

Symbolism as a device for revealing the realities of the era and the inner worlds of characters in Another Country

Research Question:

How does James Baldwin use symbolism to present the realities of the era in which the novel is set, along with the inner worlds of the characters, in the novel Another Country?

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Introduction

Aretha Franklin, an American activist and soul music singer, once said, “We all require and want respect, man or woman, black or white. It's our basic human rights.” Race and respect have been very important concepts of humanity for centuries. We see that the content of the sentence that Aretha Franklin said is masterfully explored with the concepts of racism, prejudice, sexuality, and societal pressure in James Baldwin’s novel *Another Country*.

Started writing in 1956 and finalized in 1962, Baldwin set this novel in 1950s New York City. Considering that in the 1950s America, topics such as homosexuality, racism, and relationships between races were subjects hard to talk about, the novel covers difficult topics for its time. Before and during the writing of this novel, Baldwin had the opportunity to travel to different countries such as France, Switzerland, and Türkiye, which gave him a chance to observe how these topics were addressed in different geographical regions and cultures.

In his novel *Another Country*, Baldwin skilfully uses symbolism to convey these difficult topics to the reader. Symbolism is basically explained as the use of symbols to represent ideas, especially in art and literature. To give examples; water, New York City, France and America can be listed as main symbols used in the novel. These symbols were not only used to depict the city and the era but also convey the reflections of the inner worlds of the novel’s characters to the reader.

The novel is essentially told in three parts. The first character we encounter in the first part of the novel is Rufus Scott, a black jazz musician. Through Rufus, the readers feel racism, its multifaceted effects on human psychology, and the difficulty of surviving in New York City during that period. The reader feels the tension created in Rufus by his relationship with a white woman, the dilemmas he experiences between love and hate, and ultimately how these difficulties lead him to his suicide. These allow for different perspectives to be explored and the use of symbols in these

scenes. After Rufus's death, Baldwin leaves the narration to Rufus's friends, who are struggling with the grief. During this period, the relationship between Rufus's sister Ida and her lover, the young Italian writer Vivaldo, becomes the focus of the novel allowing for different perspectives and these allow for symbols to be explored in new contexts for new people in the novel. This second part of the novel is where complex relationships take the main stage. A black woman and her white lover, betrayal, and homosexual relationships are explored in this part, along with introduction of new characters. These introduce new symbols and offer a different look at the previously used symbols from the eyes of the new characters. The third and final part of the novel, unlike the first two, explores new kinds of symbol such as the comparison of countries with the use of symbols. In the last part when Eric and Yves meet at the train station, despite the social unacceptability of this relationship, this moment symbolises a sign of hope that love can exist even in hard situations.

The main reasons this novel should be analysed can be listed as; the depth of its characters, the masterful way this depth is conveyed to the reader, and the skilful portrayal of human qualities while simultaneously indicating the realities of the period. In this process, the novel is enriched using symbolism, transcending its time.

Symbolism

In symbolism, abstract ideas can be represented by using something concrete. Emerging in the second half of the 19th century, Symbolism was a reaction against Realism, which disregarded human emotions and impressions. Not only literature but also religion, science, different kinds of arts and music can be the areas where symbolism is used. According to symbolism, objects and

places can be used as a bridge between external world and human senses. By using symbols, Baldwin incorporates the reader's imagination, adding a multi layered richness to the novel.

Music

The fact that the novel begins with Rufus, a musician, and his death's effect on the other characters tells us about the role of music as a symbol within this novel. The fact that Rufus rapidly loses his purpose in life after giving up music, and that this loss leads to his death, reveals the power of music. Jazz and Blues represent the characters' survival. This approach comes from Rufus's family. "A nigger, said his father, lives his whole life, lives and dies according to a beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddam tambourine."(Baldwin 25) With this quote, Baldwin tries to underline the importance of music for Black Americans identity. Beat is not only a music term but also a symbol of their presence.

Besides using music as a meaning to their existence, the characters in the novel also turn to music as a tool when they cannot find the true words to express their desires for love. "He stood there... screaming through the horn Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?... the boy was blowing with his lungs and guts out of his own short past... he had received the blow from which he never would recover..."(Baldwin 28) Like a man with synesthesia¹ Rufus was able to hear words and feelings through the music that were coming out of a saxophone.

