Quelle Honte:
The Anatomy of Shame in James Baldwin’s
Giovanni’s Room

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People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception.

James Baldwin
Abstract

This thesis looks at how shame is depicted in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*. In doing so, it looks both at how David, the main character in the novel, experiences his own shame in the moment, and how shame can also be seen in the way he tells his story retrospectively. Since David is both the protagonist and the narrator in this novel, both of his roles are analyzed and held up against theories of how shame shows and behaves. To understand how shame works, the thesis uses the works of Brené Brown, Alan Downs and Erving Goffman, while for its understanding of narrative theory, it leans mainly on Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction*.

In looking at the literary devices used to tell David’s story, the analysis shows how shame can reveal itself in a number of concrete and interesting ways, such as through analepsis, prolepsis, the use of a foreign language, typology, paragraph structure, and chapter divisions. It also shows how shame shows up in more subtle ways, such as through metaphors, irony, ellipsis, various kinds of focalization, ambiguous dialogue, repetition, and various types of evasion.

Due to the fact that, up until quite recently, relatively little research has been done on the intense emotion of shame, there is no wonder that few other literary researchers have used theories about shame to understand literature. In this respect, this thesis aims at breaking new ground by precisely combining shame research and literary theory. However, this thesis will also show how literature does not necessarily need theories from other sciences to be understood, but, rather, can function as theory on its own terms. In this way, *Giovanni’s Room* is not only a novel that tells a story about a character who feels shame, but is also, at the same time, a text that explains, directly and indirectly, the anatomy of shame.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I wish to thank my thesis supervisor, Nils Axel Nissen. When I was handing in my thesis proposal, now almost one year ago, I asked specifically not to get him as my supervisor. I asked about this not because he was not an amazing teacher, not because he was not enormously knowledgeable within the field I wanted to write about, and not because he lacked experience in supervising master students. No, I asked not to get him, because I was intimidated by precisely all his knowledge and experience. Therefore, I was afraid that I would not be able to be true to my own voice in the writing process. However, during our first meeting, I was brave enough to put words to my fears, and he received them with surprising warmth, understanding, and humility. From the moment I left the door open behind me after our first meeting, I have never looked back, not once. Nils, not only have you allowed me to be true to my own academic voice, you have helped me find it.

Initially it was difficult to put my finger on what it was about Baldwin’s text that intrigued and moved me so much, and it was not until I saw Hannah Gadsby’s Nanette, that the pieces in the puzzle came together: There and then I realized that shame was central in David’s life. Thank you to this strong and brave woman for, in the words of Brené Brown, daring greatly, so that others can give themselves permission to do the same.

Lastly, I want to thank myself for not giving up all these times this last year where I just wanted to burn all my books and simply quit. You are worth it. And so much more.
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Introduction

This thesis will look at *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin and will show that the concept of shame can be used to better understand and explain the behavior of David, the novel’s main character. By doing so, the paper adds depth to the academic research done on this novel and shows how various literary techniques are used to construct a character controlled by shame. It will also show how shame is manifest not only in the story being told but in *the way* the story is being told. In this way, it also participates in and adds to the broader field of literary studies.

Even though my thesis will borrow the notion of shame from the social sciences, it will not predominantly be a psychoanalytical analysis of a character. Rather, it will look at how the characterization is achieved, i.e. which literary techniques are being used, and show how shame is not only thematized through the plot and the main character but also in the narrative technique being used. In order to carry out this investigation, the thesis will look at various narrative elements, like the author-reader relationship, narration (typology and narrative planes), how the narrator relates to the narratee, and focalization. This analysis will be held up against theories of shame and stigma and look at how they can be seen as affecting David and his conscious and unconscious choices.

The theories on shame that will be applied are based on and deduced from research on real human beings, therefore one could argue that it makes no sense to apply them to literary characters. However, I claim that if we see humans as “storytelling animals” (Meretoja and Davis 1), it is also possible to see characters as storytelling characters, where they are both telling their own story, to themselves and others, and listening to the stories of their fellow characters. In this way, one could look at David, and how he relates to himself and others, as one would look at a reader relating to a novel. And – if one were to bring the concept or storytelling animals to its fullest extent – this is similar to how we “real people” relate to each other in a narrative, hermeneutic way. In this way, when I hear your story, I am trying to make sense of it by interpreting it filtered through my own story, the story I tell myself. Meretoja and Davis argue: “Storytelling practices may help define who we are, refine our moral sensibilities and open new possibilities of experience, action and self-invention, but, at the same time, they may be the vehicle of simplification, obfuscations or plain lies that corrupt our moral standing” (1). Here we see clearly that the “simplifications and obfuscations” mentioned can also fit neatly into the logic of a personal shame narrative,
where the reason behind the shame is a part of a larger narrative and understanding of one’s own life story and the world in which one lives.

