

A Critical Study on *Go Tell It on The Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*

Novels by James Baldwin

^{1*}T Devapriya (M19BE907)

M.Phil Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts & Science,
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research (BIHER),
Chennai-73, India.

^{2*}Dr.J.Kastrokumar

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts & Science,
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research (BIHER),
Chennai-73, India

Address for Correspondence

^{1*}T Devapriya (M19BE907)

M.Phil Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts & Science,
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research (BIHER),
Chennai-73, India.

^{2*}Dr.J.Kastrokumar

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts & Science,
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research (BIHER),
Chennai-73, India

Abstract:

In comparing *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* it seems very interesting to me to notice Baldwin's various moves. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* deals exclusively with Afro-Americans in the very limited setting of the home and the storefront church in Harlem, and the protagonist is very young. The novel focuses primarily on issues concerned with the history and life of Afro-Americans in Harlem. Homosexuality is only an underlying theme in the novel.

Keywords: James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the mountain*, African, American, black and white, Michael Brown, Baltimore, police, “Black Lives Matter,” Baldwin’s legacy, rioting, looters,

Research Paper

Introduction:

In Giovanni's Room the action is located in Europe, the so-called Old World, and more specifically, in France. The heroes are all Caucasians and the setting is mainly in gay bars and Giovanni's room. The first-person narrator is older than John in *Go Tell it On the Mountain* indicating that he should be fully aware of his sexual desires, in contrast to the sexual confusion that is usual in the teenage period in which homosexuality, according to Sigmund Freud, is "normally" a temporary and transitional stage.

From these opposing features of the two novels I deduce that in Giovanni's Room Baldwin wanted to distance himself completely from the American scene and the issue of race and deal with homosexuality as a separate issue. He was preparing to challenge the artificiality of constructs like masculinity, sexuality, and race which he accomplishes in his subsequent novels. However, I would argue, to successfully combine black and white, straight and gay, he had to work his way up to that point and deal with these issues separately in order to position himself and bring his audience to the point where it could handle both subject matters combined.

Moreover, Baldwin had always resisted being considered a writer who only writes for a certain audience -- whether exclusively black or homosexual. He told Richard Goldstein in 1984 that when he turned *Giovanni's Room* in, his publisher, Alfred Knopf, refused to publish the book as a favor to Baldwin.

Baldwin was advised to remember that he was a young black writer writing for a specific audience, and that he ought not to alienate that readership. Baldwin then travelled to England, where he published it. (177).

Stephen Adams in his book, *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*, develops an interesting idea in his comparison of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*. He considers both novels as an exploration of the extent to which inner drives can be contained within available, approved models of identity. John Grimes attempts to express his socially unacceptable thoughts within the sanctuary of the church. David in *Giovanni's Room* In a futile attempt to quell his gay longings, he finds refuge in traditional, external trappings of manhood. In order to fit into the conformist plan, both characters use self-betrayal processes and forfeit personal fulfilment. (Adams 37).

Moreover, Baldwin was very courageous in writing a homosexual novel during the homophobic era of the Cold War years and the period of violent racism which culminated in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. By then he had already gained a wide national and international reputation as a racial spokesman for the Afro-Americans. Throughout his entire life

Research Paper

he saw the need to fight against the oppression of the Afro- American, which he did in his many essays and speeches. Yet, especially during the Civil Rights period, many people wanted to see action and militancy, and I assume that

Baldwin as a homosexual could easily undermine his power as a fighter for racial equality for both, blacks and whites, because of his so-called effeminacy. This is why, I suppose, not merely for the purpose of entertaining and educating a homosexual as well as a heterosexual audience, but also in order to protect himself to be able to fulfill his mission both as a racial spokesman and as a writer, Baldwin hesitantly invoked homosexuality in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or cast a tragic light upon it in *Giovanni's Room* Emmanuel Nelson displays a similar opinion in his article, “The Novels of James Baldwin.” He says that the publication of a novel like *Giovanni's Room* that handled with dignity and romantic intensity the sexual love between men in the critical sociopolitical climate of America in the mid-fifties was a single act of “personal and literary rebellion” (13).

