

Giovanni's Room Study Guide

Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

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Contents

Giovanni's Room Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part One: Chapter One.....	5
Part One: Chapter Two.....	7
Part One: Chapter Three.....	9
Part Two: Chapter One.....	11
Part Two: Chapter Two.....	12
Part Two: Chapter Three.....	14
Part Two: Chapter Four.....	16
Part Two: Chapter Five.....	19
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	24
Themes.....	26
Style.....	28
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

The story opens with David waiting in his apartment on the day Giovanni is scheduled to be executed. He reflects on how he discovered his own homosexuality and the various ways he tried to resist, including his relationship with Hella. His resistance broke down, at least partially, when he met Giovanni however, but his shame prevented him from falling fully in love.

David's mother died when he was very young—about five years old—and so he is raised mainly by his father and his aunt, Ellen. From very early on, his father seems either incapable or unwilling to truly be a father and wants to, instead, just be David's friend. David is never satisfied with this relationship but realizes after a serious automobile accident that he and his father will never have the kind of intimacy that he wants. When he is a young boy—probably about thirteen or fourteen—he has his a sexual encounter with Joey, his best friend. He is so ashamed by it—and so worried that he will lose his masculinity—that he completely cuts Joey out of his life and hardly speaks to him. He keeps his sexuality a dark secret, a secret which becomes a great burden to him.

When he arrives in Europe he meets Hella, an American girl who also happens to be traveling through Europe. The two start dating and it becomes serious enough that David asks her to marry him, though he is not at all sure that he truly loves her. She decides to take some time away, in Spain, to think about it. Meanwhile, David meets Giovanni, the barman at a Paris gay bar. Jacques, who is openly gay, is attracted to Giovanni, but the latter shows no interest in him. David and Giovanni, however, hit it off immediately and talk at length. David is very unsure of himself and what he wants to do, but Giovanni is very aggressive with his attraction. The two wind up having sex that night.

David is almost completely out of money and so decides to live with Giovanni. The months they spend together almost seem like they occur in some other dimension, out of time. David is unquestionably happy with Giovanni but is not willing to completely open up with him. He is still held back by the shame over his sexuality. He receives a letter from Hella telling him that she has decided to return to Paris and has accepted his marriage proposal. He is terribly conflicted and does not know whether he wants to stay with Giovanni or have a "normal" life with Hella. In order to prove to himself that he is still attracted to women, he has a casual sexual encounter with an acquaintance named Sue, but the encounter does nothing to encourage him; indeed, his lack of interest in Sue only makes him think a relationship with Hella will be hopeless in the long term.

When he returns to Giovanni's room, Giovanni is in a frenzy. His boss at the bar, Guillaume, fired him and he suspects that it was out of jealousy over his relationship with David. Giovanni wound up getting so angry that he punched Guillaume and was thrown out. The two now face a truly dismal financial situation, for neither has a job and they have only a little money between them. David says he will write his father and get some money, but puts it off; he wants to decide what he is going to do with Hella first.



Hella finally returns and David sneaks out of the room and spends several days with her without talking to or seeing Giovanni. Their first few days together are happy, but David quickly begins to suspect that his feelings for her do not run very deeply. They run into Jacques and Giovanni at a bookstore. Giovanni, evidently, has been devastated by David's disappearance. They plan to go out for drinks together, but David stands them up and instead stays with Hella. He goes to Giovanni's room the next day—ostensibly to retrieve some of his belongings—and has a last, heated argument with him. Giovanni says that David was too scared to really embrace their relationship and, as a result, never really opened himself up to Giovanni. David insists that it is absurd to think there could be anything between them because they are both men. This argument has little effect on Giovanni, though, and he points out that David should know what they could have based on what they have already had. Though David knows he loves Giovanni—more than he could ever love Hella—he refuses to cave in and leaves.

David returns to Hella and they make plans to leave Paris, perhaps for somewhere in the south of France. They then hear the news that Guillaume, Giovanni's boss, has been murdered and Giovanni is the primary suspect. While traveling France, David keeps apprised of Giovanni's situation through the newspapers and what their mutual friend, Jacques, tells him. He is caught about a week after the murder and is eventually sentenced to death. David is unmistakably distraught by Giovanni's fortune and winds up spending several days having sex with a sailor and his friends. Hella discovers him and finally understands why David has been so distant. She leaves him as soon as she can to return to America. David stays in France until the day of Giovanni's execution.



Part One: Chapter One

Part One: Chapter One Summary

David, the narrator, looks back on his past relationships. Hella was the woman he felt most strongly for, but he realizes now that there was never a great amount of substance to their relationship, even though by all appearances their relationship was quite serious. He even told her that he loved her once, but he realized even at the time that, to some extent, he could not really mean it. Their relationship began to decay when he met Giovanni in Paris and David recalls fonder times, before Giovanni was executed.

David was, admittedly, a rather prolific liar, but the one lie that he truly regrets is when he told Giovanni he had never slept with another man before. There was another when he was younger, a boy named Joey. The two were good friends and were nearly inseparable. One day after they went swimming, David felt a new, subtle tension swimming. After they had changed out of their bathing suits, David felt a reluctance to put on clothes and sensed the same reluctance in Joey. In the middle of the night, Joey woke David up, seemingly on accident, and David playfully scolded him. His playfulness had a new effect, though, and the two found themselves kissing. They let their desires take over and spent a night of pleasure with one another. When David woke up in the morning, however, he was filled with shame. He feared his masculinity, which as a boy was not even fully his yet, was slipping away from him. He resolved, therefore, to put away these desires. He barely lingered around after Joey woke up and left. They saw each other only rarely over the summer and when they did, David made it a point to be mean to Joey. Joey eventually moved away and they never saw one another again.

David cannot locate what the seeds of his desires were, but knows they must be somewhere in his childhood. His mother died while he was still very young and so he was raised by his father and aunt. The two did not really get along well at all. His father generally had a very mild temperament but when he did become angry, it was often explosive. David recalls Ellen, his aunt, as constantly being all dressed up for no particular occasion, always with a book in her hands or knitting. Ellen was very judgmental and critical of her brother and, whenever company was over, she would watch him like a hawk to make sure he did nothing improper. Though his mother was dead for most of his childhood, David always felt her presence, symbolized by her picture on the mantle. He tried to learn more about her from his father and aunt, but they always seemed to hold her in such high reverence that could not speak honestly about her.

