

If Beale Street Could Talk

Core Conversations Reading Guide
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Overview

While earlier writers like Phillis Wheatley, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Ralph Ellison had engaged with and responded to the “classical tradition,” they invariably produced literature beholden and addressed to white audiences. The greatest achievement of Baldwin’s texts, ultimately, is in the displacement of the essentiality and centrality of the white gaze in American literature. Baldwin’s *oeuvre* bestowed on American life genuine intellectual, historic, and moral clarity. His work speaks for itself and shows its own meaning for the future of civilization.

In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, [we] see how a racialized subjectivity, and how the assumption of a woman’s voice allow Baldwin to showcase his genius at its fullest potential. His articulation and expression of African-American love and family life has profound, universal, and world-historic significance. *Beale Street* is more than a literary artefact, it is a powerful witness to the oppressive policing and carceral forces that erected a New Jim Crow at the end of the 20th Century, an argument recently made by African-American historiographers like Michelle Alexander and amplified by Ava Duvernay’s documentary film *13th*.

Pages 3-75

What do we make of Tish’s voice? Do we find ourselves convinced by Baldwin’s representation of a woman’s subjectivity? I think this is not so simple as thinking about the “realistic” or “verisimilitude”. Baldwin is an artist; this is about meaning. Concretely, consider the stretch of interior monologue about relationships between men that occurs when Tish remembers the “little Spanish restaurant” where Pedrocito and the other workers take care of them?

What do we make of Baldwin's use of names? During a lecture on *Paradise Lost*, while discussing Milton's choice to have Eve name the plants, Nigel Smith said, "Naming is taming." Does thinking about "mastery" open up our understanding of names in *Beale Street*? Is it too much to say that Fonny "belongs" to Tish in a way Alonzo belongs to the world, or the prison in the Tombs? Beyond intimacy and familiarity, what about identity and self-creation? What does it mean that Clementine sees herself as Tish?

Where do we see the *Odyssey* in *Beale Street*? What mythic artist seems to be behind the image of Fonny?

What are the dynamics between Tish and Ernestine (Sis)? Are these paradigms familiar from earlier literature? Helen and Clytemnestra come to mind; beautiful, strong, unforgettable. The ways in which the two sisters are *unlike* is most striking to me. (If we think about Ismene and Antigone, by contrast, the comparison is not so generative.)

I want to offer a reading of my favorite moment in the first third of the text, when Tish comes out of the bedroom to announce the pregnancy to Joseph and Ernestine, her father and sister: The moment seems pregnant with the kind of Platonic philosophy we encounter in *Symposium*. To make sense of this, we need to think more about jazz and music sampling and less about argumentative logic. Ernestine brings up Beauty (rest). The "streets are full of noises", and later "Blurred human voices rising from the street"... I am put in mind of James Joyce and Stephen Daedalus' famous line, "That is God... a shout in the street." Ray Charles plays in the apartment. "And everything seemed connected—the street sounds, and Ray's voice and his piano and my Daddy's hand and my sister's silhouette..." In *Symposium*, Plato puts in the mouth of Diotima a speech about the universal, divine connectedness of ALL Beauty and Love. In the same speech she elaborates a theory of psychic pregnancy. While Plato ventriloquizes a woman to dismiss heterosexual love and authorize pederasty, Baldwin takes up the same themes and focuses on Tish and her baby. I am most persuaded of Baldwin's Platonism here when he rounds out the scene by representing Fonny's erotic touch as equivalent to his ability to work wood. All Art is inspired by Love is a claim Agathon makes shortly before Diotima's speech.

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What about Tish's voice now? Further thoughts on Baldwin's narrative strategies? When Tish meets with Mr. Hayward for the first time in the text, she goes into a digression about Time. In some ways, I think her reverie sets us up to appreciate how well-woven is the structure of the novel. We learn about Officer Bell in the lawyer's office, for example, before Tish shows us the scene in which she and Fonny met him.

At the same moment in the office, when Tish thinks about Time, she describes Fonny's experience of prison as "this inferno". Much later, thinking of Joseph and Frank, Tish ends a section, "Each of these men would gladly go to jail... to save their progeny from the jaws of this democratic hell." Between these two moments in the text—marked by the most simple English language that makes us think of Dante's first and most read cantica—we learn a great deal about American discipline and punishment. We learn about "law & order" in the life of Daniel, for example. What are the tortures and horrors of the carceral system Baldwin depicts as an "Underworld"? We learn obliquely of this horror and its impact in Fonny's life also. I think it would be a mistake not to consider one of the most powerful parts in the first chapter of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of a Life*, when he describes the trauma of seeing his aunt whipped by the sadistic Plummer: "doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle." In this context, Baldwin involves Malcolm X in a new configuration of Hell, and to dramatic effect too.

Within this "inferno/hell" frame in the text, why might it make sense that Tish considers sex work? And/or why might it be appropriate that Tish and Ernestine talk about Mrs. Rogers in the way they do?

I grow increasingly convinced that Baldwin has Helen (of Sparta/Troy) in mind when crafting Mrs. Rogers. There are at least a couple of moments in the text that make me feel certain about this. Can you spot them?

How would you describe the function of Levy and the Italian lady in the text? Would it be helpful to think of Mr. Hayward here also? Does Baldwin qualify whiteness in ways that surprise us? Why?

Any thoughts about Baldwin's witness to history in his descriptions of redlining and the New Jim Crow/mass-incarceration *avant la lettre*?

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Eyesight and vision are extremely important in Baldwin's work. What moments of eye-contact affect the way we interpret the text? How do different gazes (and subjectivities) operate in *Beale Street*? Acts of seeing are very prominent toward the end... What about touch?

What effect does the transfer of the drama from Manhattan to Puerto Rico have on the characters in the novel? What surprises Sharon about Puerto Rico? What surprises us?

Let's talk about color in the novel. We probably have a good deal to say about the colors "blue", "blond", and "black"; but also might find some points of interest around "green" and "red".