An additional constraint on Baldwin was his close bond to his family, whom he did not want to hurt, embarrass, or disappoint. However, always very critical about the American society, Baldwin felt that he had to write *Giovanni's Room*. David Leeming, who is Baldwin's most recent biographer, says that Baldwin tried to explicate to his mother the reality of a writer's mission. In a letter to her he explains that he was born to translate the painful human experience into art (qtd. in Leeming: 115). Thus, in being honest about himself and by displaying his anguish and loneliness through his fictional characters, he created the means which allowed him to carry his criticism of American society into his fiction. Homosexuals were in Baldwin's opinion just the latest example of America's apparent need to repress differences in the name of morality. In a speech on the topic, “Race, Racism, and the Gay Community” (1982), he said that he considers gays as just one more group of prisoners in a society that was not aware that it was itself an emotional and spiritual prison (qtd. in Leeming: 359). He displayed this insight almost thirty years earlier in *Giovanni's Room* through the character of Giovanni who says to David, the typical average American: “You love your purity...You want to be clean ...You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love.

Giovanni's Room

James Baldwin said in an 1984 interview he gave to Richard Goldstein about the United States that he saw nothing in American life to aspire to: “It's all so very false. So shallow, so plastic, so morally and ethically corrupt” (205). These are precisely the problems he tackles in *Giovanni's Room*. Through *Giovanni's Room* James Baldwin wanted to convey something

Research Paper

about the American loneliness growing out of the urge to be accepted in this society. The American protagonist, David, in his battle to conform to American mores, though a constant self-denial and also betrayal of his environment in order to not be an outcast, comes to face loneliness because he loses in this process parental love, friends, and lovers. Moreover, as Claude J. Summers says, *Giovanni's Room* tackles the inability of Americans to face facts and express emotions. For that Baldwin needed to use the most ordinary type of American as a protagonist -- the white American Protestant. Baldwin describes this novel himself as short and tragic; an American boy finds something and loses it, and in the acceptance of the loss the protagonist takes on heroic dimensions for the author.

The novel opens with the young, blond American, David, standing at a window in a house in Southern France. On this “most terrible morning of [his] life” (7) he contemplates, in a series of flashbacks, the events which eventually led to the execution of his Italian lover, Giovanni, on that morning. David grew up with his father and his father's sister, aunt Ellen, after his mother's death when he was five. His father drank a lot and was proud of being a ‘stud’ in that he had many affairs with women and wanted David to become like him. He and his sister had many flights over the question of David's up-bringing. David had a best friend, Joey, in his teenage years; however, their friendship was ended by David after they had a sexual encounter. David leaves America as a young man in order to escape his past and to find out about himself. In Paris, he intentionally moves in homosexual circles just to prove to himself that he does not belong there.

Through Jacques, an old rich homosexual who likes David and often takes care of his expenses, hoping that this relation might lead to something more, David is introduced to the new barman, Giovanni. David and Giovanni immediately detect their mutual attraction and a relationship develops between them.

Giovanni is Italian and had just shortly before David's arrival in Paris started to work in Guillaume's bar. He had been married and lived as a farmer in an Italian village. After his wife gave birth to a dead baby, Giovanni cursed his religion and turned his back on his village to live in Paris. Very desperate, he is filled with new hope for a happy life at David's appearance.

David never told Giovanni that he has an American girlfriend, Hella Lincoln, who went to Spain for a while to think over her relationship to David. When she returns to Paris, Hella and David decide to marry and David leaves Giovanni. This decision destroys Giovanni who

Research Paper

soon afterwards also loses his job at Guillaume's bar because of a trivial incidence. Guillaume, although he promises to give Giovanni his job back if he has sex with him, does not keep his word but threatens to humiliate Giovanni in telling everybody about it. Giovanni in his anger and humiliation kills Guillaume and is soon after caught and sentenced to death. When Hella finds out about David's homosexuality, she breaks the engagement and flees to America.