As David matured into a young man, his father tried to transform their relationship into a friendship. David, however, did not want a buddy; he wanted a father. David got drunk one night and crashed a car into a telephone pole. He was not seriously injured (and neither was anyone else), but he was knocked unconscious. When he woke up in the hospital, his father was there over him. Despite David's serious error in judgment, his father showed no desire to chastise him. His primary concern was to make sure that



everything was fine between the two of them and he promised that they would figure out David's future when he was recovered. David decided not to enter college but instead wound up entering the military for a few years before moving to Europe. He was still resolved to salvage his masculinity but realized such a masculinity was an exercise more of self-deception in willpower. He could not forever escape who he was and, looking back, realizes that his homosexuality is perhaps a large part of the reason for his move to Europe.

Part One: Chapter One Analysis

The dominant theme of this chapter is David's struggle to accept his homosexuality as a young man and his various attempts to "be a man." His resolution begins by immaturely ignoring it and trying to erase the living reminder of it: Joey. He cruelly mistreats Joey and perhaps breaks his heart all so he can selfishly recover the manhood he perceives that he lost. Of course, this does not really work, as his desires run deeper than any specific encounter, and he "relapses" into his homosexuality when he joins the military and, once again, winds up involved in the destruction of the object of his desire, the soldier who winds up being court-marshaled.

David is desperate to understand the causes of his homosexuality, implying the controversial assumption that his sexuality is a result not of his genetics but of his upbringing. One typical explanation seems to be immediately out of the window: Freud suggested homosexuality was caused by an overbearing mother, but David's mother was altogether absent from his life from the time he was five. His aunt was certainly not much of a maternal figure and not overbearing, whatever other faults she had. His relationship with his father was clearly unsatisfactory, however. He never felt like he really had a father, in a sense, at least when he needed him the most. His father does not seem emotionally capable of raising a child and instead turns his son into something like a good friend instead of a child. Perhaps David is suggesting that this lack of a good, male parental figure is a contributing factor to his homosexuality.

At the same time, the reader must remain open to the possibility that David is simply wrong. Perhaps his desire to retrieve his masculinity has just taken a new, evolved form. He no longer tries to deny his homosexuality but there is a sense in which it can be nullified if it can be traced back to some childhood trauma. If he is a homosexual because his father raised him wrong, his sexuality is not really part of his identity but the scar of an unfortunate childhood.



Part One: Chapter Two

Part One: Chapter Two Summary

David met Giovanni during his second year in Paris while he was still involved with his girlfriend, Hella, though she was then in Spain. David has just been kicked out of his apartment because he had accrued a significant amount of debt and is forced to rely upon the generosity of his openly gay friend, Jacques. Jacques also later refused to help Giovanni when he needed it most and feared that his refusal played a part in whatever crime Giovanni committed that led ultimately to his execution.

David and Jacques go to a bar frequented by gay men—including some rather flamboyant transvestites—the night after David is evicted. Giovanni had recently started there as the bartender and he immediately catches Jacques' eyes. David encourages him to try to pick him up, but Giovanni is clearly not interested; they are not even sure he is gay. While Jacques is detained by the bar owner, Guillaume, David and Giovanni talk at length and show an immediate chemistry. Though never explicit, Giovanni aggressively makes his interest in David clear and David is attracted but reluctant to show it. The two discuss the differences between Europe and America and Giovanni's home. He was born in Italy, a country which, he claims, is much more relaxed than France, which is obsessed with precision and order.

Giovanni is forced to return to his work, but their conversation attracts the attention of the others in the club—to David's embarrassment—but he tries to play it off like nothing. Jacques is not so convinced it is nothing, though, and admits that he is quite confused by David's behavior. David could not fool himself; he knew he was attracted to Giovanni and realized that his interest in Hella, already weak, was waning even more.

Part One: Chapter Two Analysis

The reader must be careful in keeping track of the chronology of the events in the story as Baldwin sometimes does not make it entirely clear what happens when. It might seem that David has the conversation with Jacques about Giovanni's execution on the same day that David is supposed to meet Jacques, but Baldwin is, in fact, referring to a conversation that happens much later, perhaps to shed light on Jacques' character.

It is interesting to note that though David is still ostensibly resolved to repress his homosexuality, his behavior often seems to be motivated, at least subconsciously, by his sexuality. He has already said this explicitly about his decision to move to Europe at the end of the first chapter, and his actions in chapter two follow this same pattern. He is certainly not attracted to Jacques, but he has no problem being around a gay man—a man truly worried about his sexuality might want to keep such an obvious reminder away from him at all costs—nor does he shun going to what is effectively a gay bar. The

pressure of his true sexuality seems to be mounting, and Giovanni's aggressive flirtation seems to be enough to coax David out of his shell.



Part One: Chapter Three

Part One: Chapter Three Summary

The bar closes at five in the morning and the four of them—David, Jacques, Guillaume, and Giovanni—pile tightly into a taxi to have breakfast in Les Halles. As they approach their destination, they are stuck in abysmally heavy traffic. There is some kind of farmer's market taking place and the taxi constantly has to stop for pedestrians and carts. David is very uncomfortable. Guillaume and Jacques subtly joke about Giovanni and David, and David is somewhat ashamed to be with the two of them anyway; both of them are significantly older than he and Giovanni are. Additionally, Guillaume and Jacques are unabashedly giving their opinions on the men who walk by.

They finally reach their destination, a dirty little diner which Giovanni, evidently, once frequented. Everyone in the bar recognizes him and the woman behind the register, a large, older woman called Madame Clothilde, greets him with an embrace. While Giovanni introduces his companions, Jacques and Guillaume become distracted by all the young men in the bar. The men order drinks and Jacques takes a moment away from his flirtation to talk to David. He knows what is happening between David and Giovanni and urges David not to shut out Giovanni. Jacques offers himself as a morality tale: Jacques is what will become of David if David lets his youth escape him. Guillaume's love life is truly empty, filled only by meaningless and purely physical encounters. What David has before him has the potential to be true love. It may not last forever, or even very long, but, he says, one never regrets falling in love.

When Giovanni is done talking to some old friend of his, Jacques returns to his flirtation with a boy at the bar and David and Giovanni go into the dining room to eat. David asks how Giovanni met Guillaume. Giovanni explains that he was in desperate need of work, both for money and so he could legally stay in the country, and he evidently piqued Guillaume's interest. He allowed Guillaume to touch him somewhat but was always disgusted by it and only thought of it as a means to an end. After they finish dinner, David says he wants to go home but Giovanni insists that David come to his apartment. When they arrived, they almost immediately start kissing and end up having sex.

