

Gender Roles and Sexual Identities in *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin

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Abstract

The paper aims to focus on the events that led to the killing of Guillame and how each decision is shaped by society's expectations and norms about how a 'Man' should behave. Even in a liberal city like Paris homosexuality isn't accepted. The novel *Giovanni's Room* is about the struggle of Homosexuality and how it operates in a Hetero-normative construct.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin

Sexuality is one's biological sex that one is born with whereas Gender is the social role that a particular person with specific sex is supposed to play also called the Gender role. It is through these gender roles that one's identity is built. The society has restricted these roles of gender, as in a female is supposed to behave like a 'woman' and a male is supposed to act like a 'man' and only a man and a woman can indulge in a relation because only then they will be able to fulfil the purpose of reproduction which is considered as the only 'aim' of a heterosexual relationship.

In the novel *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, the author portrays the internal struggle that homosexuals face and how it affects their emotional state and the social life is depicted. It is the sexuality or the sexual representation of a person that is considered responsible for one's identity. The protagonist of this novel, David struggles between these two concepts. David wants to have the identity of a 'hetero male', he wants the position of 'subject' but he enjoys having sex with men. David does not accept lowering his position of 'subject' in front of the outside world but within a room he happily surrenders to men he sleeps with. He does not fit in the hetero male image that he wants to show the world and he is even unable to maintain relationships with men outside the bedroom. Hence '*Giovanni's Room*' the title is symbolic

because it is only inside this room that he is his true self.

The story begins with David getting drunk and thinks about himself and wonders "There will be a girl sitting opposite me who will wonder why I have not been flirting with her, who will be set on edge by the presence of the recruits. It will all be the same, only I will be stiller." (Baldwin, 8) These thoughts can be considered as his inner true thoughts as he is drunk and alone. This line in the beginning gives us an idea about his selection of a partner. He knows that he is not interested in girls but if he doesn't flirt with a girl she would have a question in her mind about his manhood, as a 'man' is 'supposed' to get attracted to a 'women'. This is due to the gender stereotypes that exist in the society. This introductory line gives us an idea that his relation with any women in the further story would be merely out of compulsion.

"This is the lie which I told to Giovanni but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before. I had. I had decided that I never would again." (Baldwin, 9) through this dialogue we come to know that he did not openly accept his relationships with men. He doesn't tell Giovanni about his other men that he slept with, probably because he did not want to lose Giovanni with whom he had fallen in love with. Hence it is seen that he shows the world what is 'socially accepted' but through his

dialogues we come to know his hidden ‘inner self’ which longs for a male partner. The very first attraction he feels towards a boy was with Joey “I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: But Joey is a boy” (Baldwin, 11) and he also gets thoughts of what Joey’s parents would think of him if they come to know about this incident. David gets frightened after waking up beside Joey the next morning, he had hundred thoughts in his mind and he runs away. ‘Joey was a boy’ is italicised which highlights the point that for a boy to love a boy was ‘wrong’. He considered it has a patch on his manhood and to cover this up he tells Joey a fake story about a girl whom he is loves and satisfies himself with this ‘right’ behaviour that society accepts. David confuses sexuality with gender. Being gay is equal to not being manly enough. He is unable accept his sexual orientation even after sleeping with Joey. He sees homosexuality as monstrous. He gets nasty with Joey and starts acting like a straight homophobic man because that is how a man should act. The experience with Joey changes him. He becomes secretive and cruel. He becomes a drunk, comes home late, acts rude to his step mother Ellen. This is his definition of manliness that he contemplates.

When David was growing up his parents tried to ingrain in him the characteristics about how a ‘man’ is supposed to be. His mother once tells his father “that you're the kind of man he ought to be when he grows up” (Baldwin,14). The fathers are considered as the ‘ideal man’ for sons to look up to when they are growing. David’s father comes home drunk, argues with his mother and the mother stands quiet and most importantly that he had married a ‘woman’. This is exactly what David wishes to do in his life, he constantly repeats the line ‘I want to marry a woman, I want to be a man’ he gets in to a relationship with a girl named Hella but time and again we see him getting attracted to men. A man should not show his emotions. His father doesn’t know what to do when David starts crying. This makes David shut himself even more. He creates a façade, a new

image of himself that he would show to the world.

