

“If You Cannot Love Me, I Will Die”: Reading James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*

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James Baldwin wrote *Giovanni’s Room* while staying in Paris. The story is set there, and in it there appear no African Americans, but white bisexuals and homosexuals, and a few heterosexuals. Baldwin tries to erase our awareness about his skin color from our minds at the very beginning of this story so that the issue of race might be a subliminal theme (Porter 134). As Leslie A. Fiedler says, one may begin to suspect that there must be African Americans “present, censored, camouflaged or encoded” (147). In this tightly focused novella published in 1956, however, Baldwin seems to have created a homosexual underworld not out of racial suffering, but out of psychological suffering. It seems that he wants to say we suffer much more because of our failure in recognizing our true impulses and in connecting with other people than because of our skin color. We can certainly imagine that his contemporary African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison use the issue of race to bring out something about basic human psychological problems. But Baldwin avoids doing so. We see people isolated and separated in this novella not because of their skin color, but because of their failures to love.

Giovanni’s Room is a negative rather than an uplifting book. There is a religious or mystic belief that through humiliation, pain, and suffering, one can approach enlightenment, a realization of God, and the truth. But at the end of *Giovanni’s Room*, we cannot feel in ourselves any spiritual uplift. That is, we do not see that David, the leading character of this story, ever gains any particular benefit from following his terrible course. The most fascinating part of this novella is its dark atmosphere, which suggests something like an unchangeable psychological dilemma in human relationships. This article examines the darkness visible as a kind

of nightmarish picture of a human situation, and then shows why and how Baldwin creates a Miltonic homosexual lost garden of Eden and gives us David's bitter reflections on his failure to love others.

The dramatic conflicts of *Giovanni's Room* take place chiefly within the mind of David, a young middle-class American of the clean, upstanding type, who is blond, "tall, perhaps rather like an arrow" (3). The action consists entirely of David's recollections of his past. Baldwin has neatly constructed the story so that this action falls into four well-proportioned episodes which relate David's sexual experiences: first the brief homosexual episode with Joey and then the longer relationship with Giovanni, followed by the contrasting heterosexual relationships—the seduction of Sue and the sustained relationship with Hella. Since we are limited to his memories of his relationships with these other characters, we cannot observe him from any other viewpoint but his own, as if we were peeping into a room through a small hole of a closet in which we are confined. Consequently, we must read the story and trace his confessions with our senses constricted. This atmosphere akin to claustrophobia, thus, is an accurate reflection of David's psychological situation. Giovanni's room symbolizes David's psychological claustrophobia: he fears a dark and emotionally debilitating confinement within himself. The smallness of the room, the curtainless and white-painted windows, and the untidiness of the dirty laundry, suitcases, tools, and paint brushes become associated with David's confused untidy claustrophobic mind. When Baldwin describes "the staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire" (127), he emphasizes that there is no chance for David to see through these windows into the world, that it is impossible for him to open his mind.

Baldwin also manipulates other imagery throughout the story to make us catch David's sense of entrapment, for example, as David remembers, "Life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater" (123), an image that may suggest not only the timelessness of the life in that room but also the strangeness and fearfulness of it. Besides, this image is closely connected with the images of darkness and light. We see a clear contrast

between darkness and light when David describes a traffic accident he caused one night: "And a telephone pole, foam white, came crying at me out of the pitch darkness. . . . Then everything turned absolutely scarlet and then as bright as day and I went into a darkness I had never known before" (25). Here we see that light leads David into darkness, just as later it will take him underwater. This tonal transition is further emphasized by the way in which the whole story begins at nightfall and ends in early morning. Though an early-morning light usually suggests something hopeful, we cannot feel encouraged at the end of the story, since Baldwin uses light as an entrance into darkness. This endless link (darkness-light-darkness) means that David is trapped psychologically; he wants to run away from everything which threatens him, but the terrible thing grabs him at last, or, as he says, the smaller "my own backyard" has grown, the bigger "the bulldog" (7). The images of water and darkness, and the claustrophobic atmosphere suggest David's embryonic psychological situation. That is, perhaps Giovanni's room symbolizes amnion in which David seems suspended and from which he does not know how to escape. We also see David drink alcohol many times, in fact, throughout the story, in evocation of his psychological instability. But David's constant drinking makes him meet with a traffic accident, since he is "one of those people who can look and sound sober while practically in a state of collapse" (25). Drinking helps him go down "underwater" rather than recover his composure, so that his psychological instability aggravates his drink habit.