Back in the present, David is preparing to leave the apartment where he is staying. The landlady comes by to take stock of the dishes and furniture and ensure everything is in proper order. Though she does not know David well, she seems to care about his welfare and asks about Hella, his ex-girlfriend, and if he plans to marry her. Not wanting to divulge anything that would scandalize the woman, and perhaps a bit embarrassed, he tells her that Hella has gone back to America and that they have no future together. She tells him he ought to settle down with a woman and start a family and then urges him to be regular in his prayers. The woman leaves and tells him not to wake her up the morning; he can, she says, just put the key in her mailbox.



Part One: Chapter Three Analysis

In this chapter, David finally gives in to his homosexuality and realizes that he cannot escape it. It should be noted that Giovanni is not entirely responsible for their having sex. Giovanni's aggressiveness is surely a large factor, and perhaps without it, David would never open up. However, David clearly puts himself in position for the events to happen; therefore, it might be said that David is passively responsible while Giovanni is actively responsible.

His willingness to accept himself is preceded by a realization of the effects of his false self-identity, for example, in realizing how badly he treats Jacques. By acknowledging that he treats Jacques with contempt because he sees in Jacques something he hates in himself, and by repenting of that contempt, David is indirectly affirming the legitimacy of his own sexuality.

Jacques' "vision" can be interpreted in a few ways. It is clear that Jacques recognizes the strong attraction between David and Giovanni. However, what he means when he warns David that David will become like Jacques is not clear. One interpretation could be that Jacques is implying that when a gay man becomes old and unattractive, his love life is going to decay. Jacques seems to have sex frequently enough; he just cannot seem to find a loving relationship. Why exactly an older gay man cannot find a committed relationship is unclear, but that seems to be a legitimate statement about at least the Parisian gay community, the experience of its source.

Part Two: Chapter One

Part Two: Chapter One Summary

After their sexual encounter, David, with nowhere else to go, moves in with Giovanni. The days passed there seem almost surreal, as if time were not really passing, but more difficult, sadder times are yet to come. Hella eventually returns from Spain and David, with money borrowed from his father, leaves Giovanni's room. Until then, however, the two spend most of their time together. David does not hide his relationship with Hella from Giovanni, and Giovanni inevitably becomes jealous. He tries to convince David that she is probably sleeping with men in France. David, still struggling with shame over his sexuality, acts almost as if there is nothing but friendship between the two, but Giovanni purposefully makes it a point. David insists that whatever there is between them will end when Hella returns and that she must never find out about Giovanni because it would hurt her too much.

Giovanni leaves David to go to work. David, meanwhile, gloomily contemplates the difficulty of his situation. He is frustrated at his new desires and blames Giovanni for them. As the intensity of his love increases, so, too, does the intensity of his hatred.

Part Two: Chapter One Analysis

Though more accepting of his sexuality than in his encounter with Joey, David is still obviously going through a number of psychological hoops to try to be at peace with himself. He seems hardly capable of acknowledging his relationship with Giovanni and Giovanni, eager, perhaps, to take their relationship to a more serious level, is only too ready to make it an issue. Giovanni is unwilling to be victimized by David's ambivalence and is clearly presenting a choice to him. David, however, is angry that he has to make the choice at all—between Hella, who represents normalcy, and Giovanni, the person he truly loves—and therefore projects that unhappiness on Giovanni.



Part Two: Chapter Two

Part Two: Chapter Two Summary

The afternoon after their first sexual encounter, David feels awkward. He wakes up first and feels like he wants to escape, but is too timid to do so. Ultimately, he decides to move in with Giovanni, but his motives are mixed; in retrospect, he realizes that it was a move out of desperation more than anything. While Giovanni works, David takes on the role of housewife, to an extent, at least to make himself feel useful. He is disgusted by the disorderly nature of Giovanni's room and realizes that the disorder does not seem to come from a normal source, like laziness, but from a tortured and miserable soul.

One day David goes to the American Express to get his mail. Giovanni never comes with him; he feels awkward about being around so many Americans. David's nationality becomes a sensitive point in the relationship. Whenever Giovanni is mad at him, he uses the fact that he is American as a kind of insult, and it strikes David particularly deeply because it makes him feel like he is nothing but an American. Giovanni thinks that all Americans speak and look the same, but David knows how untrue it is. Yet, he cannot deny a certain homogeneity when he enters the American Express and sourly notices that everyone does seem like some kind of country rube in comparison to the French. He gets two letters, one from his father and one from Hella. He has been fearing the latter for some time and puts off reading it. His father is angry that he hardly writes to him and wants to at least know what he is doing. He very much wants David to come back home and promises to help him do so. His father conspicuously does not ask if David is seeing a woman, and David realizes it is because an answer in the negative would make the gulf between them too obvious.

He heads to a cafe to read Hella's letter but on the way out is struck by a look he receives from an American. He realizes that the sailor saw a certain desire in his eyes and the look the sailor gave him was similar to the look he probably gave while carousing whatever port his ship happened to occupy. In her letter, Hella tells him that she has decided to accept his marriage proposal and move back to Paris in just ten days. The finality of her decision should worry him, as he is now torn by his new and altogether different love, but the pressure of this situation makes him numb. In a way, he is relieved, because it gives a certain amount of closure to the situation. Even if it will not make him as happy to be with Hella, at least he knows now what will happen.

He feels a sudden urge to be with a woman. The urge is not lustful; rather, he wants to prove to himself (and, perhaps, to the world) that he enjoys women. He wants a confirmation of his masculinity. He runs into a woman he barely knows named Sue and very aggressively proposes that they drink at her place. David is not really attracted to her—she does not have a very appealing body—but forces himself to go through with the act anyway. Afterward, he feels a similar kind of shame that he felt after having sex with Giovanni and the same desire to escape. He had sought out Sue—or someone like her—to console himself by showing that he was still attracted to women, but the plan



backfired. Thinking of Hella's arrival terrifies him now and he fears whether he could ever love her. Sue realizes the casual nature of the encounter but wants at least a little more than he does. She asks if they can do it again sometime but concludes from his reaction that she was nothing more than an outlet for his loneliness. He leaves her apartment and starts home.

