

"giovanni's room" by james baldwin

Literature



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In James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*, location, spaces, and rooms play pivotal roles in the nuance of the novel. Sometimes subtle and sometimes more obvious, spaces act as symbols and checkpoints for characters as they navigate through society after World War II. Baldwin allows these characters to feed off the spaces in which the novel takes place in, almost as if the rooms and spaces are a part of the characters at specific instances in the novel. The very fact that Baldwin titled the novel *Giovanni's Room* focalizes the attention to a single space: Giovanni's room. The audience soon finds out that this room is arguably the most important space in the novel. Giovanni's room is depicted with such traits usually associated with a jail cell. This association becomes a symbol of Giovanni's chaotic and messy life, holding the bond between Giovanni and David, and David's feelings towards homosexuality. His room is also compared to a tomb, which is a comparison Baldwin utilizes a lot in a string of variations on the use of spaces like the idea of being "under" or in the "bottom." These different images of Giovanni's room exemplify the negative feelings and uneasiness surrounding homosexuality, and even the loss of masculinity as produced by society. At the time this novel was written, there was a fear of a loss of masculinity or a sense of what was considered normal for a long time, whether that be due to homosexuality, or the rise of communism in Eastern Europe after the war. These different portrayals of Giovanni's room are dirty, suffocating, and restricting; Baldwin is showing the reader that homosexuality can be understood from all these adjectives, detrimental as they are. The novel reflects internal and external conflict created upon the common belief in society that homosexuality is unnatural and wrong. This causes homosexual men and people who are not conforming to norms to turn societal negativity

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into self-hatred and the deliberate burying of one's true-self and feelings. Yet, people cannot truly bury things for too long as visible within David.

One of the comparisons made for Giovanni's room is the parallel created linking his room to his jail cell in later in the book. When Giovanni is in jail, David wonders about the jail cell Giovanni is in and says, " I wonder about the size of Giovanni's cell. I wonder if it is bigger than his room" (113). David physically makes a comparison between the size of the prison cell and the size of Giovanni's room, which begins to emphasize the parallel between Giovanni's living space for most of the novel and the place he is being contained. Giovanni's constancy in his room, as well as in the jail cell, is further demonstrated when David is talking about the room; " I'm talking about that room, that hideous room. Why have you buried yourself there so long?" (117). This is another example in which Baldwin plays on the idea of utilizing spaces and allowing characters to use them when not wanting to deal with feelings such as shame or anxiety or even their truths, as they would rather push these feelings down figuratively, or as in the quote, bury them. David is directly comparing Giovanni's room to a tomb, which, like a cell, contains people. David is saying that Giovanni has put himself in that room and has been contained ever since. Giovanni keeps himself in that room because he has nowhere else to go; it is his life in Paris. And much like David's escape to France, Giovanni made a similar choice when deciding to leave Italy, but he does not see himself having the ability to choose his paths, as indicated in the bar scene when David and Giovanni first meet. In this scene, they discuss the difference between Americans, Italians, and French people, and Giovanni makes a point of explaining how it is almost

funny that Americans feel like they have freedom to choose anything they want even though they clearly do not.

The comparison between a jail cell and Giovanni's room also plays on the idea that a cell is not only a place of containment, but where one is meant to suffer for a crime they committed. When David compares the cell to Giovanni's room, he is also associating it as a place where they are both punished. David attributes the chaos of Giovanni's room as "not a matter of habit or circumstance or temperament; it was a matter of punishment and grief" (87). David is commenting on the condition of Giovanni's room and blatantly describing it as a reflection of Giovanni's life in a single space. Everything in the room that inhabits the life of Giovanni is closing in on him, creating a sense of suffocation. Giovanni's room is a punishment, as it makes him unable to move, which is a reflection of his stagnancy.. David also compares Giovanni's room to a closet, calling it, "a closet of a room" (142). The way David describes Giovanni's room itself, it seems to almost behave like a storage space for his life, where things are also buried and not exactly dealt with- another shadowing of a prison cell, another play on the idea of imagery surrounding spaces and its ability to conceal things. Interestingly, the idea of someone concealing their sexuality is commonly referred to as being "stuck in the closet" and as David seems to be criticizing Giovanni and the composition of his room, David is also utilizing the Giovanni's space as a place to conceal his true sexuality and human desire in general.