When David is still in his teens, he has his first homosexual relationship with Joey, a boy about his age. And that is the first time in his life that he is "really aware of another person's body, of another person's smell" (10). So it seems that he has a chance to experience an awakening into adulthood, that is, to see beyond himself and to care for someone else. However, suddenly next morning he is afraid because Joey looks so innocent as he lies asleep with an expression of perfect trust. And we become aware of David's sense of guilt: "It was borne in on me: *But Joey*

is a boy" (12). Here, we need to consider why Baldwin uses homosexuality as a root from which David's sense of guilt derives, that is, whether homosexuality is an illness from which one suffers or a choice that one makes. Eldrige Cleaver, in his attack on Baldwin, insists on the former interpretation: "I, for one, do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors" (110). When we consider homosexuality here, we must do so in terms of the way Baldwin treats it in his literary works. What Cleaver calls in question seems not to be "Baldwin's homosexuality" in terms of literary materials, but "Baldwin as a homosexual." When Baldwin read André Gide's autobiographical reminiscences published in 1952, he felt uncomfortable because "his homosexuality, I felt, was his own affair which he ought to have kept hidden from us, or, if he needed to be so explicit, he ought at least to have managed to be a little more scientific...less illogical, less romantic" ("Gide" 156). And then he points out what he considers to be the problem of homosexuality:

The really horrible thing about the phenomenon of present-day homosexuality...is that today's unlucky deviate can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling into an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased. When this possibility has ceased, so has the possibility of growth. ("Gide" 160-61)

David is a prime example of "today's unlucky deviate." The question of whether homosexuality is natural or not seems utterly irrelevant, because we really do not see what difference the answer makes. Baldwin's true interest in this novella is the inner world of an "unlucky deviate"; he tries to extract the deepest meaning from a certain possible human situation by

giving us the process of David's psychological downfall. Considered in this way, homosexuality itself is not the root of David's guilt. In other words, it is David's idea of homosexuality that misleads him. It gives him a false perspective of the fundamental human relationship of love and, thus, makes him aware only of guilt. We need, therefore, to examine how his false idea of love has developed.

David tells us that his father has never recognized the need for "the merciful distance of father and son" (25) and, as a result, David cannot love him. He says that they have never been able to talk or communicate with each other. Therefore, David acquires the habit of telling his father only what he wants to hear. David's aunt Ellen cannot understand him, and she blames him whenever he comes home drunk. Gradually, he comes to feel isolated from his family. His mother died when he was five. Though he scarcely remembers her, he seems to need to reach out to her. Yet, when he dreams of his dead mother, "she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive" (15). David's nightmare suggests that reaching out to his dead mother causes a fear of mortality or death when he is young. David's humanity is dying through the process of guilt about his basic sexual impulses. So we see that David's fear of love is rooted in childhood experiences, which do not explain the problem of homosexuality but only the problem of love in association with something sickening or deadly. Yet we must see that this interpretation is certainly enough, because we see how David always runs away from chances to love. As it happens, the chance to love for him is a homosexual one. More important is the fact that he runs away from it. He is afraid of love because it is so closely connected with death in his mind. David's sense of guilt, therefore, is not a matter of homosexuality but a matter of the fear of love or sexual impulses that take him toward death. We find a description quite similar to the nightmare about his dead mother when he

feels ashamed of himself after having sexual relations with Joey:

A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. 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. (12-13)

Here, we notice that “half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories” suggest something like dreams in which things carry on unconsciously. And a “cavern” derives from the same root as “a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive” in the nightmare about his dead mother. Though homosexuality itself is not necessarily a problem in terms of fundamental human relationships, David cannot help believing that society in general insists on regarding homosexuality as a sexual deviation. And he has accepted this point of view unquestioningly. As a result, he suffers a sense of guilt from having violated this social norm and from the feeling of pleasure which he has experienced in the homosexual relationship with Joey. And so he seeks release from his psychological embarrassment through a physical escape from America to France, but in vain.