In order for us to be engaged in a story, we need to be able to relate to it and find it psychologically reliable. This connection is based on our own experience and understanding of the world. In other words, the story we read on paper has to fit somehow with the story we tell ourselves about our own lives and the world in which we live. To put it bluntly: Books are written by human beings, and also read by them, therefore it makes perfect sense to apply theories about the psychological and emotional system of human beings to these books, as it further underlines and explains why and how readers can connect and relate to a story. The narrative of David is not only read as a story in a book, but also as a story told by one human to another, in such a way that the reader receives it as if it could have been, or even is, true at the moment of reading. For what is the emotional/psychological difference between reading a fictional story created by someone, reading or listening to a true story that actually happened to someone, or listening to and believing the story that you tell yourself about your own life? If you are completely engaged in the story, I would argue that there is little difference and therefore, be it real or not, every novel has the potential power to move, change and engage its readers and listeners.

At the same time, if theories based on shame – that are developed from wide-ranging research on human psychological behavior – match and can be applied to fictional characters, the more the story and characters become reliable and relatable to its readers. Therefore, this will not be a psychological study applied to fictional, literary characters, but rather a literary analysis of these very characters, that uses theories about human beings to show how this can add to the understanding of the characterization of these characters. In addition to this, if a fictional character – after having been investigated in-depth with regards to a number of literary techniques used to describe him or her – still holds up to the scrutiny of a theory applied to (real) human beings, I would also argue that this explains why and how readers so strongly can relate to a character. This also shows how these same theories can be used, all though not exclusively, to evaluate and understand literature. I am not saying that if a theory about human behavior seems to also apply to a fictional character, then this is the hallmark of good literature, but what I am stating is that this helps to create reliable characters whom it is easy to relate to, and it is difficult to imagine good literature without this important feature. In addition to this, as will be shown in how shame is depicted in various ways in the novel, literature also has the possibility to add to, and even alter, theories from the social sciences, and thus stand as “theory” on its own terms. Let me give some direct examples of this:
The very first thing to notice textually in *Giovanni’s Room* is how it is divided into two parts, where the last part is slightly longer than the first. There can be a number of reasons for this, where one interpretation is that it beautifully echoes the ever-present dichotomy and inner struggle going on in David between his morals and his desires, or in other words, the struggle between how he feels, and how he thinks he should feel. Also, in the novel we do not only get to know about shame indirectly through the characters and the narrator, but the characters also explore and discuss shame more explicitly among themselves: “‘You think,’ he [Jacques] persisted, ‘that my life is shameful because my encounters are. And they are. But you should ask yourself why they are.’ ‘Why are they – shameful?’ I [David] asked him. ‘Because there is no affection in them, and no joy. It’s like putting an electric plug in a dead socket. Touch, but no contact. All touch, but no contact and no light” (56). This take on shame shows how one way of protecting oneself from shame is to avoid intimacy by making potential intimate meetings mechanical and impersonal. This also means that the areas where David avoids intimacy are also areas where he potentially reveals his shame. This can be with regards to avoiding intimacy with the reader, with himself, or other characters. Here we also see how, when characters directly use the word shame, or talk about the concept of shame, we as readers get a different view or perception of what shame is about, seen from their perspective. This allows us to see the concept of shame in a new and different light that is not necessarily explored in the same way by the social sciences. Thus, the characters’ opinions become possible perspectives for us as readers in ways of understanding shame. Sometimes their perspectives even give solutions for how to bypass or combat shame. For, as Jacques advises David regarding him and Giovanni: “You can make your time together anything but dirty; you can give each other something which will make both of you better – forever – if you will not be ashamed, if you will only not play it safe” (57). Where the take home message for both David and the reader is to dare to live a little, and to take chances instead of being overwhelmed by one’s fears, ideas and shame.

*Giovanni’s Room*, set in Paris, France, was written by an African-American man and was published in 1956 when Baldwin was 32 years old. In this context, it is important to underline that I do not want to fall into the trap of looking into the biography of the “historical author” as a part of my interpretation and analysis, and thereby making what Robert Dale Parker in his *How to Interpret Literature* refers to as an “intentional fallacy” (30) – focusing on what one thinks or assumes the author may have intended. Therefore, I have deliberately, and also due to the scope of this paper, avoided bringing the biography of the author into the textual analysis, thus leaving the texts talking for itself in a wider discourse of other texts.
Many theorists have tried to explain and understand the literary components and techniques that make up a story or a narrative. My analysis does not aim at giving an historical account of the development of narratological research, but will rather use and apply these theories on the novel in question. In this respect, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction* will be used as my main reference.

