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A Scrutiny on Masculinity and Homosexuality in James

Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

James Baldwin is recognized as one of the vibrant voice among the African American writers who has produced an acclaimed body of novels. He disputes throughout his work that identity and an honest sense of self can only be attained through a personal journey that involves more than just movement from one point to another; it must also lead to a change within and an acceptance of self. In *Giovanni's Room*, the main character David travels a journey devoid of personal growth and acceptance. A white, homosexual man, David finds himself trapped in a white, straight, masculine, American ideal which does not define him. He spends the novel trying to outrun and reject his past and aspects of his identity which he wishes to ignore. Through David's struggles, Baldwin shows a connection between internal and external spaces, and establishes a link between choice and acceptance when creating a personal identity.

This paper explores American views of masculinity and homosexuality and how Baldwin shows these views to affect all Americans in their search for self and home. James Baldwin opens his 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* with a reflection on notions of space and belonging. However, American immigrants found themselves merely staring into the "darker" past as David now stares at his fading reflection in the darkening window pane. This darker past is that of a country in which identities are lost and denied: lost as immigrants have left their homelands in an attempt to start a new life, and denied as the roar of the majority silences the voice of the minority. Yet identities are also created as these new Americans attempt to carve a space for themselves through self-invention, a concept that would become a hallmark of their new country. The cry of the American majority is answered by the voice

of Baldwin, who as both a black and gay man truly embodies the struggle of the minority to understand itself and to find its place. Despite taking an active role in the American civil rights movement, Baldwin ignores issues of African American in *Giovanni's Room*, taking up the topic of personal identity instead. While avoiding overt commentary on black-white race relations, he deftly illustrates that notions of equal opportunity are linked with those of identity.

The two are entangled because, as Baldwin frequently notes, you must know and accept who you are before you can exercise or fight for your rights as a human being. His treatment of identity and equality is still relevant today: words penned fifty years ago in response to the fight for racial which equality evoke feelings of frustration and hope that resonate in the current struggle to achieve equal rights for homosexuals. Yet both race and homosexuality are traits that cannot be changed, and as such, must be accepted before one can move forward in life. Baldwin argues throughout his work that identity and an honest sense of self can only be attained through a personal journey that involves more than just movement from one point to another; it must also lead to a change within and an acceptance of self. Since he emphasizes the growth which results from the journey and not merely the destination, Baldwin creates a novel that is a journey in itself. He leads the reader through David's physical and emotional spaces to a final truth: must be faced and accepted in order for one to find and claim one's place in the world. While critical opinion, including that of Trudier Harris, Kathleen Drowne, Luminita Dragulescu, and Kemp Williams, has acknowledged Baldwin's many spatial references in *Giovanni's Room*, it has not examined the function that both space and movement through space serve in the novel. For Baldwin, personal turmoil and identity confusion fade away in the growth fostered by honest personal exploration.

Yet this imagery seems most prevalent in relation to the inner spaces of the novel, particularly homosexual inner spaces. Giovanni wants to escape "this dirty world, this dirty body," indicating that he feels that both his external space (the world) and his internal space (his own body) are in some way sullied. The Americans whom David encounters in Paris are "a unit," an imagined community sharing some unidentifiable quality that "made them Americans" (Baldwin 89). For David, that unidentifiable quality is an ideal which he is unable to attain, and thus he feels less "American" by comparison. The correlation between the American male and cleanliness rules David's inner space, leading to a disconnect between what he views as his sullied inner identity and the spotless outer image he fights to maintain.

Kemp Williams simplifies this 15 disconnect, drawing a distinct line between internal and external spaces. He argues that Baldwin merely utilizes a “metaphor pervasive in Western Culture ... the body as a container for the emotions” (27). Williams asserts that Baldwin acknowledges this metaphor “by placing emphasis on things happening in David as opposed to to David” (28). This is certainly evident in his homosexual experience with Joey, after which David struggles with emotions in his inner space: “I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened in me” (9). Yet the body is more than just a physical container: it is also the vehicle through which inner space that in which the “self” resides, interacts with external physical space.

David sees Joey's body as “the black opening of a cavern in which would be tortured until madness came” (9), and he understands the effect which physical interaction with that space will have on his sense of self (and on the self which he projects to the world). Physical contact between himself and Joey joins David's self with his external space in a very tangible way, and David believes that by remaining physically “clean” he can avoid the metaphorical dirt of homosexuality. David's attempt to remain physically clean fails with Giovanni. In an attempt to maintain between his internal and external spaces, David participates in sexual activity with the notion that “it is only the body” which is involved in the act, so he fails to be both physically and emotionally present (88). He must be present with both “body and soul,” internal and external identities, and his inability to do so in his interactions with Joey and Giovanni leads to his absence in inner space as well, resulting in the loss of himself in his denial of his sexuality. David feels this loss of internal self in terms of external suffocation, perceiving his physical locations as crowded, confining, and claustrophobic.

These descriptors demonstrate that his futile search for identity through the outer spaces of the novel. In an attempt to avoid his confusing feelings towards Giovanni, David orchestrates a sexual encounter with his friend Sue, whose apartment is described as “dark and full of furniture” (Baldwin 98). After receiving a letter from Hella accepting his marriage proposal, David projects the confusion of his inner space onto his outer environment: “I stared at absurd Paris, which was as cluttered now ... as the landscape of my heart” (Baldwin 94). While David becomes more lost with each change of location, his sense of entrapment is most clearly evident in his physical and emotional imprisonment in Giovanni's room. This statement has a double meaning for David when viewed in light of “the closet” of homosexuality. If David doesn't escape Giovanni's room in the physical sense, he feels he

will be lost to homosexuality. Yet it seems the only way to truly escape both the metaphorical closet and his false identity is to remain in the room. By staying with Giovanni, David “comes out” of the closet, rejecting his false identity and his adherence to the American ideal and embracing his true self instead. Unfortunately, David is simply unable to break free of the American masculine ideal against which he measures his identity, for he sees himself through the collective “mirror” of America and defines himself by the definitions which others impose upon him.

