



Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

## SUPERVISOR'S REPORT

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., Thesis Supervisor

Anna Jirásková

B.A. thesis evaluation

Reflections on Religion: Richard Wright and James Baldwin

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This 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 properly to 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 white society, and in their works it can be observed how such 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 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.



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Ms. Jiraskova has produced an exemplary piece of work here, with a B.A. thesis of a quality and sophistication that would normally be characteristic of an M.A. thesis. Her overall bibliography is impressive, her choice of secondary works unimpeachable, her readings of Wright's and Baldwin's works is constantly instructive, and her understanding of African American psychology, sociology, and religion subtle and revealing.

Ms. Jiraskova's exposition of her topics is highly articulate, and the architecture of her thesis is elegant, as each chapter flows smoothly from and draws on the one that succeeded and laid the groundwork for it. Her work reveals an excellent understanding of Wright and Baldwin as individuals, of the distinctive style and rhetoric of each, and of the situation of each within African American and American culture.

This is, in my view, an outstanding bachelor's thesis, and I strongly endorse the quality of its expository style, the literary, religious, and psychological analysis that it presents, and the philosophical and cultural conclusions that it offers. In my judgment, it is worthy of nomination for the Mathesius prize for the year in which it is eligible.

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne"

Signed:

Prof. David L. Robbins, Ph.D.  
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures  
September 5, 2012.

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at [drobbins22@netzero.net](mailto:drobbins22@netzero.net).