In my attempt to adhere to the two stages of the coming-out process as distinguished by Diana Fuss, *Giovanni's Room* reflects in my view still the first part of this process: the individual, trying to accept his homosexuality, before he has learned how to integrate his sexuality in his life. This process, in comparison to Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is articulated in a much franker manner, including an accurate and unsensationalized portrayal of gay subcultures and a detailed account of the coming-out experience. It mirrors a recognition of the profound effects of stigmatization on the individual. As Baldwin tries to show, the difficulties of the coming-out process have much less to do with the acceptance of homosexual desire than with adjusting to the social stigma attached to it. In this way, Baldwin fulfilled his promise of being "on my way" which ended the first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* his decision to deal frankly with homosexuality proves his willingness to face honestly his own "sexual dilemma." Yet, the principally negative ending of *Giovanni's Room* implies to me that he has not yet come to a healing acceptance of homosexuality in his fiction; he is not yet ready to envision the legitimacy of a homosexual relationship. Moreover, although Baldwin exhibits in *Giovanni's Room* his belief in the genuineness of homosexuality, he displays again his agreement with the dominant medical Freudian explanation of homosexuality with regard to the parent - son relationship.

It seems to me that Baldwin tries to explain David's homosexuality as the outcome of an abnormal parental relationship. First, he adheres to the belief in domineering mothers. David lost his mother when he was five. His father and his father's sister, aunt Ellen, eventually raise David, but they were constantly fighting in this house in which his mother's photograph on the mantelpiece "proved how her spirit *dominated* the air and *controlled* us all" (18; italics mine). He continued to have nightmares about her death about which he said that they "had this unsettling effect on my imagination" (17), hinting in its ambivalence that it could be taken as an explanation for David's subsequently 'abnormal' development.

Bryan Washington also argues along these lines in *The Politics of exile*, yet extends his illustration to all females and not just the mother figure. He explains that David as a misogynist

Research Paper

represents the 1950's Baldwin acknowledges the at that time popular theory that homosexuals either loved their mothers too much, or in their inability to be like their mothers, grew to loathe them and, consequently, all women. In corroboration, he cites the description of Aunt Ellen as "and banging in the light" (19).

I think it would also be interesting to draw an analogy between America, the mother country, and its homosexual sons, with David as the exemplar. Baldwin powerfully conveys that David's anxieties are not simply born out of his fear of being an outcast within the heterosexual majority, but are fed by his own witnessing of "a fairy who was later court-martialed out" (31) of the Army. David's feelings and indecisiveness are thus very strongly informed by his dominating mother country where, as he tells Giovanni, homosexuality "is a crime...I grew up *there*" (107; Baldwin's italics).

David's father, on the other hand, is the weak and absent father whose attention David so desperately longed for as a child (18). David's father, who is the only one who has some authority over David, is often drunk. He instills in his son the idea about the linkage between manliness and sexual performance, not wanting his son to become "a Sunday school teacher" (24), which makes David despise him from that time on; yet, David admits that he does not know why. I think the notion is underlying that David can not and will never be able to identify with his father in the sexual realm or become a "man" in the way his father defines a man. Not able to aspire to his father's ideals, the adolescent homosexual David rejects his father and "has always since then been in full flight from him" (25). The author's belief that a problematic father-son relationship triggers the homosexuality of the growing-up child is also underscored through David's first-person narrative voice, explaining his father's inability to comprehend the difficulties of their connection. In this way, the developing child's sexual orientation is placed into the father's hand who, if he is a weakling⁴ in the Freudian view because he does not have any authority over David, has to be blamed for his son's abnormality.

