



## Queer Desires And Gothic Spaces:

*Exploring Identity, Darkness, and Emotional Confinement in Giovanni's Room and Call Me By Your Name*

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes how James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Call Me by Your Name* by André Aciman (2007) adopt Gothic tropes in order to narrate queer love, desire, and identity. Conventionally, Gothic fiction revolves around relationships of fear, death, and supernatural elements, yet Baldwin and Aciman successfully reinterpret these aspects like seclusion, haunted memories, taboo desire, darkness, and emotional entrapment within the queer atmosphere. By means of this, they remake Gothic fiction into tales of psychological imprisonment brought about by social repression. Drawing on Michel Foucault's ideas about space and power and Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer gaze, this paper argues that both novels reflect the emotional and psychological struggles experienced by queer individuals. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* reveals the suffocating consequences of denying identity, while Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* portrays an ephemeral romance overshadowed by transience and loss. Collectively, these works redefine Gothic literature to shed light on the psychological cost of societal oppression on queer love.

**Index Terms** - Queer Desires, James Baldwin, Andre Aciman, Gothic Literature, Identity, Darkness, Emotional Confinement, Gothicism.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Gothicism is conventionally linked with death, fear, and the supernatural, usually set in dark and mysterious environments. Its fundamental ingredients are isolation, haunting memories, and forbidden desire, which awaken emotional and psychological turmoil. Though horror and the macabre have long characterized Gothic literature, modern writers such as James Baldwin and André Aciman reinterpret these themes to narrate the emotional battles of queer characters in heteronormative cultures.

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin employs Gothic imagery to underscore the anguish of rejecting one's self. According to David A. Leeming, "*Giovanni's Room* unmasks the psychological price paid in rejecting one's identity because of societal disapproval" (Leeming, 1994). Here, Baldwin shifts Gothic horror to existential terror, as shame and repression segregate the protagonist from society and himself alike. Likewise, Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* captures Gothic intensity in a more restrained way. Taking place in an Italian landscape bathed in sunlight, the novel contrasts beauty with a sense of impermanence lurking beneath. Aciman says, "We had found the stars, you and I. And this is given once only" a chilling reminder of love's fleeting nature. By reconfiguring Gothic tropes, Baldwin and Aciman express a deep-seated fear: that desire and intimacy are always shadowed by loss, shame, and rejection from society.

In these books, the heroes grapple with repressed desires in societies that negate the existence of queer love. This conflict results in loneliness, shame, and an inner confinement of their feelings. Although Baldwin and Aciman use Gothic tropes, they redefine the genre by changing the focus from old-fashioned horror to existential fear. This fear comes out as queer characters have to move through stifling heteronormative societies, where their identities are suppressed, and love becomes an interior source of strife. With this

development, the Gothic becomes an instrument for revealing the alienation and psychological suffering of individuals who desire contact in repressive societies.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The darkness, isolation, and emotional confinement Baldwin and Aciman deploy in their close reading of *Giovanni's Room* and *Call Me by Your Name* is underscored in a close reading. Constructed within Foucault's space and power theories, the spaces that the characters inhabit are both spaces of liberation and repression. Foucault's theory of heterotopias, "places where societal norms are suspended and enforced", can be used to explain how these spaces exist as Gothic spaces, where queer desire is both fostered and curtailed (Foucault, 1995). Halberstam's queer gaze continues to expound on the dynamics of power within these novels and how social expectation determines David's and Elio's perspective regarding their lovers. Both of the characters approach their relationships via internalized social culture, building an internalized psychical lens by which they filter their intimacy experience. Finally, Baldwin and Aciman employ such Gothic places as a vehicle through which they articulate the psychological complexity of queer love in heteronormative communities, wherein there is desire, yet one must contain it.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is commonly accepted as one of the first instances of queer literature that addresses homophobia and oppression by society. Emmanuel Nelson portrays the novel as capturing "guilt and existential fear", representing David's internal conflict with his sexuality (Nelson, 1981). Baldwin employs darkness as a recurring motif to spin David's dark story, representing both individual angst and oppression by society. In the words of Philip K. Harper, "darkness becomes a metaphor for psychological constriction", as seen in David's inner turmoil at his love for Giovanni and dread of social banishment (Harper, 1998). Baldwin's narration is a fine rendering of David's intense inner turmoil as he battles his feelings and societal demands. The exchange between inner shame and outer disapproval is an incisive critique of identity-shaping oppressions. In the end, *Giovanni's Room* is a classic treatment of fear, love, and acceptance, illuminating the emotional lives of marginalized groups.

