

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.003 Reading Fiction  
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

But she smiles at once when I open the door, a smile which weds the coquette and the mother. She is quite old and not really French; she came many years ago, “when I was a very young girl, sir,” from just across the border, out of Italy. She seems, like most of the women down here, to have gone into mourning directly the last child moved out of childhood. Hella thought that they were all widows, but, it turned out, most of them had husbands living yet. These husbands might have been their sons. They sometimes played *belote* in the sunshine in a flat field near our house, and their eyes, when they looked at Hella, contained the proud watchfulness of a father and the watchful speculation of a man. I sometimes played billiards with them, and drank red wine, in the *tabac*. But they made me tense—with their ribaldries, their good-nature, their fellowship, the life written on their hands and in their faces and in their eyes. They treated me as the son who has but lately been initiated into manhood; but at the same time, with great distance, for I did not really belong to any of them; and they also sensed (or I felt they did) something else about me, something which it was no longer worth their while to pursue. This seemed to be in their eyes when I walked with Hella and they passed us on the road, saying, very respectfully, *Salut, Monsieur-dame*. They might have been the sons of these women in black, come home after a lifetime of storming and conquering the world, home to rest and be scolded and wait for death, home to those breasts, now dry, which had nourished them in their beginnings. (65)

MIT Student

21L.003

Familial Breakdown As A Central Motif in *Giovanni's Room*

The primary conflict in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is the struggle of the narrator, David, as he seeks a surrogate caregiving figure to compensate for the breakdown of his family, and along the way, comes to terms with his sexual awakening. The familial issues rooted in his childhood contribute to his sexual confusion, his aversion to women, and his eternal search for the nurturing figure that he never experienced in childhood. Baldwin's stylistic approach to the novel is crucial to understanding David's internal conflict and his various psychological issues; through his meticulous word choices, chronological cues, and interwoven character stories, we are able to more fully comprehend the complex tapestry that weaves together David and Giovanni, two members of broken families cast astray in the world and searching for fulfillment.

Baldwin detours abruptly from narrating the consummation of David's and Giovanni's relationship into the present passage, which opens upon an elderly caretaker woman, white-haired and slightly bent with age. Surprisingly, David's initial description of her does not evoke an old woman, dried up and matriarchal, but is nostalgic and even attractive, delving into her rural youth and appreciating her smile which contains both that of "the coquette and the mother" (65). Baldwin follows the old woman with an almost incestuous observation: "These husbands might have been their sons," and reinforces the connotation by noting that they see Hella both with "the proud watchfulness of a father and the watchful speculation of a man" (65). These parallel comparisons inform us that familial constructs transcend generations, drawing a similarity between David and his father and implying that he cannot escape from the influences

of his broken familial unit or of his father's behavior. In addition, the incestuous connotation invites us to take a psychoanalytic stance on the root of David's behavior. The premature death of his mother prevents him from establishing a feminine ideal and searching for nurture in his father instead. However, his unsavory paternal role model leaves him with conflicting desires, "desperate to conquer his attention" yet despising his failure as a father (11). We see that he fails utterly to form any parental connections, leaving him with a fixation upon finding an ideal caregiving figure. The repercussions of a broken family are visible in many other characters: in particular, Giovanni, despite his bluff to appear nonchalant and experienced at life, is plagued by the death of his firstborn child. While his life was once "dripping and bursting and beautiful and terrible" with vivacity, with a woman and a village that he loved, his stillborn child destroys everything. He claims with certainty that it should have been the ideal son, "a wonderful, strong man," just as David's father wanted *him* to grow up to fit an ideal and was confused, "baffled and afraid" when he did not (140, 16). Giovanni's family's failure to form properly leaves him frantic and lost, but he seeks to fill a paternal role, while David is fixated on a filial role, which contributes to their attraction to each other; they fulfill each others' needs.

The relationships that David seeks are not merely sexual, although *Giovanni's Room* does deal primarily with the sexuality of this confused young man; on a more subconscious level, he longs for nurture. Several direct comparisons are drawn between David's parents and the generalization of the husbands and the widow-like, mourning women whom the old caretaker reminds him of. He is set on edge by "their ribaldries, their good-nature, their fellowship," word choices which immediately remind us of David's father's "jocular, boys-together air" and misplaced attempts to be "buddies" (65, 16, 16). Despite his camaraderie with these cheerful, good-natured Parisians, he does "not really belong," reminding us of his inability to bond with

his father when they acted more like friends than relatives (65). The paternal comparison is straightforward, but the maternal one is slightly more disturbing. While the fathers whom David describes are youthful and jovial, the wife-mothers they return to at home are wraithlike, clothed in black, their “breasts [...] now dry,” which conjure up images of death (65). This instantly recalls memories of his mother’s death—no physical memories are ever mentioned of his mother herself; only his nightmares of her, in which her “putrescent” body, “blind with worms,” presses him against her as if soliciting a twisted kind of affection (10). In each of these Italian men and women, he searches for a potential father and mother, but sees his own father and mother in them, making him unable to pursue them; they would only perpetuate the cycle of destruction that his real family experienced.

