The Duel between Masculinity and Sexual Orientation in Rooms in the Novel *Giovanni’s Room”*

James Baldwin wrote the eponymously named novel “*Giovanni’s Room*” in 1956, at a time when homosexuality was considered deviant: and to some extent it still is considered so in modern times. In this novel, the main protagonist, David struggles to define and represent his masculinity in two commodified living spaces, in both hetero and homosexual relationships with Hella and Giovanni respectively. In the novel gender identity and sexual orientation dualism occurs in physical rooms for David. I believe that rooms are seen through his eyes as prisons or closets which both repress his masculinity, yet ironically allows him to reluctantly express his sexual orientation and spaces that force him to face yet hide from his who he truly is. Kate Bornstein in her book “*My New Gender Workbook*” looks at “Components of Gender” (Bornstein, 51) and how sexual orientation is so closely aligned with the gender identity of our sexual partners. The dominant social construct of sexuality in the 1950’s is that “real men” are heterosexual and this view of masculinity and the normative view that homosexuality is wrong imprisons David in his life.

Masculinity is a recurring theme in Baldwin’s novel. Society’s inculcated definition of masculinity is in direct contrast to David’s view of homosexuality. He is required to “grow up and be a man” (Baldwin 15) and marry a woman and have children which are the normative expectations of the society. David is afraid that being a homosexual questions his masculinity and manhood and makes him less than heterosexual men. The confusion of sexual orientation truncating his masculinity, has turned him homophobic and he derisively describes homosexuals in the novel as “fairy… les folles…. them…beasts and grotesque” (Baldwin 26, 27). He carefully does not affiliate with flagrant homosexuals and believes that somehow he is different from them. He describes his homosexual encounters as “boyish, zestful affairs….and pretentious masturbation” (Baldwin 5). In the novel which is told through a first person narrative, David’s perception is skewed. This is most keenly shown when he describes homosexual men: collectively they are seen as pathetic, corpulent and doomed. The only exception to this initially is Giovanni, who makes him blush and feel a tightening in his chest. As David becomes embattled with his sexual feelings for Giovanni, he too becomes unattractive, borderline crazy and doomed.

David first entrance into Giovanni’s room caused internal conflict when “everything in me was screaming *No*! yet the sum of me sighed *Yes*” (Baldwin 64). This is the first time we see him fully giving in to his sexual tendencies after labeling himself vile for desiring men sexually. His initial feelings of joy and pleasure with Giovanni in his room is soon after inextricably tied with anguish and fear. David’s fear is that he will fully give into his sexual tendencies which will condemn his soul. The room represents a distortion and an alternate reality for him. He regularly describes living in the room as ‘occurring underwater” (Baldwin 85). The room figuratively stops time for David. Personal spaces are supposed to give their occupants peace and contentment. However Giovanni’s room is described negatively as dirty, disorderly and strewn with garbage. The room causes internal conflict for David because it represents both domesticity; which he regards as feminine and homosexuality which he regards as both feminine and abhorrent and this robs him of his masculinity. In the room he fears that he will become ‘the housewife” which is a challenge to his belief of his gender identity. The state of the room also represents the inner workings of the minds of both Giovanni and David. Each has and is drowning, in their own deep inner turmoil. Giovanni needs David to transform him and the room in order to save him from his past and David wants a sanctuary in which he can escape.

In Giovanni’s room a “ferocious excitement, which burst’ ….my awakening, my insistent possibilities” (Baldwin 42) escapes along with latent feelings he was hiding from. Instead of fully exploring these feelings under the guise of anonymity in a foreign country, the room become a “closet’ which David feels is trapping him. He repeatedly uses animal references to define his sexual tendencies, he describes his feelings as a “bulldog” and a “beast”, something to control and suppress. David uses biblical references when speaking about his perceived condemnation of his soul because of his attraction to men. He describes himself as being trapped between “Judas and the Savior” (Baldwin 111) and believes in the established religious views that his sexual orientation is a sin and he is condemned. He views his sexuality as a damned and doomed journey and wonders how he “can be redeemed’ and saved “from the knife” (Baldwin 169) of his sexual orientation.

*“Giovanni’s Room”* is not written chronologically and the reader’s initial contact with David in “Giovanni’s Room” begins with him reflecting on his life with Hella and Giovanni in another room in the south of France. This room was ostensibly supposed to be a home for both himself and Hella and represented heterosexuality, domesticity, family and normality. He is unable to find happiness in this setting because it is a façade. He clings to Hella “for my very life” (Baldwin 159) but she is unable to provide the peace, “the possibility of legitimate surrender” (Baldwin 121) and the validation he needs to feel normal and therefore a man. At this point I believe that his sexual orientation is subconsciously set in his mind and he realizes that he is not bisexual, but fully homosexual. His abandonment of Hella in the south of Paris and sexual fling with a sailor, a transient person with no ties to any physical place is a corroboration of that. The novel ends with David wishing to “crack that mirror and be free” (Baldwin 168) from his sexual orientation and the belief that he is corrupted and not worthy of saving. His salvation is tied up in his flesh, which has repeatedly failed him because it desire men instead of women. He believes he will become a dirty old man like Jacque and the homosexual crowd in Paris. Hella is unfortunately caught up in her own gender role struggles between being a strong independent woman in society and the established views that her value is as a wife and mother. The room also becomes a façade for her and a subjugation of her desire to be free and unencumbered by gender roles.

David has sex with women to confirm his masculinity, he is however unfulfilled in his sexual encounters with both Sue and Hella after being with Giovanni. He describes sex with both women as unsatisfying and physical encounters devoid of emotional attachment. I am not sure that David ever admits who he truly is and James Baldwin leaves the ending of the novel somewhat ambiguous. The rooms are diametrically opposed in terms of David’s expectations and desires which fluctuate between heterosexuality and homosexuality. They are not able to provide the answers that he needs or more forthrightly the answer which he refuses to acknowledge. It is unfortunate that he fled to Europe to find himself and in the process it turned out to be “the same self from which I spent so much time in flight” (Baldwin 21). I believe that the dualism between masculinity and sexual orientation happens every day in our society for both men and women. The strict confines of normative gender identity and sexual orientation imprisons many. James Baldwin novel bravely explores this is his novel, however he does not as the voice of the main protagonist give the reader a happy ending. This in my view is purposely done. He wants us as a society to think about compartmentalization and how is not always easy to fit into the prescribed roles.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. *“Giovanni’s Room”.* New York: Vintage International Vintage Books, 1956.

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Bornstein, Kate. “*My New Gender Workbook*”. New York: Routledge; 2nd Ed, 2013. Print.