Where Baldwin's novel investigates external pressures and internal conflict, Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* probes Gothic concerns of time and memory, presenting an alternate vision of queer desire. As argued by Oliver Davis in his discussion of queer temporality, where he posits that "desire is wrapped in its ephemeral quality," and Elio's affection for Oliver bears "the shadow of an inevitable end" (Davis, 2019). In the same vein, Sontag (2007) points out Aciman's employment of light and dark to describe emotional transitions, noting how "warmth turns into cold as passion burns itself out." This presentation situates the story as "a cyclical Gothic drama about love and death." These descriptions collectively highlight the novel's investigation of tragic, ephemeral love, wherein desire, time, and memory become interlocked to produce a poignant consideration of loss as an inevitability.

The dark Gothic aspects of both these novels can be examined further in terms of Foucault's theory of space and power relations. Richard Dellamora explains the idea of the heterotopic prison, where David is torn between social disapproval and his longing for freedom with Giovanni. This is a reflection of the conflict between social expectations and individual desire. Within *Call Me by Your Name*, the villa itself operates as a panoptic environment that contains liberty along with surveillance. It is where desire might unfold but remain overseen at every moment. This panoptic dynamic is a dynamic that Thomas M. King finds particularly revealing of the narrative's tension. The author identifies Elio being "steadily conscious of his family's gaze, which functions as an invisible threshold to his wishes" (King, 2020). Here, the battle between personal liberation and state manipulation is consistently reiterated.

Unveiling the intricacies of power dynamics can be seen through *Queer Gaze*. This makes us understand how the relationship between characters such as David and Giovanni; and Elio and Oliver is. By analyzing through the lens heteronormative gaze, we can better understand how each of these protagonists articulates their struggle with queer identity by gazing. Halberstam indicates that queer gaze "subverts traditional power structures," which is reflected in David's desire for Giovanni and Elio's attraction to Oliver. These relationships are caught up in a web of desire and inner turmoil. In this case, the act of gazing enables the characters to work through their identity struggles, subvert societal norms, and expose the tension between individual desire and societal expectation. Together, these theoretical approaches emphasize how Baldwin

and Aciman apply the theme of space and queer gaze to capture the tension between individual desire and societal repression.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

Isolation, darkness, and haunting memory are chief Gothic elements in constructing the psychic environments of *Giovanni's Room* and *Call Me by Your Name*. Darkness in Baldwin's novel stands for David's repressed passion for Giovanni, which is unseen by a homophobic world. Harper observes that the Gothic mood of doom hangs over Baldwin's writing, pointing to the threatening specter of exposure and rejection that pursues David. Darkness in *Giovanni's Room* symbolizes the shame internalized by the protagonist, as he vacillates between closeness and fitting into societal norms. Likewise, haunting memory highlights unresolved desire and guilt, with a lingering psychological cost. Both combine to heighten the protagonists' battles with identity, love, and judgment by society. Aciman employs light and shade to capture the fleeting beauty of Elio and Oliver's romance. The sun-kissed Italian summer provides a backdrop that is juxtaposed with the affective cold that sets in when Oliver leaves, forming a "visual metaphor of desire's cycle between warmth and loss" (Sontag, 2007). Memories of their fleeting love haunt him like residual phantoms, reminding one of the Gothic concerns of thwarted desire and longing. The tonal movement from warmth to cool colors captures Elio's own transformation from passion to desolation, a capturing of the Gothic sensibility of being trapped in the memory of lost love, whereby longing and sorrow merge to map his emotional terrain.

