grew up. His father had imposed religion on him and conditioned him to believe that.....

### **Minor**

The minor themes of the novel are 'Wages of sin' and 'Power of religion.' All the characters commit blunders and are paid for it. Florence deserts her sick mother and suffers a bad .....

## **MOOD**

The mood of the novel is sober as it traces the evolution of John from childhood to adolescence and exposes the spiritual dilemma faced by all the characters that influence John. The novel begins on a note.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Author Information**

James Baldwin was born on 2 August 1924 at Harlem, New York, to Emma Berdis Jones and James Arthur out of wedlock. Little Baldwin did not know the name or whereabouts of his real father. He often said, "I never had a childhood," meaning he never had a father in the real sense.

In 1927, Emma Berdis married David Baldwin who was a labor and a Baptist minister. David preached in New Orleans and later in Harlem. David was much older to Emma and was already the father of three children when he married the latter. David had very little affection for James and could never.....

### **Literary/Historical Information**

A number of years went into the writing of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Baldwin had been shaping the novel for eight years but could not give it the form he wanted. Thus, he was close to scrapping it. However, he did not do so. An incident happened that gave him an impetus to rewrite the novel. His friend, Lucien owned a small chalet in Switzerland and got permission from his father to live in it during the.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES**

### **Part 1**

#### **Seventh Day**

#### **Summary**

The novel opens with John's recollection of his childhood. As the eldest son of his parents, everyone expected him to become a priest when he grew up. John also had started imagining himself in that role till his fourteenth birthday.

John's earliest memories are of Sunday mornings, when the whole house was in a flurry of activity. As the

head of the family and minister of the church, his father would lead them to the church. Wearing clean clothes and cheerful in spirit, they would walk to the church. They would go past the hospital where his siblings were born. John remembers the times when his mother brought home the babies to make him feel estranged.

John's family would walk towards the church in a superior attitude, looking down on people who were enjoying the leisure of a Sunday morning. Reaching the temple of God, they would get separated to their seats in the respective parts of the church according to their age groups. John and his younger brother would be seated together along with other teenaged boys and hear the sermon read out by the young and handsome Elisha.

The priest of the church would always talk of virtues and sins. Once he had chastised Elisha for being friendly with a young female visitor to the church and warned him. Elisha and the girl had parted ways. At home, his father laid down rigid rules but Roy would always play truant. He would escape from the house or the church and return back late in the evening. His parents were worried about Roy and prayed to god for his safety. With John they were stricter. They wanted him to be good and virtuous. They wanted him to follow the path of god. Thus, they always kept a watch on his movements.

John is disillusioned with religion and his life as ordained by his father. On his fourteenth birthday, he wakes up with rebellion in his heart. He hopes fondly that someone would wake him after wishing him a happy birthday but no one comes to cheer his spirits. Feeling restless, he goes back to sleep. When he wakes up again, it is late in the morning. He hears the voice of his brother in the kitchen. Washing up, he reaches the kitchen to see his brother arguing with his mother. Roy is disgusted with his father's autocratic ways but his mother tries to justify her husband's behavior. John eats his breakfast in silence. When his mother asks him to clean the drawing room, he leaves to do his job with distaste.

As he cleans the room, he feels distressed that he has to do dirty work even on his birthday. However, after he finishes his job, his mother gives him a surprise. She enters the room to wish him and present him with a few coins for him to spend. John is grateful to her and loves her the more for it. He walks out of the house to enjoy his freedom. For some time he walks aimlessly towards the Central Park. Then he climbs a hill to look down at the magnificent city of New York. He observes people carrying on with their activities. He imagines himself holding a good position in life and enjoying the comforts of life. He longs for the luxuries of life, even though he is aware that it is sinful to dwell on worldly pleasures.

Walking down, he passes through Broadway and observes the advertisements put up. He decides to watch a movie. With this intention, he walks down the lane of Cinema halls. A poster depicting a fallen woman catches his attention and he buys a ticket for that movie. He feels conscious entering the Cinema hall and taking his seat. After glancing around at the audience, he casts his eyes on the big screen. Soon, the story of the fallen woman grips his attention. The heroine is a beautiful but arrogant woman given to all vices. A cripple student falls for her charms and professes love to her. The woman thwarts his love and flirts with other men. John sympathizes with the woman and places himself in her position. However, when the woman dies a miserable death, he is reminded of punishment for committing sins. With thoughts of the movie and a sense of guilt, he returns home.

