

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Go Tell It on the Mountain by James Baldwin

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## Book Information

James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain  
Quiz Number: 10034  
Dell, 1952  
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Book Level: 6.5  
Interest Level: UG

Fourteen-year-old John struggles against the environmental influences of Harlem.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Prejudice; People, African American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; U.S. States/Regions, New York

## Main Characters

Deborah Gabriel and Florence's childhood neighbor, who becomes Gabriel's first wife

Elisha a youthful preacher whom John admires

Elizabeth Gabriel's second wife, who is the mother of Richard's illegitimate son John and Gabriel's son Roy

Esther a mistress to Gabriel; she dies giving birth to his first son, Royal, who also dies in a knife fight

Florence Grimes Gabriel's sister, who leaves home to find a better life, thereby forcing Gabriel to become responsible and take care of their ill mother

Gabriel Grimes a strict and brutal father, husband, and preacher who lives a hypocritical life of sin and denial

John Grimes the fourteen-year-old son of Richard and Elizabeth, who strives to be "saved" in his stepfather's church

Richard the father of John, who commits suicide soon after Elizabeth becomes pregnant

Roy Grimes the rebellious son of Gabriel and Elizabeth, who gets into trouble and is stabbed in a knife fight

## Vocabulary

**bestial** of or like a beast; obscene, lustful

**concubine** a mistress; a woman who a married man uses for sex

**diminution** a decrease or lessening

**evangelist** a preacher of the Christian gospel

**malevolent** having or showing a desire to do harm

**perdition** damnation; eternal death

**sordid** miserable or wretched

**spurious** having the appearance of being genuine without being so

**tumult** any noisy and violent, usually confusing, disturbance

## Synopsis

From an outsider's perspective, fourteen-year-old John Grimes has the potential to become a great leader. The man whom John believes to be his father, Gabriel, is a respected preacher in his Harlem community. John is faithfully involved with his father's church and looks up to a youthful preacher named Elisha as his role model. In reality, however, Gabriel is a brutal and hypocritical man who hates John because he was conceived illegitimately by Elizabeth, Gabriel's second wife, and is a better Christian than Roy, who is Gabriel and Elizabeth's legitimate son. Roy is rebellious towards his strict, overbearing father and is eventually injured in a knife fight with some white youths.

Gabriel, Elizabeth, John, and Gabriel's sister, Florence, attend a church service after Roy is stabbed. At this service, Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth have emotional flashbacks that portray the hardships of their lives, while John comes to the threshing floor and is saved by God.

Florence grows up in the shadow of her younger brother, Gabriel, because her mother and society places more importance on boys becoming leaders than on girls. Gabriel, however, is a wild person and does not want to accept any responsibility or ambition. Florence finally decides that she needs to

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get away from home and leaves Gabriel alone with their dying mother and moves to New York City. In New York, Florence meets and marries a man named Frank who, after ten years of marriage, leaves her and later dies in France.

In the meantime, Gabriel can no longer run from his responsibility to his mother, and he succumbs to her influence by becoming a preacher. He later marries Deborah, an older neighbor girl who had been raped by white men when she was young and therefore is considered "spoiled." Gabriel tries to live a good life with Deborah, but he soon begins to lust after a disreputable woman named Esther. Gabriel and Esther have an affair, which results in the illegitimate birth of his first son, Royal. Gabriel has to steal Deborah's savings in order to send Esther away to Chicago, and save his reputation. Esther later dies while giving birth to Royal. Royal grows up to be a wild young man and dies from a stab wound. Deborah later dies, and Gabriel leaves the South to go to New York.

Elizabeth's mother dies when she is eight years old, and an aunt takes her away from her father, whom she dearly loves. Her aunt wants to make sure that Elizabeth grows up to be a good Christian but, when Elizabeth is older, she leaves her aunt to live in New York with a man named Richard. Richard is a good boyfriend, but he is too preoccupied with his own life to think about marrying Elizabeth, who he unknowingly makes pregnant. Richard is wrongly accused of robbing a white man's store and becomes so distraught that he commits suicide, leaving Elizabeth with John, a fatherless child. At work Elizabeth meets Florence, who in turn introduces him to Gabriel, whom she marries.

Gabriel promises to care for John like he is his own son, but he does not love him. He is unable to take responsibility for his own sins and blames Elizabeth and John for Roy's misbehavior, thinking that Roy is paying for Elizabeth's sins. John, however, undergoes a spiritual purging on the threshing floor in which the dedication of his life to God dilutes his hatred for Gabriel.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

What keeps John from fully accepting the Lord into his heart?