##### Space and Surveillance

The understanding of heterotopias, as defined by Foucault, enables readers to clearly envision the Gothic spatial dynamics in both novels. *Giovanni's Room* is described as a "heterotopic prison," where David and Giovanni retreat to admit their love, but only within a space defined by secrecy and shame (Dellamora 1998). Foucault characterizes heterotopias as places existing "outside societal norms," which allow and simultaneously observe transgressive activities. This description mirrors the psychological confinement experienced by David. In *Call Me by Your Name*, the house acts as a heterotopic space through which Elio experiences his fantasies with the constant presence of his family's panoptic eye. King writes, "Elio's perception of the gaze of his family constrains his relation with Oliver, and thus, in such an open house, the space cannot guarantee liberty from prison" (King 2020). The villa thus finds itself performing double duty as a place of protection and place of surveillance, one in which the internal terrors and outside social pressures encircle Elio so that fully his desires for Oliver are stilled.

##### The Queer Gaze

Queer gaze, then, according to Halberstam, informs us on both novels concerning flexible power relationships. David's view of Giovanni evidences the ambivalence of repulsion and desire, caused by his unwillingness to admit the sexuality. According to Halberstam, "the queer gaze subverts traditional power dynamics," which is evident in David's struggle between his desire for Giovanni and the societal expectations that prevent him from fully embracing it (Halberstam 2011). This oscillation between yearning and denial illustrates the Gothic tension of desire and repression. Similarly, Elio's interest in Oliver shares a comparable complexity of attraction and admiration. But it is complicated by their age difference and social constraints. Halberstam criticizes the heteronormative gaze and points out the complex feelings Elio has as he looks at Oliver. Elio's look is both yearning and admiring, producing a Gothic atmosphere of suspense and longing. His emotions are also influenced by the expectations of society, which subject him to maturity at the same time as regarding him as being too young to comprehend or pursue such desires. This tension between emotions turns Elio's experience into a tragedy of unrequited longing, as with David, influenced by the societal norms that trap them.

##### Emotional Imprisonment and Forbidden Love

Both Baldwin and Aciman use Gothic motifs to explore the psychological confinement of queer subjects in a heteronormative society. In Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, David's emotional imprisonment symbolizes the societal constraints placed on queer love. Nelson argues that "David's guilt personifies his internal conflict," as he struggles to reconcile his love for Giovanni with the social ostracism he fears (Nelson, 1981). The title room is then transformed into a Gothic room in which David's desires are repressed and revealed, heightening

his inner conflict. Likewise, *Call Me by Your Name* uses Gothic for the portrayal of the intensity of Elio's emotions and Oliver's haunting recollections of his short-lived affair with him. Aciman underlines the fleeting character of time, arguing that desire progresses in cycles, an idea derived from the Gothic heritage when characters are tormented by remembrance of vanished love. Davis remarks that "the novel's structure, infused with a sense of passing time, highlights the unavoidability of loss in Elio's love for Oliver" (Davis, 2019). For Elio, his memories of love turn into ghostly presences, a Gothic feeling of longing for something lost forever. The bitter recollection of Oliver haunts Elio, leaving him with the "specter of a love that can no longer be," reflecting the Gothic fascination with past tragedy and unrequited desire (Miller, 2017). While the idyllic Italian summer provides a temporary respite, it is tainted by the certainty of the romance's demise. Sontag identifies this observing the "contrast between warm tones of romance and the subsequent coolness of loss," which highlights the Gothic tone that permeates Aciman's work (Sontag, 2007). Aciman therefore examines the ephemerality of love through Elio's psychological captivity, as he is tormented by recollections long after the physical affair has ended.