Regarding research done on *Giovanni’s Room*, there is considerable academic material to be found. Quite a lot of this focuses on the homosexual aspects of the novel. Some articles present David’s journey as a struggle of identity, manhood and sexuality (Thomas, Dragulescu), which, for the sake of this paper, describes the social rules to which we adhere and thus explains the foundations for the stigma and the shame that comes from it. Others focus more strongly on the psychological aspects of David’s personality, trying to understand his sexuality and character from a psychoanalytical point of view (DeGout, Barounis). Cyraina Johnson-Roullier also touches upon some of these same ideas, but chooses to direct the debate in a broader sense than only towards sexuality, and shows how self-deception takes many forms. And it is in this direction this paper wants to move: to look at shame as a universal feeling, regardless of the source of this shame.

Certain academics try to include the (symbolic) fact that David is an American in Europe by looking at diasporic identity, expatriation and various levels of estrangement (Henderson), while others see David’s moving across the Atlantic, and his objection to heteronormativity, as a type of social resistance (Roszak). This latter researcher also brings in a stimulating dimension to the diasporic argument by adding the Italian/Mediterranean diaspora and David’s (unconscious) view on Giovanni/Italy to the equation. The issue of race, or rather the lack thereof, is also something that has been investigated in connection with this novel, where Josep M. Armengol not only refers to researchers who have tried to “race” the novel – due to its apparent all-white cast – but also tries to link this to sexuality. He argues convincingly that “Race and sexuality in Baldwin are not simply interrelated but virtually interchangeable so that homosexuality becomes, literally and metaphorically, associated with blackness at the same time that heterosexuality is . . . indissolubly linked to white-ness” (673).

Regarding the topic of shame in *Giovanni’s Room*, Christopher Stuart’s article “Finding the Jimmy in James” is the one that seems to come the closest to what this paper wants to investigate, when he tries to explain one of David’s reactions: “Afraid of his own corrupt nature, which he projects onto Giovanni, David turns tail and runs, ironically heaping on himself more shame and corruption by abandoning the one person with whom he is truly in
love” (66). This analysis helps to point to where his shame comes from, and thereby one of many places to look to find the literary technique used to make us as readers understand the reason for his shame.

In an article with the uplifting title “Say Yes to Life”, Brett Beemyn emphasizes that we all share common traits as human beings – however unpleasant and shameful they may be, where the conclusion states: “The challenge that Baldwin calls us to is to see ourselves and each other beyond simplistic categories and narrow, isolated identities, for only through such a vision is love truly possible” (70). This further supports why this thesis wants to look at what shame does to us once it has entered the individual and how this can be portrayed literarily.

Most of the abovementioned articles are impressively eloquent and show an amazing amount of background information and research by applying socio-economic theories, psychoanalytical theories, concepts of identity politics, author biography and psychology. However, they predominately seem to be largely focused on the sexuality of David and I have yet to find research that dissects the novel from a narratological perspective to look at what literary techniques are used and how they are applied to depict shame in general. Therefore, with this paper, I want to explore how shame can be used to understand and explain both the behavior of David, and, regardless of the source of the shame, how shame has the power to take over a man’s life and keep him away from what could make him more fulfilled, empowered and, to use the words of Brené Brown in The Gifts of Imperfection, “living a wholehearted life” (1). In other, potentially bolder, words, this paper aims at linking the gap between narrative theory, conceptual identity politics and psychology.

This thesis will predominantly base its psychological data on the works of Brené Brown and Erving Goffman, as they in a very fitting way build on one another. Goffman can be seen to explain the bases, the underlying social rules and regulations, that lay the foundations for the potential feeling of shame, while Brown talks about how shame acts and behaves once it has entered the emotional system of a human being. This paper will therefore look at literary techniques that explain or point to Goffman’s foundations for shame and Brown’s consequences thereof. In addition, it will also bring in perspectives from Alan Downs.

In his book Stigma, Goffman shows how we as human beings try to adapt to society and to fit in by following certain “normative expectations,” but that, for a plethora of reasons, it may be difficult or impossible for some people to meet or adhere to these expectations. These people will therefore stand out from the rest of society, where this causes what he
refers to as stigma. In meeting with the general society, or the “normals” as Goffman calls them, the “stigmatized” is faced with “possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind . . . He is thus reduced in our minds [the minds of the normals] from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (3). Here it is interesting to look at the phrase “persons available for him to be,” as this underlines Goffman’s reoccurring theme that society and the relations between us in some ways can be seen as a theater or roleplay. This will be dealt with later in this thesis, as David shows this in many different ways and in different arenas.

