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Psychoanalysis and the Treatment of the Black Body in James Baldwin's,
"Going to Meet the Man."

James Baldwin published his short story titled, "Going to Meet the Man" in 1965 in a collection by the same name which narrates a few instances in the life of white deputy sheriff, Jesse. The story opens as Jesse is lying in bed with his wife and finds himself unable to get an erection until he fantasizes about a moment earlier on in his day when he prodded the testicles of an African American male in his cell. Baldwin's protagonist exhibits sexual arousal at the thought of sexual violence towards the black body which is homosexual in nature and his sexual urges are further complicated as they are shown to be influenced by earlier exposures of violence towards the black body when the deputy sheriff was a child. Baldwin's story suggests that Jesse's arousal at the onset of the violence is homosexual because when he has flashbacks of the attacks on the black male body, he finds himself with an erection.

The aim of my paper then is to analyze how Jesse's sadistic racism may be interpreted as deviant through close analysis of the text while also utilizing the psychoanalytic framework and how this theory may fall short at times. I will mainly be looking at Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex, the fear of castration, and the repression of urges while also considering how the theory cannot provide a robust interpretation of Baldwin's short story because Freud didn't include considerations of race. Freud's theory is also insufficient in the analysis of Baldwin's story because Freud often argued that individuals have managed to set up a self-regulating agency

within themselves which successfully controls and suppresses urges but in Jesse's case, he is a perfect example of how the formation of the ego and superego have failed him as his deviance is rampant and uncontrolled.

It is important to begin by discussing how Jesse's relationship with his parents embodies Freud's Oedipus complex as this relationship plays a pivotal role in Jesse's psychosexual development. In an instance of distress, while lying in bed, Jesse recalls a certain night when he was lying on his mother's lap "sleepy, and yet full of excitement" (1755). After Jesse and his parents get home, he lies in bed again unable to sleep, while listening to the sounds outside as "the darkness pressed on his eyelids like a scratchy blanket" (1755). Young Jesse feels uneasy at being alone and in the dark and desires to call out for his mother but knows that "his father would not like this" (1755).

After his parents believe Jesse to be asleep, they begin to have sex and Jesse remembers his mother's moaning and the sounds and laughter his father made "which seemed to fill the world" (1755). From an early age, Jesse shows an attachment to his mother that is thwarted by his father's presence which to Jesse seems oppressive, threatening, and frightening. Jesse does not feel the same level of comfort towards his father that he does towards his mother and the witnessing of the parents' copulation exemplifies the love Jesse feels for his mother and the hostility he develops for his father.

In their article titled, "The Oedipus Complex in Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Freud's Clinical Cases," Antonella Trotta and Ivan Formica simplify and describe Freud's Oedipus complex as an inner conflict occurring in childhood rooted in a child's "love towards his mother and the jealousy towards his father" (2) with an implication that the child's love for the mother can be unconsciously sexual in nature and rooted in the desire to exclude the parent of the

opposite sex. In Jesse's case, he feels excitement when lying on his mother's lap, feels a yearning to be close to her when he is alone and in the dark, and feels frightened when he hears his father engaging with her in a sexual activity that Jesse is unable to be a part of.

According to Trotta and Formica, the Oedipus complex plays a major role in the neurosis exhibited by adults later in life especially when a male child discovers the "sexual relations between his parents...that the mother belongs to the father [which] activates sexual impulses within the boy. He begins to desire to have sexual intercourse with his mother and hate the father as a rival third party that obstructs the way of his wish" (3). Thus, Jesse's neurosis in adulthood, seen in his sexual anxiety, can thus be attributed to the relationship he had with his parents in childhood that like Trotta and Formica mention represent one parent as "the agent of sexual prohibition" (13) of a sexual desire that when repressed reappears later in life as a manifestation of extreme anxiety or obsessive behavior.