### **Symbolic Lighting and Topographies of Feeling**

Both Aciman and Baldwin use symbolic lighting to highlight the topographies of feeling of their characters. In Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the darkness of the eponymous room stands for David's internal conflict. Harper notes that "the use of light and shadow in Giovanni's room parallels David's shuttle between vulnerability and repression" (Harper 98). As a result, the room is transformed into a Gothic stage where light and darkness stage David's inner struggle—his attraction and fear of Giovanni. This makes the Gothic tone more intense, as the fear of social ostracism comes across as an aura of darkness that engulfs him in the space of the room. In *Call Me by Your Name*, the hot Italian summer serves as a visual metaphor for Elio and Oliver's passion, the latter giving way to colder, somber colors once their love comes to an inevitable conclusion. Sontag contends that "the emotional heat of their love cools into a sombre, Gothic palette once Oliver is gone" (Sontag 27). With these visual shifts, Aciman seizes the storminess of desire, as the dance of light and darkness echoes the extremes of Elio's emotional trajectory. Lighting is used as an aesthetic element by both Baldwin and Aciman to call forth the Gothic, emphasizing moments of closeness followed by loss and desolation. Finally, the heroes have to face the black corners of their memory, where light and darkness are metaphorical signs of loss and longing

### **Fear, Social Restraints, and the Gothic Jail**

The Gothic conventions of fear and social restraints build on the psychological jail that defines the queer condition in the works of Baldwin and Aciman. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* features a "psychic prison" imposed by David's fear of social rejection. As Harper says, "Baldwin's application of Gothic terror is an analog to David's existential fear because he fears the social repercussions of accepting his desire for Giovanni" (Harper 1998). The fear turns the room into a Gothic prison, which at the same time liberates and oppresses David's desires. In doing so, the nature of queer love is distilled as both an empowering and restraining force. In the same way, in *Call Me by Your Name*, fear of judgment and internalized shame trap Elio into an emotional prison. Although the sunlit rooms of the villa provide moments of freedom, Elio is under the watchful eye of societal expectations and his own internal fears at all times. King (2020) examines how "space and surveillance" in the novel transform Elio's relationship with Oliver from one of freedom to emotional constraint. Elio exists in the Gothic tension between desire and fear, his passion for Oliver haunting him through the acknowledgment of the impossibility of openly expressing his feelings. In Baldwin as well as in Aciman's works, fear and societal pressures generate a Gothic tension that characterizes the queer love of the characters as liberating yet restrictive at the same time.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

*Giovanni's Room* and *Call Me by Your Name* redefine Gothicism, moving it from supernatural horror to the psychological horror of repression and social constraint. Baldwin and Aciman use Gothic elements—darkness, isolation, forbidden desires, and haunting memories—to describe the psychological landscapes in which queer individuals experience love in hostile environments. By using Foucault's spatial and power theories, it is possible to observe how the protagonists convert the physical environment into Gothic spaces of freedom and enclosure, with room and villa functioning as prisons of desire, created by societal vision and self-observation. Here, queer gaze, a theory formulated by Halberstam, allows us to infuse another dimension of complexity to the power struggles between David and Giovanni, or Elio and Oliver. Here, desire is mediated

by society's phobias and limits. Baldwin and Aciman deploy symbolic lighting and emotional topography to describe scenes of intimacy that are haunted by the spectre of loss. These instances, in the Gothic context, imply that love is forever intertwined with fear of its ultimate loss. As the protagonist's struggle against the constraints of normative society, they face the darkest aspects of their own identities, maintaining the Gothic belief of suppressed passion pent up within a restrictive social context. *Giovanni's Room* and *Call Me by Your Name* finally prove the potency of the Gothic tradition in expressing marginalized identities. By a reworking of Gothic tropes, Baldwin and Aciman create emotional worlds where queer love, psychological repression, and the need for genuine connection become the actual horrors. These pieces encourage a more universal presentation of multiple experiences in fiction, using the genre of Gothic to convey the richness of the complicated nature of love and identity when we have the world dictating who and whom we should love and what is 'normal' is defined by the 'majority'.

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