
SEAN JOYCE '28

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Ghosts, Gays, and Guillotines: Giovanni's Room as a Baldwinian Gothic

**Jordan Spector '25**
Washington University in St. Louis

**This paper explores *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin through the lens of the Victorian Gothic, positioning the novel within a literary tradition that has been largely overlooked in Baldwin scholarship. While Baldwin's work has been categorized within civil rights, African American, urban fiction, and queer literature, this study argues that *Giovanni's Room* also participates in the Gothic genre, engaging with its ghosts, monsters, and societal taboos. The novel's protagonist, David, embodies a spectral presence, often existing as an observer rather than an active participant in his own life. His ability to imagine and mentally intrude upon distant scenes suggests a ghost-like detachment, which mirrors his repression and internalized shame regarding his queer identity. This portrayal aligns with Victorian anxieties surrounding queerness, where same-sex desire was often framed as unnatural. By analyzing the novel's use of Gothic tropes—haunting, invisibility, bodily possession—this paper argues that Baldwin does not impose queerness onto the Gothic but rather reveals the inherent queerness embedded within the genre itself. In doing so, *Giovanni's Room* engages with and redefines the Gothic as a space for exploring marginalized identities. This study ultimately positions Baldwin's novel as a queer Gothic text, demonstrating how the Gothic has long served as a means of articulating experiences of alienation, repression, and social transgression.**

As the memory of James Baldwin is resurrected, and a new Baldwin is pieced together by the contemporary Dr. Frankensteins of the American literary canon, difficulties arise in placing Baldwin into any one category of artistic genre. Baldwin was a lyrical writer of fiction and nonfiction prose, a sharp witness to racial injustice, a literary and social critic—in many ways, he defied the boundaries of any one style of writing. However, existing genres can help to contextualize his work. Many scholars have contextualized his writing into certain categories already: civil rights, African American, urban fiction, and queer literature being among the many categorizations. Within this revivalist scholarship of Baldwin, however, he has hardly been considered a Gothic novelist. Placing Baldwin in the context of the Victorian Gothic may provide a new angle with which his writing can be understood. Without ignoring the many other categories that *Giovanni's Room* falls into, as well as the many ways it defies categorization altogether, this essay views the novel as part of an older genre: the genre of Gothic literature. The ghosts, monsters, and social taboos of *Giovanni's Room*, all set to a distinctly European backdrop, are traditionally characteristic traits of Victorian Gothic literature.

James Baldwin and the Victorian era are two subjects which, for good reason, are seldom discussed in the same breath. The Victorian era was a period that Baldwin would not have enjoyed. Aside from the obvious freedoms he would have been deprived of as a gay Black man, Baldwin, a frequent traveler, also most probably would not have liked the lack of planes and cars. Despite all it lacked, the Victorian era was alive with literature and art. The Aesthetes, like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, helped introduce the idea of art for art's sake, which, among other objectives, created a theoretical justification for intense detail. This proclivity for detail is seen in the opening pages of Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, where a scene is wonderfully laid out of a studio and a garden—descriptions as intimate and elaborate as those which appear in *Giovanni's Room*. The genre of Victorian Gothic literature, bringing with it the tropes of ghosts and vampires and other undead beings, rose to popularity during the mid-to-late nineteenth century because of the fear and repulsion it inspired. The emergence of this genre was a revolutionary moment in literature where narratives thrived due to wicked, unsettling details. This Gothic genre became a safe space for writing on cultural taboos. As Ardel Haefele-Thomas, a race, gender, and sexuality scholar, outlines in Queer Others in Victorian Gothic, Victorian writers used the Gothic genre as a "safe space" for writing about queer identities. Queerness, in the Victorian era, could be explored through the guise of monstrosity. "'Gothic' and 'queer' are aligned in that they both transgress boundaries and occupy liminal spaces, and in so doing," Haefele-Thomas writes, "they each consistently interrogate ideas of what is 'respectable' and what is 'normal'" (p. 2).