Part Two: Chapter Two Analysis

David finds all the relationships around him breaking down and realizes he is sliding into a kind of miserable loneliness. He is uncertain whether he can have a meaningful relationship with Hella and, perhaps, is starting to realize that maybe there was never substance there to begin with. His relationship with his father has deteriorated greatly with the passage of time and the great physical distance between them. He realizes his father hardly knows him anymore; he is not even the buddy his father had always wanted. When David seeks comfort in a sexual encounter with Sue, it only casts more doubt on his future with Hella. It is only natural that David blames his homosexuality for all of this. If he were a "normal," heterosexual man, life would be much easier. Marrying Hella would not be a difficult decision and he could start the kind of typical life that everyone else, it seemed, had. Insofar as Giovanni is the tangible representation of David's sexuality, he also becomes the victim of David's projected self-contempt.

It would be unfair, however, to say that David is the only one with problems in the relationship. David has begun to realize how miserable Giovanni is, even if the source of the misery is not entirely clear. The misery is symbolized by the disorder in Giovanni's room. David's attempt to clean it up—which is ultimately futile—surely foreshadows the hopeless fate of their relationship.



Part Two: Chapter Three

Part Two: Chapter Three Summary

On his way back to Giovanni's room, David finds himself seriously considering suicide for the first time in his life. When he was younger he thought about it, perhaps as everyone does, but then it had more the character of rebellion than anything. This time, it seems an increasingly legitimate solution to the romantic tangle in which he found himself.

When he comes home, he finds Giovanni in a frenzied state. Giovanni jealously asks where he has been, but David manages to evade giving an answer. Giovanni explains that he has been fired from his job. Guillaume, he says, had been becoming increasingly combative with him. He blames the conflict on Guillaume's jealousy over his relationship with David. He accuses Giovanni of being a thief and plotting to rob him. The accusations send Giovanni into a rage and he winds up punching Guillaume before being thrown out.

Giovanni is desperate to hear David promise a commitment to him. Giovanni says there is nothing else in the world worth living for and without David, he threatens, he might not survive much longer. David, anxious to calm his friend, gives his promise. The two, now both unemployed, pool their money together and conclude that they have enough to last at least for awhile. David says that he will wire his father and get some money.

Back in the narrative's present, David contemplates Giovanni's situation now, what his prison cell looks like, whether he knows he will be executed soon. He is moved almost to tears just thinking about the most minute details of Giovanni's condition, like if his hair has been cut or if he has shaved. He cannot help wondering, though, if execution will be a kind of relief and release from Giovanni's miserable existence.

Though he promised to do so, David puts off writing his father. He has already determined that he will say that he plans to marry Hella but feels strange writing it without knowing whether it is a lie or not. The two are desperate for money and David lies each day about the money. They talk, hypothetically, about moving out of France. David suggests moving to Spain and excites Giovanni's jealousy. He insists that the suggestion had nothing to do with Hella; he simply had heard it was a pleasant and cheap place to live. David brings up the condition of Giovanni's room, which, to David, symbolizes the disorder of Giovanni's soul. Giovanni takes offense and senses, with terror, a growing rift between them. David never complained about the room before. David apologizes and insists he did not mean to hurt his feelings. Giovanni asks David to come to him and hug him, but David finds a new reluctance in himself. He sees their relationship only ending in violence and, when David finally concedes and goes to Giovanni, he realizes he is ultimately only making matters worse.



Part Two: Chapter Three Analysis

It is worth considering Giovanni's motives both in his conflict and his subsequent breakdown in front of David. The reader must consider that Giovanni might not be telling the truth, or at least the entire story. As told, Giovanni is more or less a victim: a hot-headed victim, but a victim nonetheless. Given how effective the situation is for evoking David's sympathy, and given Giovanni's recent fears that he is losing David, the timing of the firing is somewhat suspicious. Moreover, the circumstances of his firing only implicate David further, for, as portrayed, Giovanni basically got fired for staying with David. It would be very hard for David to leave him after all of that, and Giovanni surely knows that. Even if he is being completely honest, he at least is purposefully using it to exploit David's sympathy.

Of course, he is not really successful. He manages to secure David's outward loyalties, but David is not at all sure what he is going to do. Hella will arrive in several days and he purposefully puts off writing to his father to obtain money that the two of them need very much. From the present of the story, he reveals that Giovanni never saw any of the funds and, instead, he used them to move out.



Part Two: Chapter Four

Part Two: Chapter Four Summary

David finally receives a message from Hella telling him when she will arrive in Paris. When the day arrives, David slips out of Giovanni's room without telling him and meets her at the train station. When he sees her and embraces her, he is surprised by how happy he is. It feels natural for her to be in his arms and his fears that their relationship is hopeless begin to diminish. They still linger, though, and he tries to put off the discussion for their future together. She senses this distance but thinks that it is her fault. She worries that she took so long to accept his proposal that he had moved on from her. The topic of the letter comes up and David dishonestly claims that he was not sure what she meant in it, whether she had accepted his proposal or not. Sensing, perhaps, a bit of uneasiness in him, she tells him that if he has changed his mind, it is okay, but that she has decided that she wants to settle down, have a man come home to her every night, and start a family. David says that is what he wants, too, and when he lies down on the bed with her, he realizes how ready she is to begin their new life. David writes his father and tells him that he plans to marry Hella and, after a honeymoon in Europe, they will return to America. He asks that some of his money be sent as soon as possible.

David spends three days with Hella and neither sees nor mentions Giovanni. By chance, David and Hella run into Jacques in a bookstore. David desperately wants to get away but cannot help being pulled into conversation with him. Hella met Jacques previously and did not like him. Jacques asks David where he has been and informs him how miserable Giovanni has been. He has been without money or food and his situation was so desperate that Jacques had to run over to Giovanni's room to take care of him. Giovanni—who had stepped out to call David's hotel—comes into the bookstore. He is furious at David and begins to express his anger when David interrupts him and introduces Hella. This calms Giovanni down, at least for now, and Jacques suggests that the four of them go out for drinks. Hella says she is not feeling well after all the travel she's been through and declines the invitation but encourages David to go along. David says that, perhaps, he will catch up with them later and leaves with Hella. On the way back, he tries to answer Hella's questions about Giovanni. He explains that they were only roommates, purely by necessity, and that Giovanni is normally quite a good person, but that he was just out of sorts earlier. As they in bed, perhaps after having sex, Hella asks him more questions about Giovanni. She still does not completely understand their relationship. David says that he really does care for Giovanni, but Giovanni has a hard time believing it because Americans are much less expressive than Europeans. He then suggests that when the money from his father arrives, they take it and get out of Paris. He delays the question of marriage—he cannot think of anything while he is in Paris, he says—but insists that they must leave as soon as possible. Hella acquiesces.