¹ the fact of experiencing some things in a different way from most other people, for example experiencing colors as sounds...feeling something in one part of the body when a different part is stimulated

According to the novel; the reality of 1950s New York for especially Black Americans is suffering. Because racism, prejudice, and social pressure these people are exposed to loneliness which makes them feel empty. That is the point where Baldwin uses symbolism to present the realities of that era along with the inner worlds of the characters. Throughout this lonely time, music becomes a witness for suffering. Like a close friend that understands the pain. "There's thousands of people, Bessie now sang, ain't got no place to go, and for the first time Rufus began to hear in the severely understated monotony of this blues, something which spoke to his troubled mind. The piano bore the singer witness, stoic and ironic."(Baldwin 86)

As mentioned earlier, Black Americans need making their voices heard and express their anger and the feeling of being discriminated caused by the racism they face. In the novel we find out that this need is met through music. When Ida sings after her brother's death it was a way to scream to the world her grief. "Something appeared in her face... a kind of passionate, triumphant rage and agony... a communion more total than flesh could bear."(Baldwin 370)

New York

In "Just Enough for the City": Limitations of Space in Baldwin's *Another Country*, Amy Reddinger wrote, "The suburbs of New York are the twinkling lights across the water that catch Rufus's eye. Suburbs are both a symbol of escape from the city as well as a reminder of its limits; furthermore, the suburb, as a symbol for postwar hegemony, becomes the supreme signifier of cultural "norms" of the postwar era." In the novel, New York is more than just a city; it reflects the time that the novel was set. Especially for the Black Americans New York was a pressure that crushes the characters. "Beneath them Rufus walked, one of the fallen for the weight of this city

was murderous one of those who had been crushed on the day, which was every day, these towers fell."(Baldwin 22)

The city is also a symbol of threat. "The great buildings, unlit, blunt like the phallus or sharp like the spear, guarded the city which never slept." (Baldwin 22) "the spear" and "the phallus" are symbols that indicates the city can be dangerous and aggressive anytime. The city can be dangerous and ready to hunt the characters at any moment. This builds up a kind of fear that the city imposes and makes it seem as a potential threat to the people, but especially the discriminated people, because the city, being alive and never sleeping, symbolizes a society filled with hatred and prejudice being awake and living throughout the city, no matter the place or time. At that point, it is symbolized as a trap; "The city is a prison-house of desires which cannot be fulfilled." (Baldwin 15) Like a prison, the city keeps good things locked away. In the quote "For a moment, as the road swerved, the skyline of New York rose before them like a jagged wall."(Baldwin 195) The skyline is symbolized as a "jagged wall".

By using New York as a symbol Baldwin emphasizes the irony of being alone among crowds. Even though streets are full of people, the city makes you feel alone. "It was so familiar and so public that it became, at last, the most despairingly private of cities. One was continually being jostled, yet longed... for a human touch; and if one was never... left alone in New York, one had, still, to fight very hard in order not to perish of loneliness." (Baldwin 333)

Water

In the novel water is especially important symbol for both the realities of the time and feelings of the characters. Since Rufus's death is one of the main themes of the novel, it is not a random choice for him to end his life at a river. "He was black and the water was black." (Baldwin 141) After all

those times that he felt lonely and not understood, at last he found inner peace at the river and he felt completed. This feeling of being completed comes from both Rufus and the river being black shows that they were the same and the river was an escape tunnel for Rufus, something common that he had with an object. While the dark atmosphere and the repetition of the word "black" symbolize a dark and unsettling setting, it offers an escape for Rufus, his death being a relief for him rather than something bad.

A similar struggle can be seen in Eric and Yves, as social pressure and prejudices make them feel uncomfortable and unaccepted. But in France, the sound of the Mediterranean Sea gives them what they need; comfort, love and protection. "They fell asleep as they were, cradled, spoon-fashion, against each other, lulled by the pounding of the sea... the only haven either of them had ever found." (Baldwin 329) Water makes them feel as if they were in heaven.

In addition to the sea, Baldwin also uses rain as an important symbol in the novel. During a conversation between Eric and Vivaldo, it was raining outside. Since judgements of the people bother them, rain acts as a protector. It protects them from outer world and stands like a strong wall. "The rain came down outside like a blessing, like a wall between them and the world." (Baldwin 549)

Water symbolizes both positive and negative thoughts throughout the novel. The part where Rufus says, "When a child he had lived on the eastern edge of Harlem... one summer a boy had drowned there." (Baldwin 40) makes the reader feel the weight and sorrow for Rufus's grief.