Moreover, *Giovanni's Room* exposes us to the problematic issue of the family and the general perception of the homosexual as a threat to it. Through the uncertain, torn, and guilty character of the protagonist, David, but also through Giovanni, James Baldwin displays the most anti-homosexual prejudice that gay society is irreconcilable with "family life." Anita Bryant in her subtitled autobiography, rigidly declares that "male and female are programmed to mate with the opposite sex. This is the story of two and a half billion years of civilization, and any society that hopes to survive will have to recognize this." This is why, in her opinion,

Research Paper

homosexuality militates against the family. The choice of the homosexual is dire, according to her. He might choose between a lover “and with him chaos, anarchy, the end of civilization, or raising a family and preserving the universe from destruction” (qtd. in Bergman. *Gaiety Transfigured*: 188). In my opinion, Baldwin displayed the same belief almost twenty years earlier in *Giovanni's Room*

Baldwin's perception of the incongruity between a domestic life and a homosexual relationship is reflected in the novel twice. First we learn that Giovanni had a “normal” life with a loving wife in a little Italian village, and he recounts that he “was not unhappy then and [he] was not lonely” (183). However, after their baby was born dead, “gray and twisted” (185), Giovanni left everything behind and came to Paris. He considers Paris as God's punishment for “all [his] sins and for spitting on His holy son” (185), and he is sure that he will die there. I assume that Giovanni as Italian is Catholic, and the Catholic church did not sanction homosexuality. Giovanni attempted to obey the religious rules; yet he loses his faith in God after the tragic happenings. However, it is important to notice that Giovanni, as Italian/ European, once he had freed himself from his religious bonds is less repressed because his Mediterranean temperament with its frankness, warmth, and uninhibited desires takes over. Giovanni is the representative of the Italians who are supposed to be “too fluid, too volatile, [and to] have no sense of measure” (50). This is why he sees David's arrival in Paris as a motivation to continue with his life because his temperament does not make him, as he says, like “other people [who] measure all the things before they permit themselves any act whatever” (51).

Again, I think, Baldwin adapted to societal assumptions by showing the destruction of Giovanni's family. Baldwin wanted to suggest that the still-born baby was a punishment because Giovanni, despite his homosexuality, attempted to lead a “normal” family life, but as perceived by church and society, must bring about the destruction of the family as a homosexual. The baby's death is an affirmation that who he is and what he does goes against nature. Bryan Washington suggests, on the other hand, that the still-born baby indicates Giovanni's successful progression because he was able to throw off the yoke of convention and move on (78). Yet, I think this progression took place only forcibly and would not have happened but for the child-death. Forced to recognize that homosexuals cannot have a conventional family life, Giovanni finally follows his predetermined way.

Yet, he feels that instead of achieving this web of safety, he had only come to Paris to be destroyed and with him all his dreams of a family. In this way, *Giovanni's Room* does not

Research Paper

give any hope for homosexual family units.

However, I fully agree with Alan Sinfield's statement in *Cultural Politics*. - Queer Re n , and I will try to attempt a study of these implications in my readings, that the goal of literary analysis is not to track down gay characters, but to see what intrameal sex enabled and disabled. Sinfield stresses that the importance does not lie in who did what with whom, but what was perceived as being done, and the anxieties that informed such perceptions (19).

An affirmation of Sinfield's argument can be found in the character of Jacques who is like a mentor to David in *Giovanni's Room*. He is an old homosexual. representing the epitome of the fate of one who tried to deny his sexual self, and he informs David about the importance of these perceptions. If Jacques' life is shameful, then it is partly because of those who like David are too ashamed to love. For it is only love that matters and nothing else, says Jacques, in this way demonstrating the message of all of Baldwin's fiction.

