
HEARTBREAKING, ASTONISHING, CONTROVERSIAL: BALDWIN

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James Baldwin as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century has impacted the world of literature by incorporating his own experiences of being a Black, Gay man in a particularly prejudicial era of American history. Baldwin's position in society is so unique to its time that we the reader can't help but feel compelled in his work.

Baldwin's biographer Eddie Glaude simply describes the man he came to know Jimmy' as a 'misfit'. His position as an outcast in a white heteronormative society is key to understanding his work; As Baldwin faced prejudice from some of the black community for being an openly gay man, his unique stance as a dually discriminated American citizen means we can feel Baldwin's isolation within his work (possibly even more now-a-days).

Homophobic attitudes were at an all-time high in America, during the 20th century due to a lack of understanding and religious standpoints. However, in France, one of the most progressive LGBT countries in the world, all sodomy laws were repealed in 1791 during the French Revolution. So, this leads us onto *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's second novel set in 1950's France. Published in 1956, grants us a unique personal perspective on homosexuality at the time. This novel was one of the first of its kind to go into mainstream literature. Therefore, opening doors into the psychological position of a member of the LGBTQ+ in up-and-coming literature. The text gave an explicit depiction of a homosexual relationship while also highlighting the struggles an individual had to go through.



Experiences of a gay man in these trying times can be demonstrated within the opening line of the novel, quote by Walt Whitman:

'I am man; I suffered, I was there'.

This quote fashion an innate connection to Baldwin's own personal thoughts and feelings, indicating his own personal voice this acts as a prelude for the topics explored within this novel. Similar parallels can be drawn between Baldwin's personal voice and the main-protagonist David; For example, the absent father figure appears to weigh heavily on the plot, with David's father heavily on the

plot, with David's father we later find out is an alcoholic. This relationship is consistently presented as being exasperated within the plot and is shown to weigh heavily on the protagonist's mind. This relationship is perhaps as prominent as it is within the novel because Baldwin himself never knew his biological father; and therefore, the absence and

separation between father and son is an insight into Baldwin's personal life and therefore becomes a thought-provoking factor within the novel.

But why is this important? What else does Baldwin's experience have to teach us?

Baldwin's text is so revolutionary because of its outstanding ability to withstand the test of time as a text that connects us to messages of social change sixty-years down the line.

Giovanni's Room was published during a time of strife for both the LGBT and Black communities; these communities in the 1950's were directly affected by prejudices created by the AIDS epidemic which meant that already fore-standing opinions on Gay persons we're further ostracised by a largely religious American society. Therefore, Public opinion on homosexual relationships or any relationship which were deemed to stray from the 'normal' standard,

, i.e., containing a man and a woman (both cisgender), was still heavily condemned.

However, the 1950's was also the start of change for the gay rights movement. In 1950 Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Foundation, one of the first gay rights groups; a gay rights group that sort to improve the lives of gay men, which inspired many other gay rights groups to form as one of the first gay rights groups to exist within America. As the countries second gay publication, 'The Mattachine Review', allowed for there to be more representation of Homosexuality within literature and the media.

This era also saw the beginning of the rise of the AIDs epidemic that swept over the world. It is crucial to understand how throughout this epidemic black gay men were met with some particularly harsh discrimination (find a real-life example of a black gay man being discriminated for being black (possibly by someone in the LGBT community to show there was hatred and discrimination even within the community).

Despite of the discrimination aimed towards Black gay men and the LGBT community; the gay rights movement continued swiftly into the 1960's, where the state of Illinois was the first state to abolish anti-sodomy laws in 1961 (decriminalizing homosexuality). The action that Illinois had taken in removing such laws began the important discussion of changing attitudes nationwide. Meaning that, Baldwin publishes his novel amid this social and political change, smack bang in the middle of it in fact, just as Baldwin was.

The opening chapter is telling for the tone of the novel; It opens on the last day of the text and starts with David where there appears to be a looming darkness in the exposition, 'I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam [...] into a daker past'. Baldwin almost sets the novel up to present a homosexual lifestyle to have this melancholic tint to it. Suggesting that Baldwin by no means intended to glamorize the life of an openly homosexual man. Even with Paris as the backdrop for his novel and as the epicentre of LGBTQ+ rights. Even with Paris at his feet David's world slowly begins to decay and disintegrate. This is first established in David's internal monologue. Baldwin visually places you in David's shoes through his internal monologue and he leads us though David's emotional breakdown towards a better understand of the vulnerability of our character.

We can only imagine what a victory the success of this novel would have been like for the LGBTQ+ community of the time. A novel where a young man goes off to discover himself in France allowing his sexuality to finally be free in the captivating city of Paris. Our character David soon finds himself engulfed in the nightlife and us alongside him.

However, the most shocking thing was the reception of James Baldwin's novel, is perhaps what makes it so intriguing. Baldwin himself a black gay man knew he would never be able to write about a fellow black gay man, it likely would not have been published at the time due to discrimination aimed at communities. So, the importance of his work Baldwin changed his narrative to a white American to swing publication favor. From this move Baldwin was temporary shunned by black writers and activists as they felt was a 'traitor' for not using his voice to represent his community.

Reading this novel for the first time in lockdown emersed me, perhaps it was Baldwin's ability to transport us into another time and place while we were in isolation. Or possibly it was the harrowing heartbreak allows us to experience falling in love again in our rooms. Either way Baldwin has a spectacular ability to transcend time and still be socially relevant to the youth of the 2020's with a particular importance of his writing being its ability to help us digest hardship as well as being an important text that shaped literature of the 20th century.