*John's hatred and fear of Gabriel is the main obstacle between John and spiritual fulfillment. He knows that if the Lord is in his heart he will not have room for hatred, but he isn't sure that he wants to give up this sin. Since Gabriel is a minister, John knows that he cannot bow before the Lord without first bowing before his father. John cannot accept anything that his father says as the word of God because his father's words are full of hatred and jealousy towards him. Gabriel despises John's success in school and the church, and John is confused and angered by this lack of love and support. John feels that his hatred could someday give him power over his father, while accepting the Lord would mean that he would have to forgive Gabriel and submit to his abuse.*

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## Literary Analysis

What role does music play in this book? Give specific examples from the story to support your answer.

*Music is used to sing praise to God, and the words of the songs have symbolic meanings in their own right. Song lyrics are dispersed throughout the book and generally reinforce the themes of forgiveness, salvation, and retribution for our sins, such as this song from the subchapter entitled Elizabeth's Prayer: "Must Jesus bear the cross alone, And all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, And there's a cross for me. The consecrated cross I'll bear Till death shall set me free, And then go home, a crown to wear, For there's a crown for me." Blues music is used to express the hard lives of those living in Harlem, the trumpet is a recurring symbol of evangelism and the judgment day, and Gabriel tells baby John "Got a man in the Bible, son, who liked music, too. He used to play on his harp before the king, and he got to dancing one day before the Lord. You reckon you going to dance for the Lord one of these days?"*

## Inferential Comprehension

How does Gabriel's position as a deacon contradict his personal choices and actions? How is he a hypocrite?

*Students should identify the role of a deacon as one who lives a life of forgiveness, love, sympathy, honesty, fidelity, and avoidance of sin. Gabriel preaches these virtues and imposes them onto the lives of others, while his own life has been filled with lies, infidelity, hatred, and evil. He is an abusive man who cannot even forgive his own stepson, whose only sin is being born.*

## Constructing Meaning

Why does Gabriel hate his stepson, John?

*Gabriel's goal in life is to have a son to carry on his legacy and grow up to be devout and humble in the eyes of the Lord. Roy was to be this child because he was born into a marriage recognized by the church and forced to kneel down before the altar. Gabriel believes that if Roy follows the path of righteousness to salvation, it would be a sign from God that he is forgiven for his own sins and would be rewarded for his hard work in the ministry. Roy, however, is a wild and sinful child and it is John, an illegitimate son from his wife's past relationship, who is loyal to the church and a model for Roy. Gabriel can not understand how an illegitimate child can be blessed by the Lord, while his own flesh and blood, who had been born from holy matrimony, is cursed by the sin of Gabriel or Elizabeth's past. Gabriel begins to see John's good character as God's punishment for him, and this he hates more than anything else.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** Most of this story is set in Harlem. This area was the source of many important movements in American history. The Harlem Renaissance in the nineteen-twenties created an increase in race consciousness and an outpouring of African-American talent in literature, music, and the arts. Have the students research New York in the nineteen-twenties and the Harlem Renaissance, and have them present their findings to the class. The students can narrow their research to a specific topic (music, art, events, culture) and should use a variety of methods and media to present their topic to the class (oral reports, skits, timeline presentations, video, cassette/CD players, computers, etc.)

**Understanding Literary Features** An important theme in this story is the importance of the church in the characters' daily lives. The establishment of black churches was an important factor in building community among the poverty-stricken people of Harlem in the twentieth century. Have the students explore this theme by

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extracting important details, characters, and events in the book that illustrate how the church affects the lives of the people in this community. How does the church influence people's behavior, status, and attitudes? What might the story be like without its prominent role in the characters' lives? The students can use this exercise to write an essay that explores the importance of the church in this story, or they can write a creative narrative that parallels this story but associates the characters with an institution other than the church (government, schools, Mafia, etc.)

**Understanding Characterization** There are many other literary works in which the main characters are socially oppressed. Generally, these characters parallel those who are traditionally oppressed in society by representing ethnic minorities, women, or non-Christian religious beliefs. Have the students brainstorm titles and characters of other stories in which social oppression is a prominent theme, and then have the students work in groups to discuss how the characters are oppressed, by whom, and how they compare to the characters in *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. The students should ask themselves how each character reacts to an oppressive society, what action they take (if any) against it, and what is the outcome of this action.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** This story describes several scenes that the student might find disturbing. These scenes may range from the portrayal of domestic abuse to John's portrayal of Hell; it is up to the students to identify those passages that offend or disturb them. Have the students analyze the effectiveness of these scenes by identifying their purpose, what they portray, what feelings they elicit in the reader, and how they fit into the scheme of the story as a whole. They should then move into a large group and continue this discussion as a class.