It is David's attempt to align his outer reflection (what others see/expect) with his self reflection (what he knows to be true within himself) that marks his perpetual false motion in this novel; a motion intended to move him toward the ideal. Baldwin notes that “we all react to and, to whatever extent, become” what the collective “eye” sees (“Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” *Essays* 817). We start life being judged by our parents and then move through a “vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others” that add their reflections to the mix (“Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” *Essays* 817 817). What David fails to understand is that the struggle for home and identity is within. This struggle has little to do with the perceptions of others; rather, it is about an emotional coming to terms with the labels that others place on us. So his constant motion and fervent attempts to make himself over in the image of the American male fail 22 to bring true happiness to his inner space.

The action of the novel is told through a series of flashbacks as David reflects on his life and Giovanni's fate over the course of an evening. The story is framed with reflections of David, opening with him studying his own reflection in the window, noting that his “blond hair gleams” in true, American football-star fashion (3), and ending with him moving away from his image the mirror and his efforts to define himself. Each time David is confronted by an aspect of his self which he refuses to accept, he is also faced with his own reflection. On the morning David meets Giovanni, Jacques tells him that he “should see [himself] tonight ... should see [himself] now” (Baldwin 54). During his first meal with Giovanni he stares down at the table, where “deep below, trapped in the metal, the outline of my own face looked upward hopelessly at me” (Baldwin 56). His reflection tells him nothing because David is unable to reconcile what he sees with what he wants to see. It is worth noting the use of the word “trapped” here as well, for reflections are always trapped within a mirror, windowpane, or other reflective surface. 23 David's trapped reflection appears multiple times, indicating that his view of himself is confined within the American view of what a man should be. This is exactly David's problem: he is paralyzed by the fear that his homosexuality will “overtake”

him on his journey of self-discovery, and so he settles into a false harbor in an attempt to shelter himself. The simple choice to “say yes to life” is what David is unable to come to terms with, and his solution is simply to run away from the decision. While beneath the sea of Giovanni’s room, David is in a false haven and feels no need for an anchor.

Things are calm underwater, if stagnant. David exists for a short time in the underwater escape provided by the room, but he soon begins to feel the need for the false sense of motion he gets from physically running from himself. Baldwin says that “to accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it” (“Down at the Cross,” Essays 333), but David simply cannot do this. He feels that Giovanni is dragging him “to the bottom of the sea,” and his fear is causing him to “drown” in his sexuality (Baldwin 114). He views staying with Giovanni as a suicide rather than as a means to accept and immerse himself in his sexuality, thus “saying yes” to life as a homosexual man. The fact that David is a homosexual man, albeit one who has yet to embrace that label, frees Baldwin from dealing with issues of race relations and allows him to grapple with sexuality instead, showing his main character to be lost in a cycle of perpetual flight from his true identity. David's false motion continues in his desperate attempt to avoid his sexuality, and he becomes further lost as the novel goes on. He admits that when he made the decision to ignore the part of himself that “shamed and frightened” him, he succeeded only “by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion” (20).

Yet on the morning that David meets Giovanni, Jacques prophetically warns him of the dangers of perpetual false motion: “You play it safe long enough ... and you’ll end up trapped in your own dirty body” (Baldwin 57). This warning rings true for David in that he constantly runs yet is unable to escape from himself. While his outer location changes from his father’s home to Giovanni’s room to Hella's room to the rental house in the South of France, he always returns internally to the same place. The stagnation that he is so afraid of exists within himself as he is unable to come to terms with his homosexuality. Homosexual Americans are certainly not the only group to experience this stagnation, however; the black American also knows what it's like to be held back and put in one's place. Baldwin points to the function of race for the white American, saying that “the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there, and where he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall” (“In Search of a Majority,” Essays 219). Since David's movement leads nowhere, he is unable to grow and change, and fails to get any “better.” He is never able to

come to the conclusion which Baldwin himself was able to reach: that “if I was still in need of havens, my journey had been for nothing” (Introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Essays 135).

In the end, David turns away from the reflection of himself which he has been studying in the mirror and leaves the rental house (and presumably the part of his life associated with Giovanni) behind him. But even if this departure is his attempt to break out of the cyclical pattern of no movement in which he has been trapped, the cycle is perpetuated once again in the novel’s final sentence. David tears up Jacques’ letter, which informs him of the date of Giovanni’s execution, and throws away the pieces in a gesture of forward movement, but as he turns to walk away, “the wind blows some of [the pieces] back” on him, indicating that David has yet to break completely free of the chains which bind him in his inner space.

Yet the end of the novel is not without hope: David’s failure to take action pushes the responsibility for honest self-analysis onto the reader. Though David’s future seems hopeless, through his floundering Baldwin shows the reader a clear path to identity: face the truth about yourself in order to diminish the power which that truth has over you. While the change brought about by such self-honesty is small in that it is internal, the external effects of such change are just what Baldwin champions. He encourages Americans to engage in open self-reflection as a means of moving the country toward a future.

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