The next evening David goes to Giovanni's room. Giovanni's face is puffy from weeping and he demands to know what is happening. He says he has been miserable, staying up each night waiting to hear David come. He laments that David really was never open to their love, even when things were better between them. David really never opened to Giovanni, who could sense the shame in David. Giovanni tells David that without David in his life, Giovanni has no reason to live. Before he came to Paris, he explains, he had a happy relationship with a woman in his village in Italy. She became pregnant, but the child was still-born. Giovanni was so upset by the tragedy that he tore the crucifix off the wall of their home and spit on it. He left Italy and, out of some kind of desperate hope, came to Paris. He believes that his current misery is probably a punishment for his blasphemy. David tries to evade Giovanni's questions and simply says that David should have known all along that Hella would come back and David would go back to her; he loves her, he says. Giovanni is infuriated and tells David that he is not capable of love because he is too filled with shame. David becomes impatient and asks Giovanni what he wants: What does he expect to come from their relationship? How can he expect a future between them? After all, they are both men. Giovanni insists that David is well aware what is possible between them because he has already experienced the love they shared. Giovanni decides it is useless for them to fight and express his hope to David that one day he will come back and they will be together again. David promises that it will not happen. They share some drinks and David spends the night—though, it seems, they do not have sex—and leaves the next morning.

On his way back to Hella's hotel, David is immersed in reflection. He thinks about how he dreamed of happiness as a young man and how such a dream seems so impossible and even dangerous to him now. While he and Hella plan where they will go next—somewhere in the south of France, though they are not yet sure exactly where—they spend almost all their time in her room and make love several times. They occasionally see Jacques or Giovanni around town, but the encounters are brief, silent, and awkward. He often sees Giovanni in the company of the same boys with whom Jacques was enamored. He met Giovanni's new boyfriend, Yves, one day and found out that Giovanni might get his old job back with Guillaume. A week later, David hears the news that Guillaume was found strangled to death in his bar.

Part Two: Chapter Four Analysis

This chapter consummates what is perhaps the novel's dominant theme: how David's shame has prevented him from being happy. Giovanni sees through all of David's defense mechanisms and realizes that David is too ashamed to open himself up to the "stink" of Giovanni's love, a stink which Giovanni is only too willing to accept. David's shame has victimized almost every major character in the novel at some point. It is a large part of the reason for the distance between himself and his father because the secret of his homosexuality was always a barrier that could not surmounted. His shame made him treat Jacques with contempt. Jacques is older and perhaps a somewhat dirty man, but really he does nothing to warrant the hatred David feels towards him. It is made explicit a few times—even Jacques himself realizes it—that David is really just



projecting his own self-hatred on Jacques. Of course, David is also being dishonest with Hella, and it is clear that their situation cannot end well. Though at first there is a certain amount of comfort and even happiness when they are reunited, it becomes obvious that whatever positive feelings there are between them are not going to last and, indeed, are already in jeopardy. Of course, the greatest victim of David's shame is Giovanni. David was the lone bright spot in Giovanni's life, but David is unwilling to really fall in love with Giovanni and when the opportunity for a "normal" life with Hella is within reach, David immediately abandons Giovanni.

However, it would be incorrect to think David is the cause of all of Giovanni's misery. Giovanni is clearly troubled in his own right, a fact which has been known all along, symbolized by the disorder in his room. The source of his trouble is now clear, however. He experienced the immense tragedy of a dead child while he was in Italy and that seems to be the point at which he realized that there was no happiness in the quintessentially normal life in his Italian village. His repudiation of tradition, perhaps, is symbolized by his spitting on the crucifix. From then on, he would set out on his own and live according to what he wanted, no longer bound by the structures society imposed upon him. It seems, though, that those structures supported him as much as they constrained him and, therefore, he finds himself immensely vulnerable in his new Parisian homosexual lifestyle.



Part Two: Chapter Five

Part Two: Chapter Five Summary

Giovanni is immediately pegged as Guillaume's murderer and all the evidence, indeed, points in that direction, especially Giovanni's sudden disappearance. The murder became the big news story while Giovanni is still on the lam. Guillaume was the last remaining member of some ancient, prestigious French family and the French press saw in the murder a symbolic loss of French history. David, who always detested Guillaume, concludes with everyone else that Giovanni appears to be the murderer. When Hella seems shocked that David could have lived with someone who would become a murderer, David becomes angry. He says that no one can really know someone well enough to know of what they are capable. Hoping to console him, she says that they will soon get away from all of it and leave Paris.

Giovanni is finally caught, about a week after the murder took place. Though many speculators had imagined he perhaps was already as far as Argentina, he was found right in the middle of Paris. Between the details printed in the papers and David's own knowledge of Giovanni, he is able to imagine what happened. Giovanni had gone back to Guillaume's bar, ostensibly to get his old job back. Guillaume was open to re-hiring Giovanni but wanted to indulge his lusty desires first, but Giovanni was not interested. His resistance infuriated Guillaume and the two soon started fighting. That is when Giovanni suddenly became violent, took Guillaume's night gown, and strangled him. After he was caught and charged with murder, Giovanni pleaded guilty. He would eventually be sentenced to death by guillotine. Part of David wanted to stay in Paris so he could be close to the trial and perhaps even see Giovanni, but he knew it was hopeless. No one could help Giovanni anymore and perhaps Giovanni even wanted to die at this point.

When David realizes he can do nothing for Giovanni, he puts his hopes on Hella: Perhaps he can do something for her. They move to a house in the south of France, but David can not get Giovanni off his mind. He followed, as closely as he could, the details of his trial and learned that Giovanni had, in fact, been sentenced to death. Meanwhile, what feelings he had for Hella begin to decay. He begins to look at her with a kind of disgust and the sexual act even becomes nauseating to him. He is horrified at this new phase in his life. He felt that he was losing Hella and that, when he lost, he would be in a terrifying free fall and did not know what would be at the bottom. David cannot hide his preoccupations from Hella and she correctly identifies Giovanni as their source. She finally realizes that Giovanni was in love with him, but David is not willing to discuss it with her. His distance upsets her, but he is unwilling to open up. Desperate, she says she will do anything to make it work between them, but nothing seems to appease him.

That night, David slipped out of the bedroom and went bar-hopping by himself. He spends several nights having sex with a sailor and perhaps some of his friends, too. Hella finally tracks him down and finally understands the situation. She is, quite



naturally, destroyed. He goes back to the hotel with Hella, who starts packing. She wants to get away from Paris and, more specifically, away from him as soon as possible. He tries to explain himself to her. He says that he was not lying so much to her but to himself. She says that, on some level, she knew all along, and feels all the more foolish for ignoring what her instincts told her. She expresses her despair: She says how much she wanted to be with him and fears that every man she meets from now on will only remind her of him. Her taxi arrives and she leaves him.