Along with the room being a symbol of Giovanni's life, it is also the symbol of the relationship that David has with Giovanni. The idea of "being stuck in the closet" and burying one's sexuality is also emphasized in the beginning

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of the novel. David is locked in the room with Giovanni and it becomes the place that holds their relationship because all their affection occurs behind that locked door. “ He locked the door behind us, and then for a moment, in the gloom, we simply stared at each other- with dismay, with relief...” (64). The first time that David is in the room, they make love, and this immediately personifies Giovanni's room as being a place for their relationship; the only place where David will accept that he is with a man because it is behind a locked door. Behind a locked door, David is safe to be homosexual because no one else can find out, but outside David cannot associate with Giovanni because of how David sees homosexuality. Whenever David leaves the room he disconnects himself with Giovanni. David leaves Giovanni at the bar to work and then goes about on his own; “ then I, alone, relieved to be alone, perhaps went to a movie, or walked, or returned home and read, or sat in a park and read, or sat on a cafe terrace, or talked to people, or wrote letters” (83). David has his life outside of Giovanni, outside of Giovanni's room, and outside of homosexuality. David leaves his homosexuality in Giovanni's room; he also leaves the love he has for Giovanni in his room.

Inside of the room, David associates himself with Giovanni as a partner, being affected by the atmosphere of the room, a personification of their relationship. In describing Giovanni's room, David mentions some wallpaper that will never be removed, “ the wall facing it was destined never to be uncovered, and on this wall a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses” (86). This wall hanging can be understood as a symbol of heterosexual life. The picture of

the couple on the wall is a constant reminder to Giovanni the life he had in Italy with his wife, and the life that he wants with David in his room. It also serves to remind David of the societal expectation he is trying to escape, but also trying to conform to at the same time. Later in the novel, David mentions how he is thought of as Giovanni's little girl, because he cleans up the room and doesn't work. This can parallel with the couple on the wall; David is the woman in the hoop skirt, Giovanni's woman, who picks up after him in his life-filled room. David invented, in himself, the persona as the woman in the hoop skirt that he thought Giovanni wanted him to have. David became the housewife, " I threw out the paper, the bottles, the fantastic accumulation of trash; I examined the contents of the innumerable boxes and suitcases and disposed of them" (88). David's own insecurities begins to threaten himself and his idea of masculinity. He begins to see how this may permeate outside of the space that is Giovanni's room, where he contained his sexuality and relationship with Giovanni. Giovanni wants to keep David in the room, so that David is always with him, so that he will always be a part of his life, which is what the room holds. If David stays in the room, he will be forever a part of Giovanni's life because he will become another one of Giovanni's cluttered possessions contained in that room. When Giovanni started to put in a bookcase and chipped at the walls and the brick underneath, David says " in a way he was doing it for me, to prove his love for me. He wanted me to stay in the room with him. Perhaps he was trying, with his own strength, to push back the encroaching walls, without, however, having the walls fall down" (115). Giovanni wants David to stay with him, so he tries to push the walls out and make the room fit for two, make it not so

restricting so that it can hold David's life too; but also not have the room fall apart and have David escape.

Giovanni knows that their relationship is a sham, something that only exists in his room, because he says " sometimes you were here all day long and you read or you opened the window or you cooked something- and I watched you- and you never said anything- and you looked at me with such eyes, as though you did not see me. All day, while I worked, to make this room for you" (131). David exists as the character Giovanni needs when he is in the room, but always dreams of something else. David enacts his other life when he is away from Giovanni and reading in the park or seeing a movie outside of the room. Giovanni tries to make the room so that David will stay and be in his life. David has other ideas for himself- he wants to leave the room, leave his relationship with Giovanni, " I want to get out of this room, I want to get away from you, I want to end this terrible scene" (141). The terrible scene of their relationship can only end if David leaves Giovanni's room, where their relationship is. The room is so connected with their relationship that David can only get away from Giovanni if he leaves Giovanni's room. David hates that with Giovanni, in his room, he is stripped of his masculinity, and that Giovanni wants to be the breadwinner and stereotypical male. David says " you want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you want me to stay here and wash dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room..." (142). The two of them are playing out the picture on the wall, the wallpaper that is never to be taken down, and more importantly, the archetypal idea of the heterosexual couple

that lives in Giovanni's room with them. David is the woman in the hoop skirt; Giovanni is the man in knee breeches, both framed by roses.

