

Giovanni's Room: Hideous or Hideout?

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Abstract

The novel Giovanni's Room by author James Baldwin is one of the most controversial novels written in 1956. It focuses on the complex themes of sexuality and internalised homophobia as well as the social construct of genders. However, this paper focuses particularly on the title of the novel and the two main characters from the novel, they are David (the man who pretends to be straight because of his internalized homophobic nature) and Giovanni (an Italian bartender who shares a romantic relationship with David). This paper attempts to understand and justify the title of the novel, which seems to be picked up by the author with a certain intention, with the context of the above-mentioned characters and their feelings with the help of a close reading of the novel. What does the room represent? It definitely relates to the character and so to understand it, the paper utilizes specific quotes from the novel as well as academic articles regarding the novel to bring out the accuracy and support of the argument.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room, Gay Genre

"People are full of surprises, even for themselves, if they have been stirred enough. 'Nobody can stay in the garden of Eden,' Jacques said. And then: 'I wonder why.'"

The title of the novel, Giovanni's Room, does not look like a title that is randomly picked by the author, James Baldwin, on some random day. In fact, the title of the novel seems to have a deep meaning attached to it, intervening not only with the plot of the story but also depicting the main character's state of mind, if explained in a straightforward way. Coming back to the topic, this paper will attempt to justify that Giovanni's Room, the room where Giovanni lives and which is described in the novel by David, as the narrator, is not hideous but a hideout. A hideout for both the homosexual protagonists of the book especially for the character named David, a homosexual white man, trapped in the white, straight, American ideals, that do not identify him. As well as, it is also a hideout for the other character, Giovanni, but in a slightly different manner which will be discussed in a different section of the paper.

Initially, in part 2, chapter 1 of the novel, David describes Giovanni's room in connection to his life as something to be occurring beneath the sea. The choice of words indicates a lot of David's feelings towards the room and the way he felt in it. The use of words like beneath the sea - as if telling that it was a place where not all humans can come and disrupt the environment and hence becomes a safe place for them just like how the sea animals feel safe beneath the sea. In the very next chapter, he again refers to underwater indicating 'safety' saying 'Life in that room seemed to be occurring *underwater*, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change in there.' Of course, that room becomes a place that clearly shows David the mirror and gives absoluteness to the truth that he keeps denying almost the whole time in the novel. In

fact, many times he refers to Giovanni's room as 'home' in part 2 chapter 1 he says - '*we almost always walked the long way **home** along the river.*' - the word itself has the connotation of safety. As discussed in the class lectures, it is definite that David, all the time, does not accept his own sexuality and tries to escape the truth. That's where him - calling the room hideous comes in. Because of the fear, the uncertainty, and his inner conflict with himself. At one point, David remarks to Giovanni that the cramped space makes him wish they could leave it behind. This sentiment echoes his underlying desire to escape the equally constricted standards of heteronormativity that society (and therefore, David himself) imposes on him. Since David only offers that they move when their relationship (and his anxieties about his sexual identity) hits a hard patch, this desire is consistent with his inclination to regard relocation as a means of escaping his troubles. Despite the fact that they remain stationary, David continues to feel as though the room's walls and clutter are pressing in on him. Because of this, the room begins to depict how exhausted David feels in his attempt to hide his sexual orientation as a gay man, an effort that makes him feel imprisoned in a secret and constrained reality. His disgust with the room has to do with his internalized conflict and the pressure of proving his masculinity to the world. Due to social expectations, David was determined to have a steady, "regular" relationship with a woman. He goes to women (Hella or casual sex) whenever he feels too exposed in his relationship with Giovanni in order to maintain a masculine identity that he believes Giovanni is jeopardizing. In fact, Giovanni even says directly to David about his problem with remaining closeted when they have one of their arguments when he leaves him for Hella. There are uses of phrases like - 'You love your purity', and 'You want to be clean.' one of the truths that David needed was - 'You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love.' Of course, Giovanni was very emotion-driven at the moment but the practical mind of David's needed the exact words for a long time. The other way of looking at the reasons why he calls the room hideous is because hiding something for a long time with a conflicting mind is tiring, especially for a protagonist like David who wants to remain closeted and who can blame David during the times. Until the 1960s, those who loved people of the same sex typically lived dark, torturous lives, running from the expectations of family and society as they moved from place to place in search of something better. David separates his sexuality from the rest of the world, and the physical space of Giovanni's room feels distanced from the outside world. No one used to come to see them except Jacques who did not come often as well. In a way, David has made Giovanni's room oppressive by suppressing his sexuality therein and so the use of words like hideous and filthy. While "time flowed past indifferently above us, hours and days had no meaning," it also becomes a place where David was comfortable expressing his homosexuality.