*Giovanni's Room* similarly rips apart presumed homosocial expectations. This essay examines how, within *Giovanni's Room*, monstrous women defy heteronormative standards, ghosts represent hiding in the homosexual closet, and vampires reveal insecurities around queerness. This essay also considers the reasons why Baldwin may have drawn from the Victorian *Gothic* when writing *Giovanni's Room*. Considering *Giovanni's Room* as a Baldwinian Gothic helps show how Baldwin's work illuminates the underlying queerness of the Victorian Gothic genre.

## Critical Analysis

If there is one defining characteristic of David, the protagonist of *Giovanni's Room*, it is that he is afraid. As a child, he is haunted by nightmares of his deceased mother appearing before him as an undead, decrepit corpse. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, is a key novel of the Gothic era. Much like what happens

to Shelley's character, Victor Frankenstein, David's mother dies when he is young. She appears to David only in dreams. David reports that his mother materializes "in my nightmares, blind with worms, … straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive" (p. 227). This paints a chilling image, one incredibly gothic. It directly reflects a scene in *Frankenstein*, when Victor Frankenstein has a horrid dream:

> Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became lurid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (p. 38)

The tone here is similarly somber, piling on decrepit details. These scenes are not only repulsive in their mentioning of worms, caverns, and corpses, but they intentionally emphasize the death of a mother. The death of the mother instills characters with fear from a young age, particularly—and perversely—a fear of women.

Along with the memory of his mother haunting him, David finds himself also fearing a guardian figure who raises him: his aunt, Ellen. She is described "dressed … to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood," a twisted, murderous appearance, with a "cocktail glass in her hand threatening, at any instant, to be reduced to shards, to splinters, and that voice going on and on like a razor blade on glass" (p. 229). The mentioning of blood, along with the shiny and sharp objects of shards, splinters, and razor blades, invokes a sense of danger. As Meg Wesling writes in "'The Grisly Act of Love:' Monstrous Heterosexuality in *Giovanni's Room*,"

> The woman-mother is a powerful presence and a grave threat. Whether the danger is that her body will encompass and extinguish David's, or that she will inflict damage with the sharp edges of shards, splinters, and razor blades, she constitutes a mortal danger. She is not life-sustaining but life-threatening. It seems plausible, in light of these depictions, that David's flight from his natal home is precipitated by not solely his fear of his sexual desire for men but also his fear of annihilation by women. Far from the space of light and safety he conjures up in his fantasies of home, his actual home is revealed to be perilous with the presence of thwarted feminine power; the dead mother and the spinster aunt are, like David, estranged from the benefits of the normative, and their literal powerlessness is transfigured as murderous potential. (p. 450)

This analysis unpacks the queer role of a seemingly dangerous woman feared by a man. *Giovanni's Room* follows in the footsteps of Victorian literature by creating subversive, terrifying female characters, challenging the socially presumed heteronormative love for women by men.

Another perversion of *Giovanni's Room* is that it is, in many ways, a ghost story. It shares similarities, in narrative style, with Henry James' The Turn of the Screw. Written at the tail end of the Victorian era, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is a Gothic ghost story buried under layers of narration. In this short story, a party of people gathers in an isolated country estate. The narrator's friend, Douglas, reads from a transcribed letter by Douglas' sister's governess, telling the tale to the guests. As a result, the narrator of *The Turn of the Screw* is placed several layers away from the original account. While actual ghosts appear throughout this story, the narrator becomes a kind of ghost as well, mysteriously hidden behind the many layers of the text. As queer themes are touched on in *The Turn of the Screw*—namely, a young boy's apparent interest in other boys—the ghostly, removed prose absolves the narrator from any direct involvement. *Giovanni's Room* plays into this tradition of writing. The story happening in David's head does not reflect what is currently happening to his body: a decapitation quite a bit less literal than the one Giovanni fatefully confronts. As a kind of ghost, he is also able to haunt and possess, to intimately explore other bodies while simultaneously remaining distanced from them. Acting like a ghost, David describes queer scenes through a position where he is hidden; in this way, being a ghost serves as a metaphor for existing within the homosexual closet.

