Dark Corners and Awakenings: Giovanni's Room

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James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* weaves a story of people caught within a multi-layered tapestry of human emotions. It is rich in symbolism as Baldwin expresses the main character's depth of feeling in words that are both powerful and poetic. Baldwin's characters come to life; some gay men today might recognize them. Even readers who enter Baldwin's world as stepping upon virgin ground will be captivated by the humanness of these varied souls. Their lives reveal the struggle of people trying to reach within, as well as out to each other, in an attempt to balance their desires with what they feel that society expects of them. This conflict between real human sexual desires and gender role expectations results in unkept promises, unacknowledged feelings, broken relationships, deceit, rage, guilt, regrets, and the tragedy of uncontrolled shame. Early in the novel Baldwin speaks through the narrator: "People are too various to be treated lightly" (10). Indeed, Baldwin does not treat his characters lightly.

The heart of *Giovanni's Room* is the first-person narrative of its central character, David. The foundation of the novel's theme involves his need to come to terms with his sexuality, although he spends much of his time and energy trying to run away from it. He recounts his early years growing up with his father and maiden aunt, who argue constantly. (His mother died when he was five.) He leaves New York City and takes a boat to France as a way of find-

ing himself. From here on, the characters carry the passion of their lives through the apartments, streets, and bars of Paris of the 1950's.

This story can be better appreciated, if not clarified, when one understands the time period wherein this drama is played out. This is the pre-Stonewall era, a time where gay liberation was neither active nor visible, a time when the struggle over the issue of sexuality was fought primarily within the deepest core of the individual; it did not march in the streets or play out a political battle in the voting booth. Society's deep rooted conviction of the natural predisposition to heterosexuality also added a prohibition against anything other than this expected role. Boys and girls were carefully instructed in gender roles, but when it came to sexuality, there simply were no options. Even in the older, more liberal world of Paris, the inner struggle to meet the demands of a given sexuality was the cause of much shame, pain, and misguided energy. When one is denied the ability to show public affection (or can show it only with the risk of jail or death in the streets), when marriage is never an option, and when one discovers that "the love that dare not speak its name", is burning from within, then there is only one alternative because nature cannot be swept away with laws or prayed away with faith. The only thing that remains is lust and its temporary cure: physical sex. In addition, the collective consciousness of the homosexual sub-culture was still in the embryonic stages, and self-loathing, compulsive lust, and petty jealousies were the product of these growing pains. It was a time before the word "diversity" wore a new meaning. (Yet even as we approach a new millinneum, these struggles in some places and in some people, and for some of the same reasons, continue.)

David stands at a window in a house in the south of France when he begins the flashback narrative. It is nighttime, which he describes as "the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life" (7). Baldwin grabs the reader with these words in the opening sentence. He will continue to add hints of suspense and foreboding. A little further on, his self-accusing memories create a more dramatically enlightening hint: "and Giovanni would not

be about to perish, sometime between this night and this morning, on the guillotine" (10). Early in the narrative he questions what circumstances might have "helped to kill Giovanni" and mentions that Giovanni had been sentenced (34). The reader is now anxious to meet the title character of this novel and curious as to the reason for his fate, as well as the role that the narrator plays in it. First we glimpse the narrator's early experiences that originate his troubled doubts.

Shame and its self-conscious twin, guilt, play an early role in David's life. He recalls, while growing up in Brooklyn, a younger boy, Joey, with whom he had been best friends. Their playing around leads to an "accidental" kiss, and the sharing of physical sexuality when he sleeps with Joey one night while the boy's parents are away for the weekend. He remembers how the fondness and tenderness he originally felt turned to shame and regret: "The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness. I wondered what Joey's mother would say when she saw the sheets" (15). "I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me" (30). He had yet to reckon with Giovanni's room.

David runs from the memory of the physical encounter with Joey by destroying the relationship. From here on it would be unacknowledged, and the memory of it despised, a coping mechanism he would use yet again, with dire consequences, in his relationship with Giovanni. In trying to escape his feelings for Joey he discovers that there is no place to run to that is far enough, not even to the arms of a woman. This doesn't stop him from trying. In his subconscious, inner struggle, Baldwin's central character sets out on a quest to prove his manhood because, to him, being a real man and loving one are not compatible realities. Yet, when David leaves for France he relates, "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" (31). It is not merely a quest to find oneself but an impulse to run away from the self already discovered but buried by shame and fear.

Elements of shame and guilt are related throughout Baldwin's narrative. David confesses, "The incident with Joey had shaken me profoundly and its effect was to make me secretive and cruel...it remained...at the bottom of my mind, as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse" (24). His feelings begin to shift after meeting Giovanni for the first time, in what he describes as "the ferocious excitement which had burst in me like a storm," and that had made him glad that his girlfriend, Hella, was in Spain (58). He adds, "I could only drink, in the faint hope that the storm might thus spend itself without doing any more damage to my land" (58). All the while, throughout the story, the self-righteous judgment of the eyes of society appear to him to be everywhere, like the watchful eyes of the photograph of his mother which stood on the mantelpiece of his childhood memory; "no matter what was happening in that room, my mother was watching it" (20).