Back in the narrative's present, David contemplates what Giovanni is going through at this moment. It is the day that Giovanni is going to be executed. He sees Giovanni being taken out of his cell and led first to a priest and then laid in the guillotine. David drops his keys in his landlady's mailbox and starts walking down the street. He tears up the letter Jacques sent him informing him when Giovanni will be executed and throws the pieces in the air, but the wind blows them right back onto him.

Part Two: Chapter Five Analysis

As he had already begun to realize, there is no hope that he can achieve normalcy with Hella. At this point in the narrative, this can hardly come to a surprise to the reader. The real question—which is never fully answered—is whether David can overcome the shame which holds him back from having a happy relationship with another man. The days he spends with the sailors is really not promising in that regard; it has the more character of desperate lust than anything and he probably realizes that. The act is probably motivated as much by a desire to get away from Hella—whose femininity has begun to disgust him—as it is to indulge his homosexual desires.

There is a brief scene early in the chapter where David lays his head on Hella's chest. Despite his growing disgust towards her, he finds a certain amount of comfort lying there. There is something maternal in the scene and it could be plausibly interpreted as a suggestion that David's trouble comes ultimately from his lack of a mother while David is growing up. The comfort fades, however, when he feels her desire to be with him in her body.



Characters

David

David is the story's narrator and main character. His chief struggle in life is the question of his sexuality. He desperately wants to "be a man," which, he believes, requires being heterosexual, having a wife, and starting a family. He tries to understand the roots of his sexuality and speculates that it might have something to do with his mother's death while he was very young and his unsatisfactory relationship with his father, who never really embraced his duty as a parent. When he was a young boy, probably in his early teens, he has a sexual encounter with his best friend, Joey. He is so ashamed by it that he completely cuts Joey out of his life, as if by blotting him out he could blot out his own sexuality. After a brief stint in the military—during which he has an ambiguous relationship with a fellow soldier—he travels to Europe.

In Europe, he meets Hella and they begin to date. Hella is also an American traveling through Europe and David sees in her the promise of normalcy he has desired his entire life. He admits, at least in retrospect, that he probably never truly loved her, even though he desperately wanted to. He proposes to her but she says she needs some time to think about it and leaves for Spain. While she is gone, he starts a relationship with Giovanni, a barman at gay bar he goes to with his friend, Jacques. David moves in with Giovanni immediately, since he has run out of money and been evicted from his apartment. His relationship with Giovanni is a new step towards the acceptance of his sexuality but the acceptance is imperfect. He still holds something of himself back and still feels shame about his sexuality. When Hella decides to marry him and returns to Paris, he abandons Giovanni to be with her. His disappearance devastates Giovanni and David tries to tell him that they had no future anyway because they are both men, but Giovanni knows David is not being honest. He knows they love one another, but David is too afraid to accept it. David and Hella leave Paris—David is desperate to escape—and when David hears that Giovanni has been sentenced to death for murder David is completely devastated. He cannot hide his emotions from Hella but refuses to discuss them with her. In a low point of desperation, he leaves her secretly for a few days and spends a few days having sex with a sailor and, perhaps, the sailor's friends as well. Hella discovers him and finally realizes why he was so upset by the news about Giovanni. She leaves for America as soon as possible. David decides to stay in France until Giovanni's execution and, as he is leaving, he realizes that his relationship with Giovanni and the pain David caused Giovanni are things he can never truly put behind him and forget.

Giovanni

Giovanni is an Italian immigrant to Paris. As he later reveals to David, he was in a happy relationship with a woman in his small Italian village but their happiness was crushed when their first child was born dead. Giovanni cursed God and left Italy, hoping



desperately to find some peace elsewhere. He is desperate for work—both for the money and so he can legally remain in Paris—and takes a job as a barman at a gay bar owned by Guillaume. In order to get the job, Giovanni has to submit for awhile to Guillaume's lustful desires. When he meets David, the two are immediately attracted to one another and Giovanni aggressively pursues the relationship. Giovanni is frustrated and saddened by David's resistance but cannot make David open up to him. He is intensely jealous of Hella and probably suspects that David's desire to be with her comes more from an obsession for normalcy than any real feelings of love.

When David sneaks out of his room to be with Hella, Giovanni is devastated. He stays up every night hoping David will come back but is disappointed night after night. David finally does return—he gives the excuse that he needs to pick up some of his belongings—and the two have a heated argument. Giovanni says that Giovanni's life is miserable and that without love in his life, particularly David's love, he fears he will have nothing to live for. Giovanni was already on the brink of self-destruction before and tells David how cruel it is for David to tease him with the possibility of love, only to take it away and make his misery all the worse. He says it was shame that hindered David from truly accepting their relationship. David has no real response to Giovanni's arguments—for he knows, at least on some level, that Giovanni is right—but he refuses to acknowledge that fact. After David leaves, Giovanni starts a meaningless relationship with a young gay boy named Yves but continues to spiral downwards into misery nonetheless. He eventually winds up getting into a fight with Guillaume and, out of anger, murders him. He is caught a week later and sentenced to death.

Hella

Hella is David's girlfriend. They plan to get married, but she leaves him when she discovers he has been having sex with a sailor.

Jacques

Jacques is an openly gay Belgian businessmen. David hates Jacques and realizes later that his hatred is really a projection of his own shame.

Guillaume

Guillaume is the owner of the bar where Giovanni works. Giovanni later strangles Guillaume to death.

Yves

Yves is a pock-marked, young boy who Giovanni winds up dating after David leaves him.



Sue

In order to convince himself that he is capable of being attracted to women, David has a casual sexual encounter with Sue. The experiment is a total failure, however, and he leaves Sue feeling more hopeless than ever about his future with Hella.

Joey

Joey is David's best friend as a young boy. They wind up spontaneously having a sexual encounter and David is so ashamed that he completely cuts Joey out of his life.

David's Father

David's father is either unwilling to or incapable of being a father to David and instead wants to be his friend. David is never satisfied with this relationship but resigns himself to it after a serious automobile accident.

Ellen

Ellen is David's aunt. She lives with David and his father.



Objects/Places

Paris

Paris is where the majority of the story takes place. David winds up leaving with Hella to escape the guilt he felt over Giovanni.

America

David and Hella are both from America. David's American heritage becomes almost shameful to him while he is with Giovanni.