David, from youth to adulthood, often confines himself in a room. In his anxiety and curiosity, he paints scenes where he is not physically present, where he is an apparition looking through the wall, too scared to come out and physically enter the scene himself. David's ghostly abilities begin early. A young David is awakened one night in his childhood bed in Brooklyn by the sound of his drunk father fighting with his aunt Ellen beneath him. He listens to the details of their argument, describing the scene as if he were in the room. He is certain "that [Ellen] was standing in the center of the room, with her hands folded before her, standing very straight and still" (p. 230). As they walk upstairs, David wonders, "what they were thinking—each of them. I wondered how they looked. I wondered what I would see when I saw them in the morning" (p. 231). His fear of confrontation causes him to disappear, to remain in his room, away from the action but still, mentally, very much in it. David's vivid imagination and constant wondering allow him to drift right through the floor and drop into the room beneath him, to see their placement and the way they are standing. As the narration returns to David in the present, the perspective from which David is reminded of his childhood, he pictures Giovanni (David's exiled lover) in his prison cell. "I try to see him," David says, "his back to me, standing at the window of his cell" (p. 313). The scene is once again created through David's imagination: "I wonder if he is shaven. And now a million details, proof and fruit of intimacy, flood my mind. I wonder, for example, if he feels the need to go to the bathroom, if he has been able to eat today, if he is sweating, or dry" (p. 313). Though David confesses—"I wonder"—that this scene is a figment of his imagination, his emotional connection to Giovanni is real. With language that is both detached from David and deeply intimate with Giovanni, David floats right into Giovanni's cell. One can see, through a scene invented in the mind of David, Giovanni standing, lonely, trying to peer out the window and over the wall, his hair cut short, hungry, longing for companionship. David's hiddenness, his ghostly narration, grows into a metaphor for staying in the closet.

This metaphor takes shape when David's descriptions get so personal that he not only enters another room, but also enters another body. The first time this begins to happen is with David's first male partner, Joey. Waking up before him, after a night together, David watches Joey's peaceful body, and "that body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern … A cavern opened in my mind, black … I thought I saw my future in that cavern" (p. 226). David's mind and Joey's body merge as both become a black cavern. He feels as if some terrible evil is forcing him to enter—to possess—this innocent boy. David is petrified by that unspeakable

evil. The expression, "I was suddenly afraid," is repeated four times in this one paragraph. There is no indication that Joey is what is scaring him since Joey is described as "so innocently lying there, with such perfect trust … so much smaller than me" (p. 225). What scares David is himself. He reports that "my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous" (pp. 225-226). As a metaphorical spirit, feeling this urge to possess another body and realizing the queerness of possessing a boy, David questions his own morality. He asks if "the incident with Joey had shaken [him] profoundly and its effect was to make me sensitive and cruel" (p. 232). As desire toward the same gender is perceived by David as unethical and gross, that urge causes David to question his innocence and wonder if he is a monster.

While David flees before settling into the caverns of Joey's body, he commits to a successful possession, fully entering a male body later in his life. In intimate moments, David thinks about the skeleton and skull underneath his partner's skin. David looks at Giovanni and notices "the light in the eyes became a glitter, the wide and beautiful brow began to suggest the skull beneath" (p. 281). Both mentally and physically, David enters Giovanni. He begins to see the world through Giovanni's eyes. Giovanni's face is at once a stranger's and one David knows too well; he describes this paradoxical feeling by addressing that "not all my memorizing [of his face] had prepared me for the metamorphosis which my memorizing had helped to bring about" (p. 281). The alliteration emphasizes "memorizing" and "metamorphosis," drawing attention to the shifting memory of Giovanni's face but perhaps also nodding to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in which a character wakes up in a different body. David, on the day of Giovanni's execution, undergoes a metamorphosis, shifting into the body of Giovanni, noting that "anguish is about to overtake me … My executioners are here with me, walking up and down with me … they are everywhere I turn … I might ask to be forgiven—if I could name and face my crime" (p. 311). The first-person narrator seems to conflate David's and Giovanni's consciousness in a strangely omniscient way. Everything experienced by Giovanni is experienced by David, as if David has traveled into Giovanni's cell and gone even further, through Giovanni's skull, into his physical being. Also implied by Baldwin, however, is that David is an executioner himself, for as he looks around and sees executioners, he is really looking at "walls, windows, mirrors, water" (p. 311), mostly reflective surfaces where he would see his own eyes staring back at him. The act of possession, of allowing himself to enter another's body, of becoming one with another man, is again expressed in the context of David wondering if he is evil, if his proximity and love for Giovanni is a crime.