David has from the beginning of his sexual awakening been in a constant battle between his sentiments and his deeds. One example is the first sexual act with a male in David's life, which occurs during his adolescence. David and his teenage friend, Joey, grew very fond of each other during one summer and during an idyllic weekend spent on the beach, they had sex at Joey's house. We are told through the narrative voice of David that he felt intense joy thinking . However. David awakens the next morning painfully aware that he has to end this friendship. But he does not tell Joey about his cowardly decision, knowing that the slightest protest on his friend's part would weaken him and overthrow his resolution. In this manner the reader is informed about the genuineness of David's feeling; yet, "It was borne in on [him]: *But Joey is a boy*" (15; Baldwin's italics). All that he has heard about homosexuality, "black, full of rumor, suggestion of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words" (15), determines David's terror, shame, and fear that he will lose his manhood, a reflection of how he had internalized society's views of homosexual love.

Moreover, Baldwin sharpens the contrast between personal emotions and social moral 'prescriptions' through the presentation of the genuineness of homosexual desire. Baldwin manages this in a skillfully artistic manner, agreeing with what Bergman writes about the nature of the sexual experience for gay men. Thus, while Baldwin depicts the night with Joey in a very emotional and erotic style, the reader is told of the "mechanical responsibility" David felt in making love to Hella (9) or his revulsion during the "grisly act of love" (133) with Sue, which brought him to the consciousness that what he had been afraid of "had nothing to do with [his]

Research Paper

body” (133). He is able to sexually perform with either gender, but real satisfaction is only provided to him by men.

Giovanni's Room repeatedly reflects the sense of otherness and alienation which is characteristic of male homosexual discourse as described by David Bergman. Thus, the placing of the novel in France in itself suggests alienation from the American scene. This removal is closely related to Baldwin's years, spent as an expatriate, in particular, in France and Turkey searching for his identity. This is also the reason his protagonist decides to leave for France: “[A]s we say in America, I wanted to find myself” (31).

With this move, in my opinion, Baldwin wanted to demonstrate that the rigid American social mores did not leave sufficient space for people to break free from the boundaries of social acceptance in the process of recognizing their identity.

James Baldwin was familiar with Sigmund Freud and the willful and easy reception of his psychoanalytic theories in America.¹⁵ This is why I think he could not situate a novel such as *Giovanni's Room* in America and gain the same effect or convey the same message at a time when psychoanalysis was so popular. The French setting allowed him to create believable characters who protested against the so-called plasticity of the soul and the tendency to conformism and also gave him the room to criticize America and thus the means to “call society into question.” His American protagonist was faced with an environment more outgoing and self-affirming than himself; an environment which was able to challenge his avoidance of self-questioning that was the logical consequence of the principle of conformity. Through his clever technique of removing the plot from the American scene, Baldwin found it possible to draw a believable, detailed account of the coming-out experience because it did not happen in the tight American surrounding but in France, which has been built upon the sophisticated culture, history, and traditions which endow the French with a much keener sense of stability and security. A direct affirmation for this line of reasoning can be found in a dialogue in the text between Giovanni and David:

Stephen Adams in his analysis of *Giovanni's Room* discovered another interesting connection for the placement of the setting in France. Baldwin observed in his essay, “A Question of Identity” (1954), that many young Americans who were drawn to the bohemian life in Paris, soon after losing their heads and morals and having love affairs began “to long for the prison of home - home then becoming the place where questions are not asked “(*The Price of the Ticket* 95). Adams argues that David fits into this pattern, attempting to preserve his ‘innocence’ at all

Research Paper

costs, a quality Baldwin associates specifically with white Americans. Adams found proof for that in Baldwin's essay "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy" (1961) in which he argues:

Thus, Adams considers David's step of going to Paris "to find himself" as a means to discover an assurance of his innocence (38). Adams says that David flirts with the gay underworld to persuade himself that his 'home' is not there. The attempt, however, fails when he meets and falls in love with Giovanni.

Most interestingly, Baldwin, who considered Henry James as one of his spiritual fathers, employed in *Giovanni's Room* the genre which was perfected by Henry James, where the American innocent was put to the test of experience in the Old World (Adams 38).