It is in Paris that David meets Hella, who has also come from America, and, perhaps, instantly they become attracted to each other. However, Baldwin does not describe their living together until after David meets Giovanni. He thus makes us realize that David’s relationship with Hella cannot relieve his psychological embarrassment. We can certainly imagine that David, still clinging to conventional morality, envisions living together with Hella as his passport to social respectability; she becomes the vehicle through which he could both expiate the guilt he feels for his affair with Joey and confirm his masculinity in terms of social acceptability through heterosexual love, marriage, and paternity. But first we should notice that it is during Hella’s journey to Spain in order to

think about David's offer of marriage that David meets Giovanni, who has come from Italy, at Guillaume's bar. Since David has no passport to social respectability, he immediately becomes fascinated with Giovanni. Jacques, a French homosexual, fervently advises David to "love him and let him love you." "Do you think," he asks David, "anything else under heaven really matters?" (83). But the guilt which David has felt with Joey begins to jeopardize the safety he could experience through Hella. The raging conflict between his true sexual impulses and his attraction to social respectability comes to a climax after David has gone with Giovanni to Giovanni's room for the first time and the door has been locked:

I thought, if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost. But I knew I could not open the door, I knew it was too late; soon it was too late to do anything but moan. He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed. With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes.*
(94)

Latent desire transforms itself into actuality, and "the beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again" (122). Yet the voice of conformity continues to compete with his inner being. At times he dreams "of Giovanni's hands . . . which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again" (128).

We need to examine their homosexual relationship carefully in order to analyze David's inner conflict. Though we are too limited to his memories to observe their relationship objectively, their rather long conversation will help us understand it. Baldwin has them discuss the contrast between America and Europe:

'Well then,' he continued, 'as though with enough time and all that fearful energy and virtue you people have, everything will be settled, solved, put in its place. And when I say everything,' he added,

grimly, 'I mean all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans do not believe.'

'What makes you think we don't? And what do you believe?'

'I don't believe in this nonsense about time. Time is just common, it's like water for a fish. Everybody's in this water, nobody gets out of it, or if he does the same thing happens to him that happens to the fish, he dies. And you know what happens in this water, time? The big fish eat the little fish. That's all. The big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn't care.'

'Oh, please,' I said. 'I don't believe *that*. Time's hot water and we're not fish and you can choose to be eaten and also not to eat—not to eat,' I added quickly, turning a little red before his delighted and sardonic smile, 'the little fish, of course.' (51-52)

It seems that Baldwin wants to say something about Europe and America. However, David's national identity is so broad that it is less important than we might think. Donald B. Gibson, in fact, denies the effect of David's social identity, saying that he, "like the other characters, is far more individualized than representative of national origin" (106). It seems that water can take any form, and so it can be tempting or treacherous, bottomless or shallow, clean or dirty. David has crossed the Atlantic Ocean, but, because his attempt to cross something inside is unsuccessful, he does not go anywhere. Here, Giovanni tells David about time as water, but David cannot understand that this is what we must live in and that it is our element like air. Later, David feels sentimental about home, but that home is not really America for him. We see that love is a true home or a real country in which we can exist via strong supporting relationships. He is sentimental about home because he does not have that in America; he does not have real loving relationships with anyone there. Metaphorically, a country, in that sense, represents a chance for love.¹ Neither America, France, nor Italy brings any promise. That is why so many people in this novella go from one place to another; David

sees himself "as a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored" (91). Baldwin deliberately uses the issue of a country in order to emphasize that hope cannot be found in any particular place but in love. When we can love each other, we can be innocent, or we can return to innocence and, thus, create a real country where the heart is.

In terms of innocence, we see David's idea about a garden of Eden:

Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or: it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare.

(37)

As for David, like everyone, he loses innocence and he certainly feels that his innocence is dead. So he talks about how we can bear either remembering or forgetting a garden of Eden. In either way, though, we feel madness, he opens some possibility of a hero's existence. According to David's idea about people regarding a garden of Eden, he and Giovanni are clearly different types: David is representative of people "who remember [and] court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence"; Giovanni, of "people who forget [and] court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence." Yet Baldwin, it seems, tries to marry David with Giovanni in terms of an ideal human relationship. I suppose he believes that the two of them can really be united in love. Baldwin elsewhere insists on the importance of love by emphasizing its absence:

I have always had a quarrel with this country not only about race but about the standards by which it appears to live. People are drowning in things. . . . They are actually useless. You can't sleep with a yacht. You can't make love to a Cadillac, though everyone appears to be trying to. . . . I think the great emotional or psychological or effective lack of love and touching is the key to the American or even the Western disease. (Mead and Baldwin 146)

It is true that "heroes are rare"; no one in *Giovanni's Room* is a hero according to David's definition. But Baldwin makes us understand that, when we can love and "touch" each other, we might be heroic. In other words, if we can share with someone in their pain or joy, we can find a real country and we can stay there. A real love is the only way to approach being a hero.

