

## Abstract

The thesis seeks to explore how religion is depicted in the works of two of the most influential African American authors of the 20th century, Richard Wright and James Baldwin. The analysis takes as framework Wright and Baldwin's mutual discussions about how to properly articulate the African American experience in literature. The thesis examines an autobiographical work and a novel by each author. In Wright's case, the books that are discussed are his two-volume autobiography, which consists of a first part dealing with Wright's childhood and early youth in the American South, called *Black Boy*, and a second part, *American Hunger*, recounting his adult life in the North. Furthermore, his major novel *Native Son* is analyzed. In the case of Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, i.e. two essays which elaborate on different episodes from Baldwin's life, and the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are examined. The discussion is completed by insights offered by Wright in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born", and by Baldwin in the essays "Everybody's Protest Novel", "Many Thousands Gone", and "Alas, Poor Richard!" The first section of the thesis deals with the criticism Baldwin advanced against Wright in several essays, in which Baldwin was suggesting that Wright's angry writings have only reinforced the discourse of the whites, with Baldwin and Wright's subsequent quarrels, and with the issues Baldwin's comments on Wright's work raise. Next the ways in which religious and racial discourse are intertwined in American society are examined. The discussion of the topic as it can be traced in the two authors' works is complemented by general information about the historical context of African American Christian religious practice in America. The following part of the thesis explores how racial discourse influences religious views within African American communities, be it on the level of the family or of the community as a whole. Both Baldwin and Wright stress the oppression the African Americans have had to face from the white society, and in their works it can be observed how such a pressure leads the black characters to a dichotomized vision of the world. As a consequence, individuals seem paralyzed by a fear of being labeled as "sinners" and being doomed forever. Within this context, the thesis also looks into the church rituals that are characteristic of African American religious communities, focusing especially on the exceptionally emotionally powerful folk sermons, which are evoked in both Wright's and Baldwin's works. Finally, the thesis traces Wright's and Baldwin's reasons for rejecting religion as an oppressive institution, and it examines what alternatives to an acceptance of the religious discourse they offer in the works which are discussed.

*Key words:* James Baldwin, Richard Wright, religion, racial discourse, community, identity