

JAMES BALDWIN

Gay U.S. Author
1924-1987



The preeminent African American intellectual of his era, James Baldwin wrote 17 books of prose, essays, plays, and poetry – works that had a profound influence on the development of a contemporary American identity. At age 14, he became a Pentecostal preacher; something that he said influenced his later writing. His first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) framed an account of growing up in Harlem in a context characteristic of his writing – a concern for the rights of America’s oppressed and a compassionate search for human dignity amid the frustration and rage of blacks fighting for justice. His book *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) was one of the first novels written in the U.S. to deal openly with homosexuality; a subject previously explored in his essay ‘Preservation of Innocence’ (1949). In it he addressed the charge that homosexuality was “unnatural” by questioning how something “as old as mankind” itself could possibly be regarded as anything but natural. Disillusioned by American prejudice against blacks and homosexuals, Baldwin departed for France in 1948 where he soon became involved with the cultural radicalism of the Left Bank. He would live as an expatriate in France for most of his later life. Though he had toured the American South and spoke extensively about the Black Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin was not asked to play a visible role in the 1963 March on Washington because his homosexuality was considered a liability by its organizers. Nonetheless, as an openly gay man, he became increasingly outspoken in condemning discrimination against lesbian and gay people, offering a vital literary voice during the turbulent era of civil rights activism in the 1950s and '60s. He remains one of the most influential U.S. authors of all time.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: How has James Baldwin been recognized for his literary pursuits? Read the biographical information.
2. Group Discussion: Examine how Baldwin reflected the passion and struggle of Black Americans during the twentieth century.
3. Read the following background information at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/james-baldwin/about-the-author/59/> and <http://www.americanwriters.org/writers/baldwin.asp>

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Describe the political and social trends of the 1960’s that intersected with Baldwin’s activism on freedom of speech civil rights, and gay issues.
2. Connect with one other historic milestone(s) that is portrayed in the Legacy Project that gives voice to the common foundation of justice. Use the following link at http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Historic_Milestones.html

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. View “James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket” at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_hYraYI2J8
2. Read “The Fire This Time” at <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/kaleidoscope/volume4/fire.html>
3. Discuss how being an African American and a homosexual impacted his influence in the Civil Rights Movement.
4. How do you think Baldwin was changed by these events personally and professionally?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Assess the impact that racism or homophobia play in our society today? Examine the biography introduction in http://wps.ablongman.com/long_kennedy_lfpd_9/22/5820/1489977.cw/index.html
2. Describe the change that you would advocate to move forward with acceptance and inclusion in our society.