The life in Giovanni's room could be edenic or heroic. However, as David remembers, "beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear" (109). He cannot manage to form the heroic relationships necessary for a return to the garden of Eden. David begins to fear his own homosexuality as something which leads him to darkness, to something sinful and wrong. He is dominated by his own psychological country where homosexuality is something to be guilty about. His sense of guilt seems a situational given. Once outside the garden of Eden, original sin is not something we have done or are responsible for. David's guilt seems to have that kind of force. While Giovanni seems to accept his sexual impulses without guilt, David tends to open his mind to or adopt that attitude. David could love Giovanni, but, instead, his own sexuality, which he fears so much, creates in him a bottomless psychological underground which makes his life exactly like Jacques': "It's like putting an electric plug in a dead socket. Touch, but no contact. All touch, but no contact and no light" (82).

When David knows that Hella is supposed to return to Paris soon, he begins to feel an urgent physical need for women. He wants to expunge

the memory of Giovanni from his consciousness and remove all self-doubt regarding his masculinity. David uses Sue, an American girl, in a desperate effort to achieve his own selfish end, but he remains unsatisfied. So we notice that David has decided to choose the socially sanctioned morality to which he clings and in which he cannot have any satisfaction. But after making love with Sue, David begins to despise himself for doing something awful to her. Meanwhile Giovanni loses his job because he will not submit to Guillaume's sex acts and desperately clings to David. He tells David with tears in his eyes, "If you cannot love me, I will die" (201).³ Giovanni's desperate need for David's support makes David wonder, "with an unwilling, unbelieving contempt, why I had ever thought him strong" (154). He wonders at Giovanni's weakness because, in his contempt, he cannot acknowledge his own weakness. So when he finds weakness in others, his contempt is really a kind of self-hatred. Yet he feels that "Judas and the Savior had met in me" (162). He has been at fault again: he can do right things but without right feeling. He can comfort Giovanni, but it is not because he feels strong affection or love for Giovanni. Therefore, he remembers that "nothing was real for me, nothing would ever be real for me again—unless, indeed, this sensation of falling was reality" (163). In other words, David says that nothing is real, because he is not honest enough to admit what he really feels.

Hella's return, of course, cannot quench the fire that rages in David. After sexual intercourse with Hella, David notices that the difference all reminds him of the joy, the excitement, and the love that he has known in Giovanni's room. Hella has decided to be a woman at all costs and give herself to David in marriage because she began to realize in Spain "that I wasn't free, that I couldn't be free until I was attached—no, *committed*—to someone" (184). This sounds right, but we can also see that her idea of attachment, perhaps leading to marriage, lies in becoming someone's "obedient and most loving servant," which does not mean forming a real country.

Because of David's attraction to social respectability, he comes to keep

Giovanni at a distance. Giovanni, on the other hand, despairingly seeks economic support and so begins to associate with Jacques. When David returns to Giovanni's room to pick up his things, Giovanni recounts his painful past in a little Italian village passionately: he has rejected God because God seems to have rejected him by ordaining that his wife have a baby born dead. He feels haunted by a kind of original sin which he has never committed and, therefore, is not responsible for. But unlike David he is capable of loving. Consequently, rejected by David's false love, Giovanni regards him as a most immoral person and he accuses David unsparingly as follows:

'You do not,' cried Giovanni, sitting up, 'love anyone! You never have loved anyone, I am sure you never will! You love your purity, you love your mirror—you are just like a little virgin, you walk around with your hands in front of you as though you had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe *diamonds* down there between your legs! You will never give it to anybody, you will never let anybody *touch* it—man *or* woman. You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap—and you do not want to *stink*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime.' (206-7)

Diamonds may suggest something pure, and at the same time, something hard, inhuman. David isolates himself from everyone. He wants to despise Giovanni because Giovanni is not afraid of the stink of love. Charlotte Alexander says that Giovanni's words highlight David's inability "to become involved, touching and being touched, and to risk loss of purity or control" (77). In terms of sexuality, David must choose between a socially sanctioned but, for him, sterile, empty, and clean heterosexuality and the more satisfying and stinking homosexuality about which he feels guilty. Of course, we should notice that sex is only significant, as George E. Kent notes, as "a metaphor for the act of breaking one's isolation and, properly experienced, responsibly entering

into the complexity of another human being" (151). So, left in isolation by David, Giovanni abandons himself to despair. As soon as he gets back his old job at Guillaume's bar, he murders Guillaume with the sash of his dressing gown. Giovanni hides from the police for a week after the murder, but he is ultimately captured and in short order tried and convicted and sentenced. David tries fleeing with Hella to the South of France, where it should be, but is not, warmer. He takes violent refuge in her body until it becomes "stale," "uninteresting," her presence "grating" (231). Finally, after Hella finds David making frequent visits to a homosexual bar, she decides to sail for America.