All of *Giovanni's Room* is told by David, who in the present tense of his recollection, is living alone in the south of France. As he stares out the window and wanders through a house, he is never truly alone. He inserts himself, like a ghost, into scenes from his past. As a child in Brooklyn, he glides into a scene happening in a room beneath him. As an adult in Paris, he submerges into Giovanni's prison cell, describing his punishment and isolation despite not personally being there. David's ghostly ability to transport himself into scenes in which he is not visible transfers into an ability to possess bodies from his past. Possession occurs as a form of intimacy as David begins to enter Joey's body (but stops himself before fully occupying its cavern) and as he enters Giovanni's (seeing through him with X-ray vision and, eventually, adopting his perspective). In both of these instances, David wonders if he is a monster, if possessing another's body—in other words, desiring to be within the body of another man—makes him immoral or cruel.

Furthermore, David's layers of ghostliness (transporting into his past, into rooms where he is not present, into bodies that are not his) are reflective of another layer of ghostliness: the ghostly existence of the author, James Baldwin. Baldwin remains hidden in the sense that his personal identity is buried behind the fictional first-person narrator, David. David's status as a gay American abroad in Paris is one parallel to Baldwin's life that reminds the reader he is like the author, but otherwise, Baldwin's identity is lost. It fades deep into the back of the text as he embodies the character of David. David's phantom narration and his lack of bodily presence indicates that he is hiding; in the room from which he narrates and controls, the walls serve as both a barrier and a consolation. Quite possibly, the room is to David what the homosexual closet is to Baldwin. Its walls are both scary and safe. Baldwin, much in line with a Victorian Gothic tradition, uses a morally ambiguous fictional character as a safe space for portraying his own morally judged sexuality. David possesses the body of Giovanni, and, indirectly, as the one creating the vivid scenes of this novel, Baldwin possesses his body too. Both David and Baldwin fear their homosexuality; they hide to avoid being perceived as monsters. David's room and Baldwin's closet each serve as a liminal space between a prison and an escape; it is like David and Baldwin have chosen to stay in their respective metaphorical chambers, and yet the doors are now wide open. David and Giovanni's relationship becomes an open secret (to the reader and to the other characters in the book), and Baldwin, in simply publishing this book, effectively reveals that he is gay. Still, walls remain around them as they both narrate from the terrifying comfort of invisibility.

Ghosts, however, are not the only gothic element of *Giovanni's Room*. The undead appear in various forms. *Giovanni's Room*, along with being thought of as a ghost story, can also be considered a vampire story. To begin with, Baldwin's description of gender nonconformance is reminiscent of Bram Stoker's description of vampires. In Stoker's *Dracula*, Johnathan Harker—a captive of Count Dracula—asks, "What meant the giving of the crucifix, of the garlic, of the wild rose, of the mountain ash?" (p. 36). If this very question were inserted into the inner monologue of David, it would make near perfect sense, for David finds himself disturbed by similar concerns. David describes a gender nonconforming individual, likely a drag queen, in the following way:

> Now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie—that was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death … The mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream; it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume. The shirt, opened coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix … He had been eating garlic and his teeth were very bad. His hands, I noticed, with an unbelieving shock, were very large and strong. (pp. 251-252)