When Hella's and David's bohemian lifestyle raises "threatening" questions with regard to conventional man- and womanhood, Adams explains, they both wanted to seek refuge in conventions, looking backwards to America to restore some sense of order and security in their lives. This is the reason, David admits, that he asked Hella to marry him.

Remembering the "peculiar innocence and confidence" (9) of their nights, he wanted to "give [himself] something to be moored to" (10) because "nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom" (10).

I consider alcohol as a tool in James Baldwin's novels that serves to loosen these restrictive conditions by putting the characters' minds at ease under its influence and thus making actions possible because of a provisional liberation of the spirit. Apart from *Go Tell it On the Mountain* one can observe that bars and alcohol play consistently an important role in Baldwin's fiction. Throughout the entire plot of *Giovanni's Room* there is a great deal of drinking noticeable. Bryan R. Washington in *The Politics of Exile* explains that the highly visible abuse of alcohol implies a self-loathing and suggests a controlling need to numb the senses and the mind (130). This becomes visible throughout the novel where alcohol is involved in almost every conversation and precedes every sexual act. It is for David, the distressed protagonist, a means to overcome his anxiety or discomfort and thus he often "felt that [he] had better get drunk" (57). The alcohol also prompts him to unconsciously reveal his true sexual orientation. One example is that he was seen flirting with a soldier in a bar in his drunkenness, although he later denies it.

Lilly explains that gay writers often created handsome characters as another means to accommodate the process of initiating or simply justifying a male - male relationship because if the protagonists were ordinary-looking, the question of whether or not they had

Research Paper

appealing personalities would obstruct the flow of imagination. (*Lesbian and Gay Writing* 173). Baldwin conforms to that scheme by constructing a physically very attractive and well-built, “insolent and dark and leonine” Giovanni who immediately allures David, and David himself is also very handsome, as the reader is informed. The immediate mutual attraction between David and Giovanni is thus above all a result of their physicality and eases the beginning of a relationship, which David, in particular, in his tortured and uncertain state of mind, would otherwise surely not have started.

Consistently throughout the text the reader is informed that David truly desired Giovanni, that he wanted to stay forever with him in that room, and that “[he does] not think that [he] will ever love anyone like that again” (148). Giovanni is presented as the living example that homosexuality is not in itself “dirty”. Giovanni's pride and joy, the genuineness of his feelings, are written on his face when he introduces David to a friend; “Something is burning in his eyes and it lights up all his face” (71). His happiness about his friendship with David influences his whole appearance, and the “insolent, dark, leonine” Giovanni David had seen first in the bar had turned into his baby.

And yet, because of David's consistent self-deception and denial, the novel has an unhappy ending for all the main characters: Giovanni is executed at the end after killing the bar owner Guillaume; Hella flees in shock to America; and David is left alone in his anguish and despair. David has from the beginning been depicted as the tormented figure who “had been playing a deadly game” (58), and although he tried to win by cheating, he is the loser on a first evaluation because he has long lost his father, he lost his best friend, Joey, his fiancé, Hella, and his lover, Giovanni. Herein, I think, lies the key to Baldwin's estimation that *Giovanni's Room* is “tragic.” David's internal sexual struggle is primarily characterized by an intensely individualistic search for a personal identity within the larger heterosexual and homophobic community. Opposing emotions, such as he “was utterly, hopelessly, horribly glad” (58) at Giovanni's sight or his desire to “be locked in that room forever with [Giovanni]” at the moment he tells Giovanni that he must leave him, signify his tormented state of mind with regard to what he wants to do yet does not dare to commit himself full-heartedly. In this way, when David enters Giovanni's room for the first time, he carries with him this ambiguity of emotions. During their first night together, when Giovanni pulled David into his arms, everything in him screamed “*No!* yet the sum of [him] sighed *Yes*” (87; Baldwin's italics).