Spain

Hella leaves David for Spain to think about his marriage proposal.

Guillaume's Bar

David meets Giovanni at Guillaume's bar. It is where Giovanni winds up murdering Guillaume.

Madame Clothilde's Bar

The first night they meet, David, Giovanni, Jacques, and Guillaume wind up going to Madame Clothilde's bar for drinks and food.

Giovanni's Room

David stays in Giovanni's room because he was evicted from his last apartment. Its disorderliness symbolizes Giovanni's chaotic soul.

American Express

The American Express is where David goes to receive his mail. Giovanni never wants to go with him because he is disturbed by seeing so many Americans.

Guillotine

Giovanni is executed by a guillotine.



Nice

David meets the sailor he winds up having sex with in Nice.

Jacques' Envelope

Jacques sent David a letter telling him when Giovanni would be executed. As he is leaving his apartment, he tears up the letter and throws the pieces into the air, only to have the wind blow them back on him.



Themes

SHAME AS THE SOURCE OF DAVID'S UNHAPPINESS

Shame is the driving force in David's life and ultimately the cause of the unhappy situation he finds himself in at the end of the story. After his sexual encounter with Joey, which seems perfectly innocent and shameless when it happens, David is disgusted with the act, with himself, and even with Joey. He is still a young man and is afraid of losing his masculinity before he even fully possesses it. He keeps his sexuality a secret, but it still unconsciously influences his decisions. In retrospect, he realizes that his homosexuality led him to Europe where, perhaps, he thought he might find a culture that was more accepting of it. Society is not what is restraining David, however; it is himself, and no matter where he moves, he will carry his own obsession with being "normal" wherever he goes.

He finally gives in to his homosexuality when he meets Giovanni, who is very aggressive in his pursuit of him. They wind up having sex that night and David moves in with him. David realizes that he is happy and even falls in love with Giovanni, but David is unable to completely open up to Giovanni. The specter of Hella's return looms over their relationship, creating anxiety in David, who is unsure what he wants to do, and jealousy in Giovanni, who fears losing David. David must admit that his love for Giovanni is stronger than his love for Hella, but he is so obsessed with being normal, and so ashamed of the "abnormal" lifestyle of being a homosexual, that he eventually decides to be with Hella. However, his guilt over Giovanni's self-destruction is so great that he winds up sneaking away from Hella to have sex with a sailor and, as a consequence, winds up destroying the relationship with Hella, too.

THE VICTIMS OF DAVID'S SHAME

David's shame does not only make himself miserable, it makes almost everyone else in the story miserable, too. The first victim of David's shame is Joey. Joey and David have an innocent sexual encounter when they are young. It seems to be almost an outgrowth of their close friendship. When he wakes up the next morning, though, he begins his obsession with masculinity and normalcy. He feels that he cannot be a man unless he has a wife and children; therefore, he leaves Joey and cuts him out of his life almost entirely and, when they do interact, he treats him very rudely. Joey is confused and heartbroken by David's transformation and his family winds up moving away.

David continues to transform his disgust with himself into contempt for others. He realizes, for example, that this is the cause for his hatred of Jacques, a gay friend of his who has done nothing to provoke David's disgust. David uses his friend Sue to try to reaffirm his own masculinity, though it ultimately has the opposite effect. Though Sue realizes their encounter is casual, she hopes to have something more but quickly realizes David really had no interest in her at all; she desperately tells him to come over



again if he ever feels lonely. Of course, his dishonesty winds up destroying his relationship with Hella and seems to truly traumatize her. When Hella realizes he is a homosexual, she realizes there is no future between them but says that she truly loved him. She fears that from now on she will see him in every man she meets and fears she will never be able to have the same kind of happiness.

The greatest victim of David's shame, of course, is Giovanni. Giovanni and David truly loved one another, but David was never able to truly give himself to Giovanni. He was, as Giovanni put it, too afraid of the "stink" of their love to ever really open up to him. David winds up leaving Giovanni for Hella and shows no real regard for Giovanni's welfare. He leaves Giovanni with no money, no food, and with no idea of where David has gone. When they talk for the last time, David is stubborn and unsympathetic to Giovanni's misery. Giovanni is completely destroyed by the abandonment and is eventually driven to murder.

NORMALCY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

The source of David's shame is a sense that in order to have a normal life he has to be a heterosexual and have a wife and children. He fears he is losing his masculinity when he has the sexual encounter with Joey, and, in his desperation to recover his masculinity, he shuns Joey, as if by erasing Joey from his life David could somehow escape his own sexuality. Of course, this immature and cruel tactic is not successful and his sexuality continues to be his secret burden. It unconsciously plays a part in his decision to go to Europe where he thinks, perhaps, that the culture will be more accepting of his sexuality. It is possible that he thinks that being a homosexual there will somehow feel normal and that he can be happy without regret.

Europe is certainly more open to homosexuality than America was, but social pressures are ultimately not the problem. Baldwin never shows any kind of intolerance or bigotry directed at homosexuality, in Europe or America. (The sole exception to this, arguably, is the court-martial of the gay man while David is in the military, but the event is only mentioned in passing and does not directly affect David.) David's problem are within himself: He is the one who is obsessed with being masculine and being normal, and he thinks, for some reason, that this means being heterosexual. The early chapters are largely an analysis of the roots of this obsession and the most obvious explanation is his upbringing. His mother died when he was still very young and his father was never much of a father to him; their relationship had more the character of friendship and, over time, really became a distant friendship, if that.

Style

Point of View

The story is told in the first-person perspective and alternates between the present tense and past tense. Whenever David is speaking in the present tense, he is narrating what is happening on the day Giovanni is scheduled to be executed. The past tense is used in his reflections on the roots of his homosexuality and the events that led up to this relationship with Giovanni and its dissolution. The effect of this alternate viewpoint is to place all the events in the context of the book's ultimate tragedy, for the reader knows from the first chapter that Giovanni is going to be executed, though his exact crime and the reason behind the crime are not revealed until the last chapter.

As David is in the midst of great psychological turmoil, the reader ought not to necessarily trust everything he says. For example, the early chapters could easily be read as an attempt to find the roots of his homosexuality. He points to his non-existent relationship with his mother, who died when he was only five years old, and his troubled relationship with his father, who wanted to be a buddy instead of a parent. Such an analysis implies a controversial view of homosexuality that sees homosexuality as the result of a troubled childhood instead of genetics. Which view Baldwin himself believes is not clear, but the reader should be open to the possibility that David's analysis is incorrect.