This description has an uncanny resemblance to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Along with the mentioning of garlic and a crucifix—two things used in *Dracula* to keep vampires away—is the focus on

teeth, lips, and hands. Johnathan Harker comments often on the teeth of Count Dracula. He notes that the Count, "with a grim sort of smile, which showed more than he had yet done his protuberant teeth, sat himself down again on his own side of the fireplace" (p. 27). Johnathan grows infatuated with the red lips of female vampires. He also takes note of Count Dracula's large, dangerous hands, which he notices "were rather coarse—broad, with squat fingers. Strange to say, there were hairs in the center of the palm. The nails were long and fine, and cut to a sharp point" (p. 27). Hands are also one of the defining details of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Stevenson writes that "the hand of Henry Jekyll … was professional in shape and size; it was large, firm, white and comely. But the hand which I now saw … lying half shut on the bedclothes, was lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair. It was the hand of Edward Hyde" (p. 51). In both *Dracula* and *Jekyll and Hyde*, large, thick hands reveal the monstrosity of a character. The same happens in *Giovanni's Room*, as David views the strong hands of the person he meets as a detail worthy of "shock." The comparison of a gender nonconforming person to a mummy or vampire, or any kind of monster, is grossly disrespectful, yet it simultaneously affirms how the Gothic genre serves as a space for describing identities outside of the status quo.

Even as David is repulsed by this gender nonconforming figure, he later suggests that his own relationship to Giovanni shares some similarities in its queerness to the nonconforming individual's identity. At the end of the chapter where David meets this individual in Paris, David says,

> Giovanni will be rotting soon in unhallowed ground near Paris. Until I die there will be those moments, moments seeming to rise up out of the ground like Macbeth's witches, when his face will come before me, that face in all its changes, when the exact timbre of his voice and tricks of his speech will nearly burst my ears, when his smell will overpower my nostrils. (p. 254)

Here, Giovanni is the one described as undead, with an overwhelming stench. Rising out of his coffin, Giovanni becomes the figure of a mummy or vampire that David, once afraid of, is now seduced by. David dreams of "the touch of hands, of Giovanni's hands, or anybody's hands, hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again" (p. 292). David senses that Giovanni's hands hold a monstrous power, like those of the nonconforming person he met, or perhaps those of Dracula's or Mr. Hyde's. However, he now seems to embrace this power. He does not always embrace this power, however, for he begins to question what it means that his lover, Giovanni, is also a monster.

Alone in Giovanni's room, with his fiancé in another country, David finds himself in a position like Johnathan Harker's at the start of *Dracula*. David, of course, is not actually held captive by Giovanni, as Johnathan is by the Count, but he does frequently feel trapped. Giovanni's room is often compared to the bottom of the sea. David says, "Life in this room seemed to be occurring under water" (p. 289), as if he is submerged here, lost and enclosed in the unexplored depths of the ocean floor. David even says, "Giovanni was dragging me to the bottom of the sea" (p. 314). Johnathan Harker, also stuck, finds himself emasculated. He notes that where he sleeps and writes in his journal, "of old, ladies had sat and sung and lived sweet lives whilst their gentle breasts were sad for their menfolk away in the midst of remorseless wars" (p. 45). At the same time, he secretly suggests an enjoyment in being so desired by the vampires trapping him. Stumbling upon a terrifying scene, about to be attacked by vampires, Johnathan, within the chaos of startling descriptions of blood and teeth and horror, slips in that "I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips" (p. 46). Later, he notes "a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive" (p. 47) about the female vampires. Johnathan grows infuriated with being trapped, forced to sleep in what was once a lady's room, but he also suggests a strange pleasure in his situation; in being preyed on. David also becomes frustrated by being trapped in a position of domesticity. David says to Giovanni,

> You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little girl. (p. 337)

Giovanni and David fight, and eventually, David leaves, never to see Giovanni again. As he leaves, he thinks about apologizing, but David notes, "Any yielding at that moment would have locked me forever in that room with him. And in a way this was exactly what I wanted" (p. 339). David secretly admits that being stuck in this room is something he wants, that it is not only Giovanni's wishes keeping him there, but really, it is his own desire. He cannot say this to Giovanni, or anyone, however. He cannot say that cooking and cleaning and caring for Giovanni, acting as his stereotypical 1950s housewife, is something he secretly does want. To say this would be as strange as Johnathan Harker admitting he secretly enjoys being the object of Count Dracula's and the female vampires' desire. David sees Giovanni as a monster, and despite how obviously in love he is with Giovanni, he cannot find it in himself to admit to any mutual wanting.

