

Prompt 1

James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* explores the dangers of running from love and oneself. In it, the narrator, David, moves to France from America to escape himself and his repressed feelings toward his own homosexuality and masculinity. Yet, in doing so, he is forced to reckon with the feelings he was running from, and, through his metamorphosis, ultimately ends up alone and unable to love. In *Giovanni's Room*, David's behavior and feelings toward Giovanni and Hella evolve constantly. With Giovanni, David is stuck in an ambivalent limbo, whereas with Hella, he swings from the extreme of affection to hate and, finally, indifference. His unwillingness to accept his feelings for Giovanni eventually leads to a breakdown of both relationships.

David feels a connection with Giovanni immediately. At the moment, he is "utterly, hopelessly, horribly glad" that his fiancée, Hella, is off in Spain, which allows him to experience his excitement fully (42). After having dinner, the two share an intimate moment in Giovanni's room. Despite his inner reservations, he succumbs to his desires (64). At the beginning of their relationship, David's disgust and inner struggle do not yet shadow his affection for Giovanni. He allows the initial spark to guide his behavior and emotions.

However, as David realizes Giovanni is changing the way he experiences attraction toward men, he begins to resent him for surfacing the part of him that constitutes the roots of his self-hatred. Other men become attractive to him, too, and the thought terrifies him, creating "a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as [his] love" (84). The relationship also makes him feel emasculated, like a "little *girl*", revealing his fragile masculinity and how he projects this self-loathing onto the relationship (142). He loves Giovanni but is disgusted by his body. He

wants to leave him because he can't see a future with him, but also wants to stay because he is happy. He is stuck in an ambivalent limbo, "a terrible confusion" where he is repulsed by touch one moment and dreaming of it in the next (88). His resentment ultimately accumulates and causes their relationship's demise.

Due to his conflicting feelings of love, hate, and disgust, David never fully opens up to Giovanni. He "helplessly" resists him and keeps him at a distance despite Giovanni's efforts to get close (82). Their relationship is held in a precarious balance, threatening to fall apart at any moment. After Giovanni gets fired, their conversation about leaving the room marks the beginning of their relationship's downfall. They stand, opposing each other and holding bricks, and it seems to David that they would "beat each other to death" if they did not embrace at that moment (118). Following this incident, the cognitive dissonance David experiences becomes too burdensome, and living with Giovanni feels like "torture" (114). Their relationship falls apart slowly but steadily. David is too scared to face himself, and Giovanni is too afraid to lose David. Fear overtakes David's initial elation, breaking his love apart and threatening to consume it from the inside out.

David and Giovanni's relationship reaches a breaking point when Hella returns from Spain. After avoiding Giovanni to be with Hella for three days, David visits Giovanni's room to break up with him. Giovanni is startled and asks who it is at the door. In response, David tells him to "Shut up", and when Giovanni begins to cry, thinks "*Sweet Jesus!*". David's reactions and words turn cruel, and he finally is honest about his reservations toward the relationship — nothing can happen between two men. Though he still loves Giovanni, his damaged masculinity

and the metamorphosis of his sexuality become too much for him to handle. He runs away from the situation and escapes through “loving” Hella.

Despite being with Giovanni, David is always hoping for Hella to return from Spain. He feels “relief” and delight when she announces her decision to marry him, as he views her as his ticket to a stable and grounded future (94). Yet, he cannot help but imagine Giovanni in her place (95). Giovanni has taken up residence in his mind. The development scares him, so he clings to Hella tightly, even more so after breaking up with Giovanni. Despite this strong attachment, he admits that, while his dynamic with Hella remains the same, he never knew how much he loved her in the first place (119). He convinces himself he loves her to conform to societal norms. Yet, Giovanni is constantly on his mind, and he even admits to Hella that he loves him on two occasions. After the initial relief of using her as a coping mechanism to escape his new capacity for loving men, his “love turn[s] to hatred”, and he finds that all he had once enjoyed about her turn “sour on [his] stomach” (158). He is not confused about his relationship with Hella and instead swings from love to hate in an instant, then to indifference once she discovers his sexuality and he no longer has to put up a front.

Throughout Giovanni’s Room, David constantly fights his feelings for Giovanni and lies to himself about his desires, emotions, and identity. He runs from Giovanni and his homosexuality and tries to convince himself to love Hella, eventually losing them both through his cowardice. By running from his true self, David ultimately shatters his capacity for authentic love.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room*. 1956. Random House LLC, 2013.