In Giovanni's context, the room is definitely a hideout and unlike David, he doesn't fight the fact. There are many scenes where Giovanni's action in the novel describes how much he wants to protect that room that ensures his safety. Chapter 2 of part 2 justifies the previous statement - "We sometimes heard children playing outside our window, sometimes strange shapes loomed again it (*the obscured window panes*). At such moments, Giovanni, working in the room, or lying in bed, would stiffen like a haunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten **our safety** had moved away." One can also say that, in terms of the figure of speech, there is a lot of use of pathetic fallacy. David, as a narrator, describes the messiness of the room by describing areas of it like 'The wallpaper lay on the floor, in great sheets and scrolls, in the dust. On the floor also lay our dirty laundry, along with Giovanni's tools and the paint brushes and the bottles of oil and turpentine.' The mess in the room, metaphorically, resembles Giovanni's

life. His emotions and conditions were just like his room. But then Giovanni was an artist, maybe he was supposed to be messy. The lines narrated by David are - 'But I sensed when I woke up and looked around the room, the bravado and the cowardice of his figure of speech. This was not the garbage of Paris, which would have been anonymous: this was Giovanni's regurgitated life.' Here, one can again see David's way of looking at the room at the same time - completely being true to his sexuality. He felt safe in the room but also carried the worldly judgments and the fear of the world in his brain which never lets him be himself, truly. Further in the novel, we see Giovanni having plans for remodelling the room when David starts staying there. Even when Giovanni loses his job, he spends his time attempting to renovate his room by adding bookshelves, while David argues that this amounts to little more than trying to prevent the room's own walls from encroaching onto them. Because Giovanni was seeing a future with David and so he was dreaming of making their hideout, which, one way or the other, was already his home, a better place but the reality was completely different. There are scenes in the novel where David and Giovanni even get into a heated argument when David says, "I'm talking about that room, that hideous room. Why have you buried yourself there so long?" to which Giovanni asks, "... And since when, since when - he stopped and beat with his forefinger on the chest (*one can sense the element of an exaggeration*) - 'have you so hated the room? Since when? Since yesterday, since always? *Dismoi.*'" to which David says, "I don't hate it. I - I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." This proves Giovanni's attachment to their hideout. Giovanni even shares his past life with David and we see, that whereas David is constantly fleeing his sexual identity, Giovanni is fleeing something entirely different that is his past. The dividing line is that Giovanni does not actively deny anything about himself. Instead, he simply desires to build a new life that will allow him to be happy. David, on the other hand, constantly looks for ways to escape himself that will only lead to more sadness. Knowing how precious life is, Giovanni acknowledges how tragic it is for somebody like David to waste time making himself frustrated, which is likely why he tells this story in the first place and also brings him to his hideout which eventually becomes their hideout.

The central theme of "Giovanni's Room" is that of concealment and disclosure. David, as the narrator shifts between appearing straight, appearing homosexual, and finally appearing both, all the while being both ready and unprepared to reveal himself or his confusion through a glance, a piercing stare, or an instant of pure recognition. In truth, the space into which Giovanni invited David breaks the centrifugal "continuous motion" that has kept him from his homosexuality. The exact location of "this is something that shamed and frightened [David]," yet which he has always craved but been denied in his life, is represented by Giovanni's room. In his own words, "I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home. But, again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat to France." In conclusion, as discussed throughout the paper, the room becomes the hideout for both protagonists. The difference, as a reader can notice, is in their perspective. Whereas Giovanni, though lonely and in need of love and that's where his desperateness is seen to keep David in his life, was completely at peace with his truth and sexuality. David, on the other hand, used the room and stayed in the room, comfortably, until his fears and his ideas of being 'normal' started suffocating him and he started looking at the room as the problem. The end of the novel proves it when he finds it difficult to leave the room (*'then I wanted to beg him to forgive me. But this would have been too great a confession; any yielding at that moment would have locked me forever in that room with*

him. And in a way this was exactly what I wanted.' part two chapter four) But the ingrained ideology in his brain of heterosexuality as being the only way of living a normal life takes over, and he does exactly what the homophobic world would have expected.

“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.”

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