Setting

The book begins in America with the description of David's childhood and adolescence. He says, in retrospect, that his decision to leave America for Europe was ultimately motivated by his homosexuality, even though he did not admit it to himself at the time. He gives no explanation as to why his homosexuality would play a factor in moving to Europe, but it might be plausibly connected with his obsession with normalcy and conformity. David is obsessed with "being a man" and connects masculinity with heterosexuality. It is possible that he thought this obsession was somehow the result of American intolerance to homosexuality and that, perhaps, he might be more at peace in Europe where he supposes people will be more tolerant. It is probably true that people in Europe are generally tolerant of homosexuality, as evidenced by the number of homosexual establishments, like Guillaume's bar. However, social pressures are never presented as any kind of difficulty for David. Indeed, no intolerance of any kind is ever shown, on either side of the Atlantic and, therefore, it should not be considered a legitimate reason for David's neurosis.

The differences between various countries is a common subject for the characters in the book. Giovanni, an Italian living in France, contrasts the laid-back culture of Italy with the precise, "measured" culture of France. The difference between America and Europe is a big point of contention between Giovanni and David. Giovanni points out David's



nationality whenever he is mad at him, and it hurts David because it makes him feel like he is nothing more than an American. Giovanni thinks all Americans are the same, and David protests, but when he visits the American Express, he cannot help noticing a kind of homogeneity.

Language and Meaning

An American reader may struggle, to some degree, with some of the dialogue in the book because speakers often intersperse French phrases and sentences along with English. Often, the meaning of the French phrases will be obvious from context, but occasionally that is not the case. It is actually not entirely clear what language the characters are supposed to be speaking normally. It is, of course, presented in English, but this may simply be a practical measure. It would make sense if they all spoke French—as they are, after all, in Paris—but then it would be strange for Baldwin to only translate certain parts of speech. Giovanni is presented as speaking "no English" in Part One, Chapter Two, which implies that Jacques and David were speaking English, but it does not explain what language they use to speak with Giovanni. The question may not have a clear answer as meticulous detail might not be a major concern for Baldwin.

Baldwin's style makes frequent use of metaphors and similar, giving the text a very vivid and expressive nature. For example, on page 30, Baldwin introduces Giovanni in the following manner: "Jacques was aware, I was aware, as we pushed our way to the bar—it was like moving into the field of a magnet or like approaching a small circle of heat—of the presence of a new barman. He stood, insolent and dark and leonine, his elbow leaning on the cash register, his fingers playing with his chin, looking out at the crowd. It was as though his station were a promontory and we were the sea." In this brief paragraph, Baldwin uses figurative description as many as four times, if one were to include the adjective "leonine."

Structure

The book is divided into two parts. The first part of the book deals with David's life and sexuality prior to moving in with Giovanni. The second part of the book depicts what happens while they live together and the aftermath of their relationship. Since the division of the parts revolves around David starting his relationship with Giovanni, Baldwin presents that moment as the central event in the book. It is certainly the central event, so far, in David's life, for it is the closest he has come to accepting his sexuality. With Joey, he was barely able to live with himself even the morning after. He lived with Giovanni, however, for several months and even admits to himself that he fell in love. Of course, he never tells Giovanni that he loves him, and that fact is representative of what progress David does not make with Giovanni. He is not able to fully come to terms with himself and his sexual identity and, as a result, he plunges all those around him into misery.



The first part of the book is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of David's upbringing and his adult life prior to moving to Europe. In the second chapter, David is evicted from his apartment and goes to the Guillaume's bar with Jacques where he meets Giovanni. The two hit it off immediately, and chapter three narrates the rest of the night, culminating in their sexual encounter.

The first two chapters of the book's second part describe David's life with Giovanni while he lives with him. In chapter three, David's relationship with Giovanni begins to deteriorate. Giovanni lost his job at Guillaume's bar and David is conflicted over what to do with Hella, but leans towards being with her. In chapter four, Hella arrives in Paris and David abandons Giovanni for her. It drives Giovanni to such depression that he winds up murdering Guillaume. In chapter five, David's relationship with Hella ends when she discovers that he is a homosexual. He lingers in France until the day of Giovanni's execution.

Quotes

"But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: But Joey is a boy. I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood." (9)

"Perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself. This is an interesting phrase, not current as far as I know in the language of any other people, which certainly does not mean what it says but betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced. I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home." (23)

"I have thought about Jacques' question since. The question is banal but one of the real troubles with living is that living is so banal. Everyone, after all, goes the same dark road—and the road has a trick of being most dark, most treacherous, when it seems most bright—and it's true that nobody stays in the garden of Eden. Jacques' garden was not the same as Giovanni's, of course. Jacques' garden was involved with football players and Giovanni's was involved with maidens—but that seems to have made so little difference. Perhaps everybody has a garden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword." (27)

"'You play it safe long enough,' he [Jacques] said, in a different tone, 'and you'll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me.'" (62)

"He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed. With everything me screaming No! yet the sum of me sighed Yes." (70)

"With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots." (91)

"In the beginning, because the motives which led me to Giovanni's room were so mixed, had so little to do with his hopes and desires, and were so deeply a part of my own desperation, I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work. I threw out the paper, the bottles, the fantastic accumulation of trash; I examined the contents of the innumerable boxes and suitcases and disposed of them. But I am not a housewife—men never can be housewives." (95)

"The question he longed to ask was not in the letter and neither was the offer: 'Is it a woman, David? Bring her on home. I don't care who she is. Bring her on home and I'll you get set up.' He could not risk this question because he could not have endured an answer in the negative. An answer in the negative would have revealed what strangers we had become." (99)



"Sue was not Hella and she did not lessen my terror of what would happen when Hella came: she increased it, she made it more real than it had been before." (109)

"I was vividly aware that he held a brick in his hand, I held a brick in mine. It really seemed for an instant that if I did not go to him, we would use these bricks to beat each other to death." (128)

"I had hoped that when I saw her [Hella] something instantaneous, definitive, would have happened in me, something to make me know where I should be and where I was. But nothing happened." (130)

"The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope and I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away. Yet, as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me." (185)



Topics for Discussion

What significance does David believe his upbringing had on his sexuality, if any?

Why does David associate heterosexuality with masculinity?

Why does David imply that, in retrospect, his decision to go to Europe was motivated by his sexuality?

Why does David hate Jacques and Guillaume so much?

When Jacques warns David about becoming like him, about what exactly is he warning him?

Why does David leave Giovanni for Hella?