Another aspect of Jesse's neurosis stems from the fear of castration that is also traced back to Jesse's childhood when he witnessed the lynching of a black man during a picnic he attended with both of his parents. Shortly before the lynching, Jesse recalls how his "father's lips had a strange, cruel curve, [how] he wet his lips from time to time" (1758) and how Jesse was "terribly aware of his father's tongue" (1758). It can be argued that Jesse inherits or mirrors predatory behavior towards the black body from his father who is visibly aroused by the lynching of a black man. Jesse's father is described almost like a hungry animal awaiting the slaying of his feast which in this case happens to be the naked black man in front of him.

The description of the father's tongue also contrasts with the actual phallus of the black man which is described as "meat being weighed in the scales...much bigger than his father's...the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest" (1760). During this moment, Jesse

looks up to his mother and realizes how beautiful she is while also developing feelings of excitement and a “joy he had never felt before” (1760) awaiting the castration of the black man before him. Jesse feels his scrotum tighten and after the black man is lynched it seems as though the hostile feelings he might have had towards his father dissipate when he proclaims that afterwards he “loved his father more than he had ever loved him” (1760).

Taking the psychoanalytic lens into account, it can be assumed that the ascribed hypersexuality of the black man was threatening to both Jesse and his father and that the annihilation of the threat served as a bridge between father and son which lessened the son’s sexual jealousy and intimidation of his father. However, the fear of castration is still a part of Jesse’s psyche as he constantly feels the need to dominate the black body as an affirmation of his racial and sexual superiority.

Jesse feels the need to be sexually violent towards black men to ensure and project the castration and its accompanying anxieties onto the black body and away from himself. The symbolism of the castration within the story is also discussed by Kwangsoon Kim in his essay titled, “Oedipus Complex in the South: Castration Anxiety and Lynching Ritual in James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man.” In his essay, Kim also notes that Baldwin’s short story consists of “a psychosexual disfunction that is obviously related to [Jesse’s] childhood trauma from the lynching spectacle” (319).

However, it is here that the limits of the story’s interpretation using the psychoanalytic lens come through because as Kim mentions, the psychoanalysts of Freud’s time like Carl Jung and Alfred Adler “did not think of the Negro in all their investigations” (319). Kim goes on to say that it can be speculated “that Fanon’s psychoanalytic investigation of racial relations may have inspired Baldwin to examine the racial tension of the American South through the

psychoanalytic lens in his story” (320). While not explicitly stated, Kim hypothesizes that Baldwin must have been at some point exposed to Fanon’s writings which then inspired his position within the story and the way that he focused on the white character’s actions and machinations instead of the black male victim to highlight the absence of the role of race within psychoanalytic inquiry of the time.

Kim makes it a point to mention that Baldwin’s story is peculiar in that it gives voice to the white protagonist and silences the black characters as a way of showcasing the pervasive nature of racism and its effects on the psyche of a white fictional character. Jesse’s impotence then can also be read as “a metaphoric device that represents the abnormality of white racism” (320). Jesse’s impotence is also abnormal because he himself admits that his white wife is unable to give him the spice that he sometimes desires so he must “drive over yonder and pick up a black piece or arrest her [which] came to the same thing” (1750).

Kim proposes that Jesse’s “arousal for the image of a black girl clearly [places] his symptoms in the social and historical context of American slavery” (321) with a regression towards childhood that according to Freud serves “as a defense mechanism leading to the temporary or long-term reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than addressing unacceptable impulses in a more adult way” (322). Jesse feels the need to act violently towards the black body, especially the male one, because his behavior and arousal can be seen as homosexual especially when he hits the testicles of the black man in jail and to his “bewilderment, his horror...[feels] himself violently stiffen” (1753). Jesse tries to displace his homosexual arousal towards the black man by further trying to emasculate him and telling him that he is lucky white men “pump some white blood into you every once in a while- your women!” (1753) but this ultimately comes across as a desperate attempt to deflect from his non-

heterosexual desires where the only admissible way of inhabiting the black male body aside from violence is through the penetration of the black female body.

Going back to Freud, in his famous essay titled “The Uncanny”, he explores the idea of individual’s having two identities, the conscious and the unconscious, with the latter being labeled as the “other” prompting a person to behave in ways that go against their “better” or more rational will. Freud notes in his essay that the “idea of the ‘double’ does not necessarily disappear with the passing of primary narcissism, for it can receive fresh meaning from the later stages of the ego’s development. A special agency is slowly formed there, which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego...exercising a censorship within the mind...There are also all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy... all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will” (601). It is here in the essay that an individual’s dual identity is explained by Freud as the divide within a person between seeking out desires indiscriminately or instead adhering to the rational and moral codes which keep an individual within a safe space.