In Vivaldo's dream, he is facing heavy rain and a high bridge. This subconscious fear is symbolized as a form of water. He feels guilty about Rufus's death, and he is afraid to face reality. "Vivaldo dreamed that he was running... blinded by the rain beating down... [he] stood, higher than Rufus had ever stood, on the wintry bridge, looking down on death." (Baldwin 543) But afterwards, this

fear makes him so uncomfortable that he decides to plunge into the truth. "And he himself felt, in a way he had not felt before, that it was time for him to take the plunge. This was the water, the people in this room... it was the only water there was." (Baldwin 249) Here, water is used to symbolize the tricky situations and the harsh realities. When he decided to face them, he used the word "plunge."

Domestic Places

In the novel *Another Country*, domestic places symbolize both the inner worlds of the characters and the main elements of that period. In 1950s America, homosexuality was not welcomed by society, and sexual prejudices were making those people uncomfortable. In the novel, unlike America, Eric's house in France represents peace and healing. "The house was long and low, built of stone, and very cool and dark after the heat and brightness of the garden." (Baldwin 286) He was happy in this place because he could finally be himself there.

To be able to show the social bias and pressure on a black American woman and a white man's relationship, Baldwin uses Ida and Vivaldo's house. "...his hovel on Bank Street was not a home. He had always supposed that he would, one day, make a home here for himself. Now he began to wonder if anyone could ever put down roots in this rock..." (Baldwin 103) Vivaldo's house is not described as a home. It is just a place for shelter, and there is loneliness in it.

Rufus and Leona's apartment is used as a symbol of an unstoppable end. Violence and racial hatred have destroyed their relationship, and the apartment is no longer able to protect them from this society. "The bald kitchen light burned mercilessly down... on the uncovered wash and bathtub. Dirty clothes lay flung in a corner." (Baldwin 111) Here, merciless light makes the reader understand that there are no more secrets left behind.

Richard and Cass's new apartment may seem like the dream house and the representation of a dream life from outside, but reality is just the opposite. Even though they are a socially accepted white couple, they are unhappy because of the rigid roles that society makes them fit into. "'Come in, children,' she said, 'I'm delighted to see you, but there's absolute chaos in this house today. Everything's gone wrong.'" (Baldwin 226) They are trying to hide the chaos.

The social pressure on homosexuality makes Eric live an isolated life because of the sexual prejudices. A quiet and hidden life is what Eric experiences when he returns to America. "His apartment was small and spare, absolutely monastic; it was less a place to live in than it was a place to work; and she felt... how profoundly he might resent the intrusion... of the feminine order and softness." (Baldwin 412) Here the apartment symbolizes emotional loneliness.

Darkness and Light

Light and darkness have been used as symbols in literature for centuries. Usually light symbolizes what is seen, safety and clarity whereas dark is used for symbolizing what is hidden, unknown and mystery. In this novel Baldwin uses light as the symbol of truth that the people are looking for and darkness as the symbol of the secrets that people hide.

In our minds we all keep secrets. When we condemn them to darkness, they gain power and become more dangerous. "Precisely, therefore, to the extent that they were inexpressible, were these terrors mighty; precisely because they lived in the dark were their shapes obscene." (Baldwin 289) The things that terrorize us become more powerful in darkness.

After hiding from his own true feelings, Eric decides to face the reality of himself. It is a hard decision but also a relieving one. During this relief, his thoughts become clear, and this helps him

to look back to his past and accept it. "Now that his flight was so rigorously approaching its end, a light appeared, a backward light, throwing his terrors into relief." (Baldwin 289)

Most of the symbols that were used in this novel underline the loneliness and fears of the characters. Darkness is a representation of loneliness and the danger of the big city. "Tall apartment buildings, lightless, loomed against the dark sky and seemed to be watching him, seemed to be pressing down on him." (Baldwin 140) Just like a monster, darkness is symbolized as a big creature which is ready to crush Rufus.

Where darkness represents fear, light mostly represents hope and guidance in the novel. When Eric thinks about Yves, the man he loves, he feels that a light occurs to help him find his way. Through darkness and loneliness of the big city, Yves's memory enlightens his way. "Yves' eyes, like the searchlight of the Eiffel Tower or the sweep of a lighthouse light, lit up, at intervals, the grave darkness around him and afforded him... his only means of navigation." (Baldwin 331)

In the novel, darkness symbolizes unrelieved secrets. According to Baldwin, being honest about who you are is the only way to turn darkness into light. "Without this effort [to tell the truth], the secret place was merely a dungeon in which the person perished; without this effort, indeed, the entire world would be an uninhabitable darkness..." (Baldwin 175)

When Vivaldo understands that not many things in the world were just black or just white, the novel uses symbols of light and fire for this situation. The contrast between darkness and light is similar to that of black and white. "Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night... And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hint of its origins, in fire." (Baldwin 611)

America vs France

America and France represent two different lifestyles in *Another Country*. In the novel, America is a place where people cannot function as themselves because of the social pressure whereas France is a place that people are free from the prejudices of the American society and free to face themselves.

