

# The identity crisis in james baldwin's nonfiction and in giovanni's room (1956)



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I encountered a lot of people in Europe. I even encountered myself. - James Baldwin

James Baldwin's writings are most famous for their complexity of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies during 20th century America. His novels and plays portray personal dilemmas, social pressures interfering with the integration of black, gay and bisexual men, and deep internalized issues of these individuals and their quests for acceptance. These characteristics are seen in Baldwin's essay "A Question of Identity" and his novel, *Giovanni's Room*. In these two texts, the main characters face many identity crises in respect to nationality, social status, and sexuality.

In the 1950's, many aspects of society changed as a result of World War II. During the war, men and women, blacks and whites, played equally important roles. When the war ended, people wanted women and black people to go back to their previous positions in society. However, the minorities did not agree with that, and they wanted to work and be as equals again, since everyone was equally important and needed on the battlefield. Therefore, for groups that were discriminated against in the past, World War II was a provocative model for future change. As a result, many social norms changed. For example, the state created various job opportunities, which were seen as "women's work." These jobs were available for nurses, midwives, cleaners and clerical staff. Additionally, during this period, banking, textile and light industries also expanded and provided women with opportunities in administrative, secretarial and assembly work. However, jobs were still strictly segregated by gender, and repetitive routine work was considered women's work.

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Baldwin's collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, tells the reader about the social environment in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement. Through his work, the conditions of being an African American living in a society with racial discrimination are told firsthand. In one of his essays included in the book, "A Question of Identity," he talks about the search for the various ways that Americans, in the American student groups in Paris, relate to Europeans and their culture. He analyzes soldiers living in Paris who are studying at the universities under the G. I. Bill, which was offered to them after the war. Baldwin questions why some soldiers are successful in adapting their lives to France, and why some are not. For example, Baldwin states, "This is the reason, perhaps, that Paris for so long fails to make a mark on him; and may also be why, when the tension between the real and the imagined can no longer be supported, so many people undergo a species of breakdown, or take the first boat home" (130). Through this quote, Baldwin says that soldiers have to deal with the conflict between reality and fantasy. Some soldiers have a theoretical and ideal concept of Paris, no real knowledge of the history of France or its people, and no understanding of the language. And thus, when reality finally hits them, they end up buying their tickets to go back home. On the other hand, the successful soldier takes the time to study the history and culture of France, and might even end up living with a French family. Nevertheless, even this soldier could encounter problems because French people may also have an idea of Americans. Overall, Baldwin suggests to the reader that, when living in Paris; we should use the "vantage point of Europe" to discover "[our] own country."

Something similar can be seen happening within the concept of identity in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. The America that is shown in the book is one that is wrapped up in David and Giovanni's relationship. For example, David sees America as the place of his youth, the place of the people he loves and understands. However, he would have never left America if he thought that his identity was not something else as well, or that he was not entirely restricted to his American identity. An example is when Giovanni coyly refers to David's nationality, David says, "I resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called not an American because it seemed to make me nothing" (89). Being American is the identity that David tries to flee from; nonetheless, it is an identity that defines him. However, we all know too well that he cannot always run from his problems, as they will all catch up to him one day. Another main identity crisis in *Giovanni's Room* is David's struggle with his sexuality. He is either gay or bisexual, a fact that terrifies and defines him throughout the novel. He believes he must only be attracted to women because he is a man. However, David is also attracted to men; therefore, he believes that he cannot be the ideal, socially accepted man.

David makes an effort to have it both ways by keeping his fiancée, Hella, and his boyfriend, Giovanni; but, in the end, he ends up losing them both. David eventually admits to Hella that his feelings for her are empty and unromantic, which leads her to return to America, and Giovanni is ultimately guillotined. David's struggle is shown during his final fight with Giovanni.

David says in a moment of rage: What kind of life can we have in this room?-

this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? All this love you talk about – isn't it just that you want to be made to feel strong? You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through the door and lie with you at night and be your little girl. That's what you want. That's what you mean and that's all you mean when you say you love me. (142) Through this quote, the audience can clearly see David's denial of his sexuality. Because of this, he lashes out at Giovanni, and they have a huge fight. David is afraid that if he accepts who he truly is, he will lose all his masculinity and will have to fit into gay stereotypes. Additionally, society looks down upon gay people, so he would face a lot of criticism from outsiders. As a result, he would never be happy with Giovanni, feel free to be himself, or have a successful future. He would always have to put up a front just to protect himself and the people that he loves. This is further shown when Hella says that " Americans should never come to Europe [because]... they never can be happy again. What's the good of an American who isn't happy? Happiness was all [they] had (165)." Hella's statement is particularly striking because Americans believe that it is their right to " life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Therefore, David values his happiness over two of the most important people in his life.

" A Question of Identity" and Giovanni's Room are both powerful texts that portray the challenges many second-class citizens faced during that period. Baldwin effectively included themes of the identity crisis to further the

meaning behind these pieces in order to paint a compelling picture of how complicated it can actually be to accept our own humanity.

## **Works Cited**

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