David never felt inclined towards women, “God knows; the ladies seemed extremely animated, their males seemed rather stiff; the ladies seemed to be doing most of the drinking... whether they were after money or blood or love...always dressed in the most improbable combinations, screaming like parrots the details of their latest love affairs—their love affairs always seemed to be hilarious... spent time with a celebrated movie star, or boxer. Then all of the others closed in on this newcomer and they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard. I always found 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.” (Baldwin, 21). He disliked their behaviours and their showy nature. He felt that women were fake and men should date real women but the irony was he would not even date a real woman because a man who likes men can never even love a real woman. This also shows that the outer qualities of women can never attract David because his mind and body had already made a ‘choice’ of the gender role that his body fits into or a role that he is comfortable with.

Next encounter that David has is with Jacques “I looked down at him. I wanted to do something to his cheerful, hideous, worldly face which would make it impossible for him ever again to smile at anyone the way he was smiling at me. Then I wanted to get out of this bar, out into the air, perhaps to find Hella, my suddenly so sorely menaced girl.” (Baldwin, 29). To hide his feelings or to stop himself from getting attracted to Jacques he suddenly starts searching for Hella. It is observed that whenever David starts to feel for a man he takes support of a woman to escape reality. Even in the beginning with Joey he makes up a fake story about a girl, second with Jacques he does the same and also in the end he rejects Giovanni for Hella.

The protagonist, David's last encounter is with Giovanni, a man. He falls in love with him at the first sight. Giovanni reciprocates his love and they both start hanging out together. Eventually as Hella, the girlfriend of David is out of town they start living together in a room. It is in this room that David freely expresses his love and likes being the 'housewife' for Giovanni. David overthinks about everything, he doesn't want to give a wrong impression to the world. At the same time he can't be just friends with Giovanni, he doesn't deny his homosexual feelings with him but we know it won't last long. In the case of Giovanni its different he is fun, he isn't reserved he openly shows his affection towards David even when they are outside the room. David gets annoyed when he sees that a sailor had seen them roaming and was looking at them with contempt. He blames Giovanni for awakening a 'beast' because for him 'affection' is a weakness in a 'man'. He wants to end it with Giovanni because he can't think of a long term future. Society has scared him, he can't think of a permanent happiness with a man. He tries to pass his love for Giovanni as love experimental phase. He is angry at the world for making him suffer for who he is. He wants to be a part of the normal world. Homosexuality isn't normal. Having a family and a wife is the only reason he is with Hella, his girlfriend.

He sees how Giovanni is affected when Guillame fires him out of jealousy. Giovanni is not as strong as he pretends to be, yet David is cruel to him by lying to him, leading him on. He sees Giovanni as clingy. Even though Giovanni is the only one who knows who David really is. David couldn't be honest, he feels uncomfortable in his own skin and wants to go back to pretending. Even though he knows he is the only one who cares about Giovanni's love but then to he leaves

him broken without thinking about its consequences. This ruins Giovanni, who has no one to turn to. He crawls back to his same abusive boss who uses him. David thinks he knows why Giovanni murdered Guillame but he actually doesn't.

David at the end says "I know it's not my fault" but at some level he knew it was. In a society where boys have to be strong and a mama's boy, David overcame this lack of love by using Giovanni and then destroying him. The American societal norms help him in making such a decision. He has to hide his true self because it is unnatural, disgusting and would mean that he has lost his 'manhood'. For instance in the novel it is mentioned that the army drops a gay man, he can never have any real friends, and so he can't show his true self. Thus he sleeps with women to show his masculinity.

The novel Giovanni's Room by Baldwin James Baldwin moves beyond narrow identity categories, believing that all people had to live their lives open to both women and men in order to experience life and not be trapped in one aspect of themselves. Through David's struggles, Baldwin shows a connection between internal and external spaces, and establishes a link between choice and acceptance when creating a personal identity. Baldwin establishes self-reflection to be the only means of creating a personal identity that is able to balance acceptance with self-invention. He explores this self-reflection in terms of internal, external and choice, acceptance throughout the novel, showing the struggle to be both personal and shared with the community to which one attempts to belong. Thus the novel proves to be the best example to understand Gender, its confusion with one's sexuality, the stereotypes associated with it and the internal conflict that homosexuals go through.

Reference:

Baldwin, J. (2016). *Giovanni's room*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.