Hella and Giovanni are two antagonistic characters, polar opposites competing for David’s love. While Hella is a young girl still searching for her path in life, Giovanni is cynical and experienced, having had a child and thrown away his old life to bartend for the depraved Guillaume. The etymology of their names, however, adds a new dimension to a comparison between the two. The strikingly unique name ‘Hella,’ to the English-speaker, instantly recalls ‘hell.’ However, looking at the actual etymology, we see that it is derived from the Scandinavian ‘Helge’, meaning holy or blessed. ‘Giovanni,’ on the other hand, traces its origins back to ‘Iohannes,’ which comes from the Hebrew ‘Yochanan’ meaning ‘God is gracious.’ Both etymologies essentially label them as blessings. Perhaps Baldwin is implying that neither path is necessarily right or wrong, but David only needs to free himself from the psychological restraints that his mother’s death and his father’s misdemeanors imposed upon him. If he could accept his homosexuality, he would no longer feel a need to hide Giovanni, his God-given gift, from society.

David's desire to belong and to be cared for carries over into his confusion over his homosexuality and gender identity as well as his familial stress. He feels that the French men, the fathers, are unable to treat him as a son because they sense something different in him that makes him "no longer worth their while to pursue" (65). The parenthetical, almost paranoid superlative "(or I felt they did)" implies that perhaps it is not the other men who are at fault, but merely David's confusion over his orientation and identity that deter him from forming genuinely filial relationships (65). He struggles to hide his relationship with Giovanni, often inventing cover stories to explain why they live together, and openly pretends to be happy with his fiancée; he even "hopes to burn out, through Hella, [his] image of Giovanni and the reality of his touch" (122). His desire to belong to a 'normal' family is painfully obvious in this deception. He and Giovanni both subconsciously know, despite their feelings for each other, that their relationship violates the generic families they seek to reconstruct as compensation for the failures of their original familial units. Also of note in this section of the passage are the perceived perceptions that the men have toward David; we feel as though they sense something uncannily wrong about him, from the way that they pass him "very respectfully" and almost avoidantly, on the street (65). When he is with Hella, they greet him with "*Monsieur-dame*," a standard greeting for a heterosexual couple in France, but one which also evokes an implication that he is both a man and a woman (65). We see in other parts of the novel that David's homosexual experiences with Giovanni, amongst other men and boys, induce turmoil over his gender identity. Not only does this affect his behavior—he finds himself, to his "terrible confusion," playing the role of a housewife and even taking pleasure in it—but he also feels displaced and isolated, with an insatiable need to belong (88).

The prose of *Giovanni's Room* is characterized by frequent alternation of tenses, sometimes mid-thought, as the narrator wavers almost haphazardly between past and present, and also by richly descriptive and evocative language. By gradually revealing more and more details about the present situation while still anchored in the past—often teasing the reader with stray thoughts about Giovanni's imprisonment—Baldwin increases the suspense and the desire to know about Giovanni, to devour the scraps of narration he throws us. In this passage, however, he reverses his normal tactics and gives us a scene from the present with a flashback to the past, to Hella, instead of focusing, as he customarily does, on Giovanni. This subtle switch highlights David's entrenchment in his homosexuality; his fiancée is a minimal but noticeable counterpoint to Giovanni, his lover. We also note that this scene occurs—not chronologically, but within the timeline of the narration—almost immediately after Giovanni and David consummate their relationship. As he contemplates the elderly caretaker woman standing before him, he recalls Hella, his past, whom he scorned. Another significant deviation in this passage is that it focuses on a female character in an otherwise male-dominated story. This woman is, in fact, the last one introduced in *Giovanni's Room*, and also the only one who has created a successful family. We never properly see his mother, who is dead. Aunt Ellen, the spinster, only contributes negatively to David's development, and in fact exposes him to the knowledge that his father is a drunkard and a womanizer. Hella is young, naïve, and just as confused as David, abandoning him temporarily and going to Spain. The old woman, on the other hand, has lived a normal life and encourages David to do the same, obliviously saying, “‘You must go and find yourself another woman, a *good* woman, and get married, and have babies. *Yes*, that is what you ought to do,’ [...] as though I had contradicted her” (68). And he does contradict her, although she does not know it; his homosexual lifestyle and his fractured family conflict with her concept

of a normal family structure. Interestingly enough, she is the closest representation we see of a mother, going so far as to call him “*pauvre bambino*”, or ‘poor baby’ (68). David recognizes this, and feels like “a half-grown boy, naked before his mother” in her presence (70). By failing to construct a normal family, he feels that he is offending her, the archetype of all mothers; he “want[s] *her* to forgive [him]” but does “not know how to state [his] crime” (70, 70). He does not want her to leave, but unfortunately, having finally found a genuine maternal figure, he misses his chance to accept her, as he is unable to comply with her requests, and she dismisses him, transformed suddenly from a warm and loving mother into a detached landlady, in “the graceful termination of a business deal” (70).

*Giovanni’s Room* is a complex story involving many parallel threads, each sharing a motif of familial breakdown and similar character arcs. Despite the attempts of David, his father, Giovanni, Hella, Aunt Ellen, and many others—all but the archetypal old woman—to draw together the remnants of their fractured families, they inevitably fail. David can escape neither his nature nor the damage caused by his parents; Even as he leaves, abandoning the old lady and turning his backs on the scraps of Jacques’s envelope, “the wind blows some of them back,” reminding him of his follies (168). His futile attempts and inability to reconstruct what he never had ultimately destroy his love—Giovanni.