

# A fading reflection



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BUSTER**

In James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the protagonist David grapples with his homosexuality, a part of him that he continually denies, and subsequently fails to repress. As David deals with his identity, he looks for and finds himself, his literal image, in mirrors, windows, and other reflective surfaces. This motif is symbolic of David's split life, and his growing self-awareness. One of the clearest, and perhaps most poignant, examples of this motif occurs in the extended metaphor in the first and the last pages of the book, where David gazes into a window at his reflection on the day of Giovanni's execution. These two connected scenes, and his disappearing reflection at dawn, represent the collision of his two selves as his life falls apart, and the ultimate union of the two conflicting versions of David into one broken, but unitary, man.

The first reference to this extended metaphor appears almost immediately. Though David is recounting the story in a flashback, the reader only knows the narrator through what has been said early in the book, and thus this early reflection of David represents the David of the exposition (3). This David is fully immersed in heterosexual culture, complete with a fiancée on her way back from Spain. His reflection is distinct, tall, and "like a face you have seen many times" (3). Baldwin makes no mistake as describing David's reflection as the easily recognizable trope of the handsome American man. This everyman image includes compulsory heterosexuality, and David's reflection being described as one that has been seen many times suggests that this reflection is obligatorily heterosexual as an assumed normal state. This description is also intermingled with the narrator seeing Hella in his mind's eye, his anchor to the heterosexual world. The very fact that his

reflection is clear to him in the reflection of the window shows the reader that there are two distinct images of David present. The one, the compulsorily heterosexual, has gleaming hair and is tall and handsome. The other, the David speaking in hindsight, is drunken and miserable. This true, first person narrator David is also fully aware that the coming day, and the death of his male lover, will be “ the most terrible morning of [his] life” (3), separating him fundamentally from his reflection.

The same scene reconnects at the very end of the novel, but now the reader fully understands the gravity of the situation that had only been alluded to in the exposition; David has irrevocably been discovered as a homosexual man by Hella and his community, and his internalized homophobia resulted in a recklessness that directly contributed to the death of his lover. Now, “ the horizon begins to lighten” and David notes, “ I seem to be fading away before my own eyes” (166). The handsome reflection of his heterosexual façade begins to fade away. If the reflection in the window is the idealized version of his life, and the one that he had tried so hard to live fully, its disappearance in the brightening light is its permanent death. And thus, it only makes sense that David’s disingenuous life should be shattered by the light of the dawn of the morning of Giovanni’s death. Now, David is left only with his true self, one that he claims is “ dull and white and dry” (168) when he catches a glimpse of it in the mirror. With the disappearance of his reflection, his acceptable other self, David must face the extent of his own self-loathing. His internalized homophobia now manifests in his disgust at viewing his own genitals. He is embarrassed, scared and guilty.

And yet, there is something fundamentally optimistic about the dawning of a new day as a symbol in literature. And this moment of union between David and the man he was pretending to be is also a moment of enormous pressure being relieved. David says solemnly, " 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" (169). He has hit rock bottom, but in this fall he has achieved an oneness of self that he had never possessed before in his life. Baldwin makes David pay for his cruelties by giving up his social status, his privilege and his pride, and the punishment is by no means over as David steps into the light of day to get on the train. But this dawn that washed away David's falsities is, amazingly, also the dawn of a new life that, though it will doubtlessly be more painful and ostracized, will also be genuine.