Claude J. Summers appropriately describes *Giovanni's Room* as a penetrating study of

Research Paper

self-deception and an unsentimental study of homosexual life in the 1950s. He says that this Baldwin novel is distinguished for its social approach to the question of homosexuality. Summers explains that although *Giovanni's Room* is framed as a coming-out story, it is also a “problem novel” because it recognizes the homosexual dilemma as a socially significant issue. Through the placement of David's fate within the broad context of American values, Baldwin both reflects and challenges the sexual attitudes of his time (128). However, as much as *Giovanni's Room* represents the homophobic tenor of the Eisenhower years through these ambivalences in the text, it also vividly mirrors, and there I agree with Summers, the social reality of that time by means of the divided and deceitful self of the protagonist David.

Giovanni's Room is in itself one more critique of American attitudes. As Baldwin conveys through the elder homosexual Jacques: “ But the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people's pain” (75), and this is true for any people.

Giovanni's Room Baldwin's reaction to the social and legal prohibition of homosexuality; it is essentially defensive and yet affirms a homosexual identity.

However, Baldwin's adherence to popular societal beliefs about the causes of homosexuality and his principally negative ending of this novel, in that he cannot picture a positive future for a homosexual couple, lead me to the conclusion that at this point in his fictional career he has not yet achieved a positive acceptance of homosexuality in his novels. David at one point in the novel contemplates what his future would be as a gay man when he would not be with Giovanni anymore.

Like all of Baldwin's novels, *Giovanni's Room* is very complex, and although it is clearly a homosexual novel judged by the content itself, Baldwin so skillfully maneuvered the topic that his stand on it could be read in several ways. Again, we can say that Baldwin played it safe because he created sufficient ambiguity in *Giovanni's*, allowing multiple interpretations, which include also anti-gay interpretations

Or Giovanni, who is one of the “straight-acting” gays in the novel, describes Guillaume as an “disgusting old fairy” (141).

Readers who did not want to acknowledge the novel's or the writers significance within the canon of gay literature saw the French setting as Baldwin's tactic to remove himself from the plot and defined *Giovanni's Room* as an anti-gay novel because of its realistic and thus simultaneously unattractive and sad picture of the gay subculture. The French setting could serve as a metaphor for homosexuality being foreign in a sense and thus also represent a

Research Paper

distancing technique of Baldwin's. There are some ambiguities to be found in this novel, which, as Claude J. Summers observes, might have served as the author's devices for self-protection during an era of extreme homophobia and thus permit also anti-gay interpretations. He sees this accomplished by Baldwin through a sexually confused and unreliable first-person narrator, his unattractive and decadent description of the homosexual milieu, and the melodramatic frame of murder and execution (173).

Conclusion:

I read the finishing lines of *Giovanni's Room* in this light. A homosexual relationship in this novel has not yet a chance for a positive future. Yet, David, after paying a high price, is finally ready to 'go the way his blood beats' and this is why he feels the "dreadful weight of hope" on his shoulders when he steps into the awakening morning, a symbol in itself of a new beginning. And with this conclusion the author of *Giovanni's Room* has also set the tenor for his subsequent novels.

References:

- [1] Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.
- [2] *Giovanni's Room*. 1956. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1988.
- [3]*Go Tell It On the Mountain*. 1952. New York: Signet, 1963.
- [4]*The Price of the Ticket*. New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1985.
- [5] Adams, Stephen D. "James Baldwin." *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1980.
- [6] Als, Hilton. "Fathers and Sons." *Village Voice* 12 Jan. 1988: 35.
- [7] Auchincloss, Eve and Nancy Lynch. "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin." Rpt. in *The Black American Writer Vol. 1*. Ed. C. W. E. Bigsby. Florida: Everett/ Edwards, 1969.
- [8] Austen, Roger. *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America*. Indianapolis: Bobbs -Merril, 1977.
- [9] Baldwin, James. *Another Country*. 1962. New York: Dell publishing Co., 1970.