Giovanni, like Count Dracula, meets the cruel fate of a blade to his neck. Traditionally, the only way to eliminate a vampire—notorious for being difficult to kill—is decapitation. Count Dracula, with a desire for the blood of all genders, and the act of sucking blood described in a very sexual manner, can be interpreted as a queer character. Much scholarship exists on this topic. As Samantha Kountz and Dr. Isabella Norton state in their 2021 article "*Where There is Love, Why not?*": *Queer Love and Storytelling in* Dracula *and Bram Stoker's* Dracula, "In light of contemporary discoveries and discussions about Bram Stoker's biography, modern criticism of *Dracula* has often taken a queer stance" (31). The novel *Dracula* ends with a cast of strong, heterosexual men defeating this vampire, performing a supposed public service for the world. Likewise, the guillotine that Giovanni faces through capital punishment is meant to serve as a heroic solution, killing a queer man that most of Paris views as an enemy. The similarities between *Giovanni's Room* and *Dracula* highlight the role of sexuality and gender in the making of a monster—how appearance, sexual deviance, and a disturbance of perceived gender roles are used to paint a character as monstrous.

*Giovanni's Room* is not the only text of Baldwin's that considers monstrosity and deviance, ideas influenced by a Victorian Gothic mode of writing. In his nonfiction essay, "Equal in Paris," Baldwin discusses a time where he found himself trapped in a prison cell while abroad in Paris. He begins the essay with a seemingly overt nod to Victorian literature, writing out the date and time, reminiscent of a classic epistolary or the iconic line from

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, "It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils" (p. 37). "Equal in Paris" begins, "On the 19th of December, in 1949, when I had been living in Paris for a little over a year, I was arrested as a receiver of stolen goods and spent eight days in prison" (p. 101). This nonfiction essay reads as a Gothic tale, telling the story of how Baldwin was arrested and his fear that he would be stuck in that cell for a few days. When he ran away from America, he created a twisted trap for himself. Baldwin's case was eventually dropped, but while he waited behind prison walls, he contemplated Paris' justice system—including the use of the guillotine—and met a handful of characters trapped with him, invisible to the world outside. There were prisoners, "scrapings off the Paris streets," that were old ghostly shells of human beings, "simply the clay which had once been touched," and younger, vampiric men "with faces the color of lead and the consistency of oatmeal" (p. 109). It seems that in Baldwin's own account, monsters exist in hidden parts of Paris. Published just before *Giovanni's Room*, "Equal in Paris" gives us a glimpse into Baldwin's discovery of an unseen layer of Paris. Baldwin wrote that "silence is really all I remember of those first three days, silence and the color gray" (p. 112), a very melancholic, gothic attitude. Through the epistolary-like introduction, the horrid descriptions of the prisoners he encounters, and details like being "led through a maze of steps and corridors" (p. 108), this essay seems to be in conversation with Gothic literature. Perhaps, finding himself imprisoned in Europe, fearing for his life, Baldwin thought of the writers before him who experienced or wrote about similar situations of imprisonment: a line of thinking which would easily have led him to the authors of the Victorian Gothic genre.

It cannot be known if, while in Europe, James Baldwin thought of Oscar Wilde, a Victorian writer who was famously imprisoned and who also spent a portion of his life living abroad in Paris. Intentionally or not, however, Baldwin was likely influenced by Wilde. Wilde, who wrote the Gothic tale of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was an Aesthete. As such, he argued in favor of art for art's sake, a theoretical framework for appreciating immense beauty and detail without there having to be a meaning behind it—enjoying art and literature for the pure sake of enjoying it. In James Baldwin's essay "Princes and Powers," Baldwin defends this very theory Wilde helped popularize, saying "art for art's sake is not a concept which makes any sense in Africa" (p. 150). Giovanni's Room is known, among many qualities, for its specificity of detail like the "zinc-covered counter" (p. 259), the "courtyard malevolently pressed," and "the wall paper on the floor, in great sheets and scrolls, in dust" (p. 289). These details—from the dust on the floor to the material of the counter—are much like the details of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written in just as elaborate and flamboyant of sentences, sentences which run on with descriptions, because beauty, for the pure sake of beauty, is valued, in Wilde's novel, to the highest degree. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* opens with a studio:

> filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn. (p. 5)

The title, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is a double entendre, for the novel is about a painting of Dorian Gray, but the book itself reads as a painted picture of Wilde as well. Wilde, like Baldwin, paints a picture with words. Furthermore, much like Wilde—and his contemporary, Bram Stoker—Baldwin was inspired by Walt Whitman. *Giovanni's Room* begins with a Whitman epigraph: "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (p. 219). On the surface, Baldwin—a Black, civil rights era writer—might not seem to have much in common with the Victorians. Nevertheless, he does share, at least with Oscar Wilde, a similar love for language and detail and beauty, and an interest in art for art's sake. In specific comparison to Wilde, he also shares the lived experience of being an imprisoned queer man and of achieving the status of being both a celebrity and an outcast.

After spending time in the prison of Reading Gaol, Wilde wrote a poem titled "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," a dark, pessimistic tale. The long poem ends:

> The man had killed the thing he loved,
> And so he had to die.
>
> And all men kill the thing they love,
> By all let this be heard,
> Some do it with a bitter look,
> Some with a flattering word,
> The coward does it with a kiss,
> The brave man with a sword. (Poetry Foundation)

When Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover with whom he was tried for crimes of sodomy, asked him what he meant by this poem, Wilde responded, as Douglas records in his 1938 book *Without Apology*, "*You* ought to know" (p. 48). Douglas speculated that what Wilde meant by this poem:

> "was that if one loves anyone very much one is very apt to destroy him or her, or, more exactly, to destroy the image of the person created in one's own mind which is in truth what one loves and worships. You create an image of the beloved and then gradually and inevitably you kill it." (p. 48)

This is a line of reasoning which makes sense for a couple that has been forced apart, with only a mental image of the other to hold onto—and, eventually, to let go of. In *Giovanni's Room*, David similarly contemplates the fate of a socially forbidden relationship. Helping Giovanni move bricks from his apartment, David narrates that

> "it really seemed for an instant that if I did not go to [Giovanni], we would use these bricks to beat each other to death … I dropped my brick and went to him. In a moment I heard his fall. And at moments like this I felt that we were merely enduring and committing the longer and lesser and more perpetual murder." (p. 317)

Here, "lesser and more perpetual" seems awfully reminiscent of Douglas' phrasing, "gradually and inevitably." David and Giovanni do not beat each other to death, but when Giovanni later dies, David seems oddly responsible. In one of the most Gothic moments of the novel, that reads as if it were written by the hand of a Victorian writer, David describes how

> "the hours of this night begin to dwindle and now, with every second that passes on the clock, the blood at the bottom of my heart begins to boil, to bubble, and I know that no matter what I do anguish is about to overtake me in this house, as naked and silver as that great knife which Giovanni will be facing very soon" (p. 311).

It is hard to read this without thinking of the "longer and lesser and more perpetual murder," as if David's failure to kill Giovanni with a brick somehow led to this inevitable, more drawn out death, and now David must live with the pain and guilt of a slower, crueler murder. It is also difficult to not think of the aforementioned "walls, windows, mirrors, water" (p. 311), the mostly reflective surfaces where David sees himself, wondering if he is Giovanni's executioner, if he is a force of evil. *Giovanni's Room* may feel Gothic because it is, in a sense, a more fully realized version of Wilde's own Gothic writing, a rendition of the line "all men kill the thing they love," an account of how a gay man, prevented from being with another man—prevented by himself, by the law, and by the world around him—ends up, somehow, tragically killing the one he loves, destroying the image of his beloved.