One unnamed character is the old landlady of the house in France where David tells the story. She acts as the epitome of the watchful, instructing, demanding eyes of society. Here Baldwin gives us the impression of a woman who has worn herself out trying to live the societal dictates of a traditional heterosexual lifestyle. "She seems, like most of the women down here, to have gone into mourning directly the last child moved out of childhood. Hella thought they were all widows, but, it turned out, most of them had husbands living yet" (88). Her words reinforce the direction toward which David is so deliberately trying to navigate: "You must go and find yourself another woman.... You will make a home someday?" Like the cry of a heterosexual world limited in choices, she tells David, "your Papa will be very happy to see bambinos from you" (92,93). It is no wonder that David sometimes touches upon feelings of disgust for the men around him, the men of Giovanni's world, and the man (himself) he discovers in Giovanni's room.

In his narration, David sometimes speaks of homosexual men as "fairies" and equates being gay with being feminine. He also feels a need to protect what Jacques refers to as his "immaculate manhood which is your pride and joy" behind a solid wall of

denial (43). We get our first glimpse of Giovanni when David, along with his friend Jacques, meets him in a bar. Jacques is immediately attracted to the young man who makes drinks for the clientele. Giovanni, however, connects with David, much to Jacques' displeasure and David's delight. "I realized that I was quite happy to be talking with him and this realization made me shy" (45). David isn't even fully aware of his own motives in being attracted to the youth who epitomizes the young, attractive gay male, lost in a world without a mentor.

David's fear is that he is homosexual, or bisexual. The label may be more in the mind's eye of the reader. The point is that David fears that he is not heterosexual. He needs so desperately to see himself as masculine. He chauvinistically tells Hella, "I don't see what's so hard about being a woman. At least, not as long as she's got a man" (165). He is dominated by the belief that being a real man can only be equated with heterosexuality. His passions and emotions are caught within a constant tidal wave of ups and downs. One moment his thoughts are crashing against the shore of his longing for his girlfriend Hella, even when she is in Spain contemplating the future of their relationship. The next moment he finds joy, pleasure, and release on the calm and comforting shore of Giovanni's love. It is the ever played-out drama of the closeted gay male within a homophobic society. Here the homophobia is often turned inward.

Giovanni is stuck within the framework of his solitary and unkempt room. The room is small, as claustrophobic as it is untidy. Little light comes in as the windows, always closed, are covered with thick cleaning polish. Giovanni himself exclaims, "where do they take [all of the garbage of the city]? I don't know where they take it but it might very well be my room" (114). This tiny environment keeps him both locked in and away from the prying eyes of a society that offers no healthy role models, no rites-of-passage, no ceremonies or celebrations. His sexuality immobilizes him, limits him, threatens to destroy him within a world of unhappy men ready to devour his youth, objectifying him into obscurity. Guillaume is one of these men, but maybe David is, too. In the dark cor-

ners of the room lie the symbolic vestiges of emotional and psychological rubbish. Giovanni is fearful of noises outside; he is insecure as to why he came here from Italy and unsure about where he is going. He implies that his life was meaningless until he met David. After meeting David, he feels a little more liberated from the confines of his hideaway. He is ready to expand his perception as well as the size and appearance of his room, although he never completes it. The bricks remain scattered, and the old wallpaper hangs, exposed and unchanged, like sexuality revealed but without the emotion of love and trust to allow it to grow. Giovanni never really breaks through to creating a better living space for himself and David, and the half completed work stands as a testimony to the condemnation of an unforgiving world.

David narrates how that room changed him. For a time he lived and loved in that room. For a time he was able to get in touch with himself, and, therefore, able to touch another. Eventually, however, the room begins to enflame David's fear because the truth behind his fear is clearly awakened here. The room represents assorted tastes and touches, physical, as well as those of the heart and of the mind. David relishes these momentarily. Then he worries that Hella might find out. Giovanni wants to hear David speak of what it is he fears would be found out. But David can't even acknowledge the reality behind his fear. Giovanni tries to reason with him, "To find out, to find out, you keep saying, as though we were accomplices in a crime" (107). David states that "people have very dirty words for this situation" (107). Giovanni replies: "If dirty words frighten you, I really do not know how you have managed to live so long....If your countrymen think that privacy is a crime, so much the worse for your country" (107,108).