America is crushing the characters throughout time in the novel. Eric was aware of this situation, and he was afraid that New York would destroy him, like it destroyed Rufus. He thought of America as a deadly trap and France was the only way to escape from that trap. "I didn't know what was going to happen to me in France... but I knew what was going to happen to me in New York. If I had stayed there, I would have gone under, like my friend on the George Washington Bridge." (Baldwin 11)

Unlike America, France is a place where social pressure is not dominant. In France people know and accept their responsibilities and face themselves. Blaming society is not an option. "Paris does not offer many distractions... Then the discontented wanderer is thrown back on himself – if his life is to become bearable, only he can make it so." (Baldwin 314)

America's labeling of people and its desperate hope for the American Dream prevent people from maturing and growing. These labels are extremely discriminating and separating, putting people in certain stereotypical templates. These cause certain groups to be left out and seen as an obstacle acting against The American Dream and its ideals by just existing in the society, being different from those who consider themselves as "ideal". "The American ideal... of sexuality... has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs... It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden... that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood." (Baldwin 14)

Racism in America blinds its peoples' eyes and constructs an obstacle acting against love by making people see each other only in a racial way rather than understanding them. People cannot see each other as true themselves and that ends up in insincerity. The prejudices act as a barrier between people and separate them just because of their race, causing discrimination between the people of the same country and people. "The habits of public rage and power would also have been our private compulsions and would have blinded our eyes. We would never have been able to love each other." (Baldwin 17)

When compared to France, New York is described as Barbaric and strange. When a person lives freedom outside of New York, returning to New York makes them feel strange. After France Eric starts to find New York as a dangerous place. The new dynamics of the country was different compared to France and he felt the judgement of the people of New York. "New York seemed very strange indeed. It might, almost, for strange barbarity of manner and custom... have been some impenetrably exotic city of the East." (Baldwin 333)

In France Yves could be himself. He didn't face judgements there but unlike France, New York is a city where a stranger feels uncomfortable. It is like a teacher who can make instant exams. He feels freer in France because of the different social dynamic of France. He felt he needed to enter the country to become free and make himself free from the judgements he faced in America. "He felt helplessly French... And he felt their movement away from him... it flashed through him that of course he had a test to pass; he had not yet entered the country; perhaps he would not pass the test." (Baldwin 616)

Conclusion

To sum up, James Baldwin uses symbols as a bridge between the characters and the readers, the truth and the hidden secrets, outside world and the inner worlds of the people. This novel is about

love; the love between a city and its citizens, the love between two races, the love that a person feels for his own identity.

The symbols of water, cities, different countries, darkness, and light all present the realities of the time in which the novel is set, along with the inner worlds of the characters. Baldwin's usage of contrasts makes the novel a delightful read. These symbols help the readers understand the social dynamics and the prejudices caused by these dynamics at the era when the novel was set and the characters' inner worlds, whether it is about the discrimination they faced because of their race and sexual decisions or about their own thoughts and decisions about themselves. Baldwin uses certain symbols throughout the novel across different characters to show that similar feelings can be felt by different people, which could be caused by the same reasons. These feelings are conveyed to the reader by symbols, each representing their own meaning depending on the context where it is used to make the reader feel different depending on the use.

James Baldwin used those symbols to underline the social realities as well as their effects on human psychologies and behaviors. We can easily see that racism and prejudice are not only social facts but also very important issues that affect peoples' lives. Symbols help the readers understand these characters' issues in different ways or representations of these problems.

The symbols are not specific to characters or chapters in the novel. James Baldwin uses symbols to connect different characters and their problems. Unrelated characters and unrelated problems are bonded through the use of certain words. This helps the novel convey Baldwin's social judgement as a whole and show that his judgement is not only towards one problem, and rather, about the whole society at the time.

Baldwin's background as a black writer travelling through the world shapes his criticism about the society's judgements and prejudices about certain people. As someone who has experienced these

judgements first hand, he masterfully uses the novel as a message towards the readers, conveying the same problems he faced with as a human into the novel by the use of symbols.

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