Baldwin shines a light on the many queer themes of Gothic literature, conversing with the ideas of Oscar Wilde and painting his own queer, Gothic tale into *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin, however, was not the only Black twentieth century author to reimagine the Gothic genre. The undead, with all their peculiarities, function as a means of manipulating time. Whether it is Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, Sheridan Le Fanu's *An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street*, or Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, ghost stories show a dead predecessor communicating with a location's new occupants. Similarly, vampire stories such as Stoker's *Dracula*, Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, and John William Polidori's *The Vampyre*, depict an undead being that is near impossible to defeat, preying on victims for entire millennia. In the twentieth century, these gothic stories served well for American writers contemplating a lingering legacy of racial discrimination, wishing to portray how the problems of their past continued to haunt and occupy their present. The ghosts of *Giovanni's Room* are not as literal as the ghost of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Beloved*, however, contemplates a complex history of slavery in America, while *Giovanni's Room* contemplates a complex history of homosexuality in the Western world. In addition, the vampiric characters of *Giovanni's Room* are not literally vampires, as are the vampires of Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*, but both Baldwin and Butler may have used the traditionally Victorian Gothic trope of vampires to suggest a timeless, persistent struggle. The reintroduction of Victorian Gothic themes into twentieth century Black American literature resurrected the power of the undead: the power, that is, to overlap the past with the present. Ghosts and vampires remind a reader that the past never truly disappears.

There is plenty of reason to believe that James Baldwin may have been interested in the Victorian Gothic—whether that be the overlap in Baldwin's and Wilde's theories of art and life or the context with which other twentieth century writers around Baldwin were considering the Gothic genre. Regardless of James Baldwin's exact intentions, however, *Giovanni's Room* appears to be in direct conversation with Victorian Gothic literature. *Giovanni's Room* explores the monstrosity of women, the invisibility of ghosts, and the repulsion and seduction of vampires, all themes which find their roots in Victorian Gothic novels and can be observed through a particularly queer lens. *Giovanni's Room* does not write queerness into the Gothic; rather, it simply recenters the queerness that has always been lying under the surface of this popular genre. Queerness, after all, is a word that for most of history has meant strange and disturbing. Before it was directly associated with gender and sexuality, it was in some cases another word for gothic. Queerness, now broadly defined as any identity which opposes the status quo, has taken on a new meaning. But it may, in some ways, still be synonymous with the term gothic. *Giovanni's Room*, as a queer Baldwinian Gothic, shows how the Gothic is not only a genre of terrifying, nightmarish tropes, but it is also a necessary space for exploring identities that are unsettling and uncomfortable to the status quo. It is a genre heavily related to queer literature. In recognizing *Giovanni's Room* as a Gothic novel, the parallels between Gothic and queer literature become more apparent. If we can consider this exceptionally queer novel as Gothic, we can begin to reconsider more Gothic novels as queer. Doing so can help create a lineage of queer writing across time. We can explore more thoroughly how contemporary queer literature has been constructed out of the remains of a dead Victorian genre.

## References


Baldwin, J. (1998). Equal in Paris (T. Morrison, Ed.). In James Baldwin: Collected essays (pp. 101–116). Library of America.

Baldwin, J. (1998). Giovanni's room (T. Morrison, Ed.). In James Baldwin: Early novels and stories (pp. 217–360). Library of America.

Baldwin, J. (1998). Princes and powers (T. Morrison, Ed.). In James Baldwin: Collected essays (pp. 143–169). Library of America.

Haefele-Thomas, Ardel (2012). Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity. University of Wales Press.

Kountz, S., & Norton, I. (2021). "Where There Is Love, Why Not?": Queer Love and Storytelling in Dracula and Bram Stoker's Dracula. Journal of Dracula Studies, 23, 31–54.

Shelley, M. (2022). Frankenstein (J. P. Hunter, Ed., 3rd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Stevenson, R. L. (2021). Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (D. Lutz, Ed., 2nd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Stoker, B. (2022). Dracula (J. E. Browning & D. J. Skal, Eds., 3rd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Wilde, O. (n.d.). The ballad of Reading Gaol. Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45495/the-ballad-of-reading-gaol

Wilde, O. (2022). The picture of Dorian Gray (M. P. Gillespie, Ed., 3rd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Wesling, M. (2022). "The grisly act of love:" Monstrous women in Giovanni's Room. MFS Modern Fiction Studies, 68(3), 434–459. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Douglass, A. (1938). Without apology. The Richards Press.