Again, David fears the prospect of being on the inside (of his sexuality) looking out as the eyes of society (or the mother he has never known, or the father he cannot relate to) point at him. "Now I was in the zoo and they were watching," he states (52). In the company of Giovanni, Jacques, and Guillaume, he senses that "everybody is looking at us and I am beginning to feel like part of a traveling circus" (70). As the frenzy of his guilt evolves he states,

"I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned" (137). When Hella returns to him in Paris he has nothing more to do with the needy Giovanni. Back when Giovanni had told David of his being fired by Guillaume, he plead with David, "Ne me laisse pas tomber" (Don't let me fall), but David does (139). David's response is that "[t]he burden of his salvation seemed to be on me and I could not endure it" (152). The fact is, he is unable to save even himself.

He cannot, however, fool himself. He is unable to commit to any definite plans with Hella. He tries to lose himself in drink and men. When Hella discovers him in a bar with a sailor it becomes, for him, the culmination of the watchful eyes finally cornering him. He surrenders and admits to her (and to himself) that he had been lying, first and foremost to himself. He tells her that at first even he didn't know the truth. He laments, "I hoped to burn out, through Hella, my image of Giovanni and the reality of his touch—I hoped to drive out fire with fire" (161). "I only knew I had to get out of Giovanni's room," he concludes (217). Escape into the fantasy of a perfect world with Hella is now impossible. "Hella. . . one day, when you're happy, try to forgive me," he asks her. She replies with "I don't know anything about happiness anymore. I don't know anything about forgiveness. But if women are supposed to be led by men and there aren't any men to lead them, what happens then?". She leaves him.

Someone might have told her about the liberation of women, but that time, although just around the corner, had not yet been born. Still, there exists a deeper truth waiting to be spoken, waiting for a world to hear it, both then and today. It is that neither the liberation of women nor the liberation of sexual orientation can amount to anything until it begins within. This is the missing piece to the struggle of the characters of Baldwin's story.

After being abandoned by David, Giovanni becomes close to Jacques, hangs out with him, begins to act like him. David notices that Giovanni's mannerisms are beginning to appear effeminate. When this relationship cannot grow beyond the insubstantial, Giovanni returns to Guillaume, hoping for his old position. Why

couldn't Giovanni find liberation? Why did he have to return to a world that made him wish he wasn't alive? Earlier on in their relationship, Giovanni tells David, "I have only just found out that I want to live" (67). Later he says, "If you were not here, this would be the end of Giovanni" (145). Finally he speaks words to David that are as emotional as they are prophetic: "If you cannot love me, I will die. Before you came I wanted to die" (182). David becomes his only escape. When that route is blocked he returns to the familiar. Anyone with even a little knowledge of social psychology understands that a common factor in the experience of being human is the wish to remain with or to return to the familiar. We stick with what we are used to, even if it is an empty dead-end street. We return to what is predictable, even if it blocks our way into self-actualization, even if it leads to psychological, emotional, or even physical death. Giovanni once made the statement that "[m]aybe everything bad that happens to you makes you weaker" (145). For some, the bad experiences of life make one stronger, but not for Giovanni. He had relinquished the possibility of personal strength to David, and David was gone. When Guillaume taunts Giovanni, uses him and laughs at the abuse, Giovanni, in a fit of mad rage, strangles him to death. Maybe, somewhere in his subconscious where only Freud could reach, Giovanni knew that he had nothing more to lose. In a sense, killing Guillaume puts an end to Giovanni's struggle with life. Giovanni is caught, tried, and sentenced to the guillotine.

Toward the end of the novel, Jacques has left David a note in a blue envelope telling him of the date of Giovanni's execution. In David's final narrative his thoughts walk us through what the last moments of Giovanni's life might be like. In the narrative, Giovanni's last walk to his final journey is paralleled by David's own. At this point David talks a lot about "mirrors." Giovanni's last moments mirror what he feels now, that Giovanni's death at the blade of the guillotine may be "a gateway [that] he has sought so long out of this dirty world, this dirty body" (222). David questions further, "I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife" (223). In the end

David tears up the envelope without having opened it. He watches as the tiny pieces are wind blown. The last line of the novel recounts "as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me" (224). Baldwin's tale may appear, on the surface, to be a depressing story lived in a time and through the people of that time, where hope is always out of reach. It need not be.

Baldwin makes no attempt to take the reader by the hand and offer solutions to the complexities that trouble the souls of this novel. It is through David that we visit the questions. It is through his internal dialogue that we witness the battle between shame, self-awareness and self-acceptance. Does David ever reach self-acceptance? The reader with a negative frame of mind might see David's act of tearing up the envelope as a symbol of his rejecting the world of Giovanni's room. Others, more optimistic, will see it as a way of only rejecting what is ugly about the shame that is held within: the shame that causes Jacques to be trapped within the addictive world of the flesh, fearful of intimacy. It is the shame that Hella feels when she finds herself standing on an empty stage, a meaningless world without traditional scripts and roles, the shame that leads Giovanni to murder Guillaume and to pay for it with his life. It is the shame that convinces David to walk away from the dark corners and awakenings, only to discover that "every room I find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni's room" (112).

WORKS CITED

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