In Baldwin’s short story, it is apparent that his protagonist exhibits repressed yearnings or hopes which are often erased from memories and which continue to drive the other self into the fulfillment of a dream that wasn’t achieved. Within Freud’s essay on the uncanny is Freud’s exploration of the fear of castration which is applicable to Jesse’s impotence but also to his repressed desires of behaving sexually like a black man. In the conclusion of the short story, after Jesse reminds himself of his childhood lynching, he is finally able to achieve an erection and tells his wife that he is going to have sex with her “just like a nigger” (1761) while also prompting her to love him “just like [she’d] love a nigger” (1761).

Jesse's behavior in the concluding scene of the story encapsulates his neuroticism which is also based on his fear of being mutilated which Freud claims, "excites a peculiarly violent and obscure emotion" (599). Although Freud writes this with specific reference to the fear of losing one's eyes in mind, I equated this loss on a similar stance as losing one's manhood because both involve a maiming of the body that renders a person not only incapacitated in a vital way but also as impotent. Jesse is a perfect example of how a person can exhibit two different identities with one becoming prominent through an experience occurring "when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression" (608) which in Jesse's case comes about at the onset of impotence.

Moreover, there is a section from Freud's book titled, *Civilization and its Discontents*, which discusses the primitive impulses of man and how they can be destructive or animalistic as they clash with societal expectations and especially during developments of the ego and the super ego. Freud argues that when civilization tries to inhibit the aggressiveness of an individual then these repressed desires ultimately cause inner turmoil and conflict. However, besides Freud's omission of race in his theories, this section of his book shows how the psychoanalytic lens lacks in the interpretation of Baldwin's short story because Freud claims that civilization obtains "mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening it and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it" (84) which doesn't really occur in the story.

It is ironic that Jesse describes, and views black men as African jungle cats but fails to see the indomitable and non-normative behavior that he instead embodies. Jesse's sexual urges, deviances, and disabilities in the story are the result of repressions taking over in both psychological and physical ways where there is a lack of control or self-agency; if Jesse has no

control over his own deviant urges and desires it is also apparent that civilization has no control over them either which goes against what Freud theorizes in his book. For Freud, the human should not think of himself as happy in any of the “animal states” whereas “in the case of other animal species it may be that a temporary balance has been reached between the influences of their environment and the mutually contending instincts within them” (83).

In Jesse’s situation, his primitive instincts have taken over and society has failed to promote/ regulate his ego and superego and that it is instead the desires of the id which are untamed. Thereby complicating Freud’s assertion that there is existing control and balance between the primitive and the civilized. Baldwin’s story thus illuminates a critique of how Freud’s psychoanalytic lens limits the analysis of Jesse’s character within the story as he talks about feelings of guilt that come about when an individual “recognizes in himself an *intention* to do it” (84) it being the deviant behavior.

In Jesse’s case, there are no feelings of guilt but instead an outward embrace and indulgence in homosexual violence and in interracial relations despite a social awareness that the behavior is frowned upon. Freud further purports that “the sense of guilt is clearly only a fear of loss of love” (85) but in the story, this fear never enters Jesse’s thoughts as he is too busy embracing the power that his race allows him where he even feels comfortable having sex with his wife and telling her out loud that he is behaving as a black man would and that this is not to be questioned but instead accepted.

Furthermore, in advancing the discussion of the construction of white masculinity in Baldwin’s story is Sara Taylor’s article, “Denigration, Dependence, and Deviation: Black and White Masculinities” as she argues that white masculinity creates the “tenets of black masculinity and...[exerts] power over them to reify its own existence (44). In the story, Jesse has

a preconceived idea of the sexual deviance that the black body harbors which was imparted on him by his parents during childhood. The voice of the black body is never heard but instead only Jesse's views of the black body are shown, which cite the black man as sexually overpowering to the point that he needs to be tamed or castrated by the white community. It is only possible for Jesse to have the cleaner, superior, and more respected masculinity if the deviant black masculinity exists. Taylor also writes that "white patriarchy's monopoly on American society, its constructions of black masculinity are the prevailing cultural mores. The white man, then, in Baldwin's configuration, literally has the black man by the balls" (46).