As he walks towards his house, he notices Sarah running towards the medical stores. He is afraid something is amiss at home. Before he steps into his house, his neighbors inform about the accident of Roy and Sarah confirms the news that bullet had hit Roy. As he passes through the kitchen to enter the drawing room, he becomes aware of the presence of Aunt Clarence in the house. Inside, his aunt and his parents are gathered around Roy. Even as he gives first aid to his son, Gabriel informs John that Roy had been hit.....

## Notes

The first part of the novel reveals beautifully the thoughts and feelings of an adolescent who is repressed by the autocratic rule and religious dictums of his father. John desires the pleasures of the world and the comforts of life like any other boy of his age but is afraid of offending the Lord by indulging in his whims. This dilemma between the worldly and spiritual tortures him and he feels troubled.

Part One is appropriately entitled 'Seventh Day.' The Seventh day is the last day of the week and also the day of judgement. John's birthday falls on a Saturday and on this day he realizes that he has to decide his own destiny, instead of being led by his father. He hates his father for his authoritarian ways and thus, feels the need to rebel against the norms laid down by his father. On his fourteenth birthday, he passes judgement on his father. He considers his parent as evil.

The five biblical lines quoted below the title:

*And the spirit and the bride say, Come*

*And let him that hearth say, Come*

*And let him that is athirst, Come*

*And whosoever will, let him take*

*The water of life freely.*

enhance the meaning of this part of the novel. John is forced to follow the path of god by his father and the church. However, instead of obeying his father meekly, he feels the need to taste the.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### Character Analysis

#### John Grimes

John Grimes is the hero of the novel, as the book relates his life and the lives of all those characters that influence him. At fourteen, John is at the crossroads of his life. His desires clash with his father's attitude. Everyone, especially his father, expects him to become a priest when he grows up but John wants to taste the pleasures of life before choosing his vocation. He is tempted to the luxuries and comforts of.....

#### Gabriel Grimes

The personality and nature of Gabriel are a contrast to that of John's. He has an imposing presence that attracts women to him. He also possesses a smooth tongue that persuades people to listen to him and act on his advice. However, behind the mask of courtesy and respectability, he hides his arrogance and insensitivity. He is autocratic at home and imposes his ideas on his children. He considers himself.....

#### Florence

Florence poses a contrast to Gabriel, though she is his sister. Gabriel is weak in mind, while she is mentally strong. From childhood, she shoulders the responsibility of running the house along with her mother and takes care of Gabriel in her mother's absence from the house. Later, she attends to her sick mother.....

## **PLOT (Structure)**

The plot of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is simple. The novel opens with the dilemma faced by John Grimes on his fourteenth birthday. In order to highlight the crisis in his life, it exposes the life of other characters that had influenced to shape John's character. The last part of the novel reveals the trauma .....

## **THEME(S)**

### **Major**

The major themes of the novel 'Search for Identity' and 'Quest for Love' are linked to each other as the characters in the novel crave for love in their search for identity. Thus, they can be explained .....

### **Minor**

The minor themes of the novel are 'Wages of sin' and 'Power of religion.' The characters in the novel are made to commit sin either through force of circumstances or impulsiveness. Florence sins due to.....

## **OTHER ELEMENTS**

### **Symbolism**

James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is replete with symbolism. The novel echoes with biblical allusions and religious symbols. The very title of the book has symbolic implications. Taken from.....

### **Irony**

An undercurrent of irony runs through the whole novel to expose the hypocrisy of the characters and conflicts raging within them. John's life is itself an irony. From his childhood, he had been told that he should become a priest when he grew up and he had accepted the idea. However, on his.....

### **Comparisons and Contrasts**

James Baldwin has shaped characters some of who are alike in their situations, while others create contradictions among them. Florence and Elizabeth resemble each other in their plight, just as Frank and Richard are alike in their natures. On the other hand, Esther and Deborah are pictures of contrast, while Florence and Gabriel are unlike each other in their attitude and beliefs.

Florence and Elizabeth Florence and Elizabeth are unfortunate women who do not get the love they deserve and are deprived of the happiness due to them. Florence sacrifices her childhood and youth, looking after Gabriel and doing housework. She forgoes education in order to send Gabriel to school and .....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Explain the significance of the title *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.
2. Reveal the symbolic significance of the novel.....

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