David closes his homosexuality in Giovanni's closet of a room, and outside of the room he is not homosexual or with Giovanni. David associates their relationship with the room and it becomes his definition of homosexuality. Giovanni's room is dirty, cluttered, restricting and dark. Giovanni tells David that his room is in disarray when they first meet, " you could certainly tell that there was no maid if you ever saw my room" (46). In saying this, Giovanni is both inviting David to his room and telling him that his life, the room, homosexuality, is a mess. When David first wakes up in Giovanni's room, he sees that, overall, the room is dirty and messy, but there are also diamonds in the rough. Like homosexuality, and any relationship, there are good parts among the bad ones. When observing the physical space of Giovanni's room, there are tall piles in his room, a violin, sheet music, and wine. The violin and the sheet music are pretty, and the wine sweet, which are nice in a room, but when the violin case is warped and cracked and the wine is seeping into the floor and hanging sickly in the air, these things are no longer a vision of beauty. David identifies Giovanni's room with homosexuality because with all of the clutter, the room has " indefinable sex in its center" (88). The center of the room, the bed, is where their sex exists; the rest of the room is just Giovanni's clutter, which has nothing to do with sex, but surrounds it constantly. Homosexuality is dirty, ugly, and suffocating according to David, because he associates it with Giovanni's dirty, ugly and suffocating room that surrounds them.

Throughout the novel, Giovanni's room is repeatedly linked with water. The room is described as underwater; this gives the illusion that the room is unbearably suffocating. David says, " life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there" (85). Underwater, everything is hindered, and when you stay too long without saving yourself, one dies. David felt that he would deteriorate, like Giovanni, amidst the clutter and dirt in the sweet wine tinged air. David's " sea change" is a complete change; he became a different person in that room, living up to the girl that Giovanni had wished he had. The room, and water, is treacherous. David talks about the room being a punishment for Giovanni, "...I knew it because I wanted to live. And I stared at the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all of one's forces which occurs when gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger..." (87). David feels the room is an unsafe place, where there is mortal danger. The room is underwater, dangerous, and David continuously feels the pressure building on him, " I could not say anything. I felt that the walls of the room were closing in on me" (105). When the conditions of David and Giovanni's relationship worsen and Giovanni loses his job; the walls of the room close on David and the water pressure increases, and he has trouble surviving. David is constantly being crushed in the immense pressure, and as the novel progresses, it gets worse. " I felt, then, that Giovanni was dragging me with him to the bottom of the sea" (104), once again a reference to water when conditions become dangerous. At the bottom of the sea, the pressure is too high that any human dragged down would meet their demise.

From the start of the novel, it is already obvious that one of David's concerns in confronting his identity and sexuality is his fear to lose his masculinity.

When he looks around at the effeminate gay men in the bar, he thinks " I always find it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody, for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of them" (27). David has a hate for these gay men who are feminine; he seems to think they are not man or woman, and certainly not masculine in his definition. David fights with his own homosexuality as he resents these stereotypical ideas of homosexual men. The novel is riddled with the common societal view of homosexuality being unnatural and wrong, and David internalizes this view into self-hatred. David was once in Guillaume's bar and " once very drunk, I had been accused of causing a minor sensation by flirting with a soldier. My memory of that night was, happily, very dim, and I took the attitude that no matter how drunk I may have been, I could not possibly have done such a thing" (27). David sees homosexuality as something to be ashamed of, and when he has any encounter with his own homosexuality, he would rather deceive himself.

Baldwin plays on the use of spaces and the aspects of space to make a statement about the perception of one's identity and choice in society. David believes he can run away from the things that bother him or cause conflict within him. This is the reason he flees the United States to Paris, but he soon finds out the he cannot. David tries to bury his feelings, desires, shames, and anxieties concerning his future, but also learns that they find a way to come out. He cannot escape because even the spaces surrounding him reflect the

things he is trying to run away from and start to close in on him. These physical, external places become reflective of the internal spaces within David or even Giovanni. Everywhere he turns, he is reminded of feelings he tries to escape from. Feelings that make him who he is. Baldwin seems to be highlighting the inevitability of having to deal with one's identity, that one cannot truly escape what is inside them. This reminds me of how Americans in general began dealing with things after the war and a desire to keep appearances up. Everyone wanted to look happy, normal, and as if they were contributing to society in a positive way. They buried their problems in small places that would eventually explode.