It is useful to situate Taylor and Kim's arguments in relation to each other because both explore how damaging racism can be not only to the black male victim but also to the white protagonist. As Kim proposes, "Baldwin clearly intends to demonstrate how Southern racism harmed white people as well as black people. In fact, critics have noted that Jesse's psychosexual dysfunction relates to Southern racism" (320). Similarly, Taylor also argues that Baldwin's short story "suggests that the system of creating masculinities for both blacks and whites is a system of destruction of all: the white man destroying the black to achieve his own manhood and the black man destroying himself in order to conform to the tenets of masculinity set forth by white patriarchy" (57). Both critics' arguments help to elucidate how Baldwin's white protagonist embodies a neurosis that is not contained, and which permeates the white masculinity as much as it denies the existence and freedom of the black masculinity.

It is almost impossible for black men to escape the labels imposed upon them by the white patriarchy because they are so prevalent. It is noteworthy then that Baldwin ends his story with the image of the lynching as the white man has the black man's severed testicles in his hand because it shows the debased nature in which the white masculine power sought to subjugate

black masculinity. Taylor also wrote that the image of the testicles and the lyncher's hand were a symbol that linked two forms of oppression together, which were "the white patriarchy's false construction of a hypersexualized black masculinity, as well as its subsequent attempts to repress and destroy that very construction" (46). Jesse hypersexualizes the black men he encounters so he can justify his aggression towards them, making Jesse's white masculinity almost entirely dependent on the repression of the hypersexual, which he has created.

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's essay, "Playing in the Dark," is fitting in the analysis of Baldwin's story because it emphasizes how the canon of American literature denies the impacts that slavery has had on it and that it rejects slavery as having any involvement with the canon. Morrison goes on to say that there is also an Americanness with a main goal of excluding the black presence while ignoring the knowledge that the black experience is essential when understanding the literature of the nation.

In the same fashion, Baldwin conjures up a character who denies the humane existence of the black body and instead treats it as an object of consumption which is never treated as a real person but instead as a tool for the advancement of white sexuality. The lack of recognition for the "American Africanism" which is defined as a "persona [which] was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence [serves]" (1165) also encompasses a way of "policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability" (1165) both of which allow racism to appear as natural.

Baldwin's silencing of the black voice and its focus instead on the white perception highlights how the analysis of blackness is essential in the understanding of literary whiteness because of its prevalent nature in the white psyche. The fabrication of the Africanist persona can

then be treated as reflexive because it deals with “an extraordinary mediation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (1169).

Baldwin’s story shows how blackness aids in the construction of the white identity and how a total rejection of the African American presence disables a white character.

Despite Jesse’s desire to exterminate the physicality of the black presence, his sexual deviance emphasizes the existence and importance of this presence which Jesse only wishes to do away with because he cannot escape it psychologically. Taylor’s argument also resonates with Morrison’s through her concluding claim that within the story “masculinity is never a *positively* defined identity. It must always be defined in terms of what it is *not*” (57) which reinforces Baldwin’s portrayal of both white and black masculinities as interdependent on each other and as non-static.

Jesse fantasizes about the layout of the North and its town where “all the niggers lived together in one locality” (1754) and how a fire could be localized and centered in that one area to erase their existence altogether. Jesse regrets that the South is not laid out in this way and that because of this if he set a fire, it could “hardly be controlled [and] it would spread all over town” (1755). However, in a metaphorical sense, the fire has already spread in that the existence and importance of the black body can no longer be ignored. It has manifested itself and dug itself into the white psyche forever demanding its rightful place in the American consciousness; one that will consider the damage that racism has on both white and black individuals alike and ultimately calls for a reconsideration of the abuse and mistreatment of the black body which condemns, punishes, and rightfully calls out the sickness of the white racist.

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