Giovanni's Room concludes in the early morning in the great house in the South of France. David imagines Giovanni's advance to his execution as his own reflection in the large window panes becomes more and more faint, and he becomes more and more desperate the closer he comes to a terrible realization about his life: "*Take off your clothes*, something tells me, *it's getting late*" (245). It seems clear that his inner voice rushes him, symbolically, into being honest with himself, into removing his mask in pursuit of a loving relationship. Elsewhere, Baldwin discusses this kind of love, that is

so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. (*Fire* 109)

David thus comes to understand that he has no hope. He begins to realize the whole process of moving toward death is something that God has ordained or dictated. He cannot change his fate, but he realizes that he must accept it with his mask taken off. And in his acceptance of hopelessness, ironically, there are some magic keys to the truth about his real self. Baldwin, in his unsparing criticism of such protest novels as

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), insists on the importance of accepting our lives: "But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not to battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it" ("Everybody's" 22). We are already outside the garden of Eden. We are always past the point of original sin. The journey toward death has already begun: since original sin has taken place, we are always moving toward death. "The world," as Joseph Campbell, one of the leading mythologists, has ever said, "as we know it, as we have seen it, yields but one ending: death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of our heart with the passing of the forms that we have loved" (25-26). But this tragic journey is our life; it produces our humanity, the burden which rests heavily on us. So we see in David a kind of satisfaction in the idea of reaching the end. There is a design or pattern being carried out: God has arranged things so that we are born and we move toward death. Everything ends in death, and finally all of us die. So, since we follow this pattern, we achieve God's purpose by dying.

Mentally walking with Giovanni to the guillotine, David finds himself naked in his room. At length we see his first and last prayer in the penultimate paragraph of *Giovanni's Room*:

I move at last from the mirror and begin to cover that nakedness which I must hold sacred, though it be never so vile, which must be scoured perpetually with the salt of my life. I must believe, I must believe, that the heavy grace of God, which has brought me to this place, is all that can carry me out of it. (248)

Here, David confronts his real self, difficult though it is for him to get "the heavy grace of God." With the constant repetition of "must," it seems he tries to convince himself. Through Giovanni's love, however, he has already lost the last chance to do so. And so David's alcohol-inspired prayer does not alleviate his fear and guilt; more to the point, it reaffirms them. And his body, which he "must hold sacred," will

certainly not remain so. David leaves the house with the morning weighing on his shoulders with "the dreadful weight of hope." He tears up the blue envelope bearing the news of Giovanni's death sentence and throws the pieces into the wind. "Yet as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me" (248). This occurrence seems to haunt him as he sees that he has admitted to himself that it is too late. He realizes that, though he tries to forget what has happened to Giovanni, he will be haunted by the past which will certainly bring him a terrible sadness at his lost opportunity to love.

Giovanni's Room has a fatality like something out of Edgar Allan Poe in its tone. We cannot but feel that David has fallen into a certain fatal trap, because Baldwin deliberately presents us with a kind of claustrophobic atmosphere and a notion of the lost garden of Eden. David, who is trapped in his psychological womb, cannot realize that love is the only key to extricate him from his entrapment. His tragedy is rooted in his inability to be honest with himself. More specifically, he cannot share with someone in their joy and pain: he is afraid of being involved in loving someone. His inability to love leads only toward a realization of death in his humanity. What Baldwin wants to emphasize seems condensed in Giovanni's words: "If you cannot love me, I will die." That is, we see that to be rejected by David's false love is as much as a death sentence to Giovanni. Love, Baldwin suggests in *Giovanni's Room*, seems so important and indispensable in human relationships that its absence takes Giovanni's life and leads David into his collapsing humanity.

Notes

1 Daniel Vivaldo Moore, the most distinct projection of Baldwin of all the characters in *Another Country*, attempts to "strike deeper into that incredible country in which, like the princess of fairy tales, sealed in a high tower and guarded by beasts, bewitched and exiled, she [Ida Scott] paced her secret round of secret days" (173). Consequently, it is exclusively Vivaldo who can reach a

new station in his search for his own identity (Igakura 125-28).

2 One germ of *Giovanni's Room* can be found in a New York murder case dating from 1943-44, in which a Lucien Carr stabbed an older wealthy man, David Kammerer, and dumped his body into the Hudson River. What at once fascinated and repelled Baldwin was the readiness of a man to kill when confronted with another man's touch. When his advances were refused, Kammerer allegedly told Carr, "If you don't love me, then kill me" (Campbell, *Talking* 101-2).

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