Goffman underlines that “It can be assumed that a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations by all participants” (127). He continues: “Failure or success at maintaining such norms has a very direct effect on the psychological integrity of the individual” (128). This paper will be looking at precisely this mechanism: How do we see these “effects” in the fictional characters and with which narrative techniques are they brought forth. The bridge between stigma and shame is also explicitly put forward by Goffman himself: “Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess and one he can readily see himself as not possessing” (7). In other words, when you see something in yourself that is not socially accepted, but you cannot seem to change or get rid of whatever causes this separation, shame may be a likely consequence.

*Stigma* gives numerous examples of the rationale behind various ways of what the author calls “stigma management” (99), and it is precisely by looking with a keen and observant eye at the novel in question – and by a thorough close reading – that one may find actions, words, gestures and thoughts that together reveal behavior that fits into to this category of stigma management that deviates from the behavior of the normals. However, it is important for Goffman, and for me, personally and in this paper, to underline that the use of such words as “normal” and “stigmatized” are used for the purposes of trying to understand social interaction, and thus is used as a part of a model of understanding. Therefore, they do not carry any value judgment or a way of categorizing neither real human beings, nor fictional characters. As Goffman says: “The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives. These are generated in social situations during mixed contacts by virtue of the unrealized norms that are likely to play upon the encounter” (138). In other words, stigma is something that happens and develops *between* human beings and is not a human category.

Brené Brown has in her article from 2006 “Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame” defined shame as “an intensely painful feeling or
experience of believing we are flawed and therefor unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (45). She further explains how this shows in feelings of being trapped, powerless and isolated, which – as this paper will show – are all feelings David can strongly relate to.

A critical reader may object to the fact that Brown’s study has been done on women only, and that the fictional character discussed in this paper is male, but further studies conducted by Brown show that the main concerns regarding shame were the same for women and men alike (Brown et al.). However, even though there seem to be few significant differences between men and women, “the data clearly demonstrated that the social-community messages and expectations that fuel shame are organized by gender” (358). This means that how one experiences shame is the same for both sexes but the reason for experiencing shame are different. These latter studies show how for men “the expectations and messages center on masculinity and what it means to ‘be a man’” (358). Therefore, when looking at this novel, this aspect of “masculine” shame will be given a special emphasis in seeing how this relates to David and also how it is shown in the narration.

Taking this aspect further, it is one thing to be a man vs. being a woman, but there is yet another thing being a man vs. being a gay man. Therefore, I have found it helpful to include in the discussion Alan Downs’s specific reflections around gay male shame explained in his book The Velvet Rage. For, as he says in his introduction: “The experience of being a gay man in the twenty-first century is different from that of any other minority, sexual orientation, gender or cultural grouping . . . We are a culture of our own” (1).

In his article “The Psychodynamics of Shame,” Andrew P. Morrison further explains how shame can be “the most potent and painful of human expressions” (28) and therefore he also stresses how “shame is often disguised under a variety of defense mechanism, such as contempt, envy, or grandiosity” (24, my emphasis). He also explains how the feelings of anger, rage and withdrawal often share this same function. Another aspect that potentially also reveals shame in an individual is to notice how the individual speaks to him- or herself in a manner that Morrison calls “a sleight of hand.” He explains this as “the words that people use to describe their own ill feelings toward themselves” (32). This means that when looking for shame in a fictional character, sometimes – as in real life – it is possible to hide the actual feeling of shame by acting in a way that from the outside may not at first seem like a shame-induced act, but only reveals itself as such when being further scrutinized. Therefore, when dealing with David as a character, these features, as I will from here on refer to as secondary shame markers, will also be taken into account, both from a psychological and narratological point of view.
Regardless of these subdivisions of shame, it is important for me to underline that in general shame is shame – meaning that it is something all human beings can relate to, regardless of how it is induced – and I still want to keep this universal aspect throughout the paper. This is also shown in how Downs’s reoccurring theme – that gay men essentially feel unlovable – ties perfectly in with the aspect of unworthiness in Brown’s main definition of shame. Nevertheless, I will obviously dive into the specific details of shame wherever that is necessary, to either better understand David in all his facets, to point out to the reader that what one may simply, at a first glance, look at as gay behavior, actually is shame-provoked behavior showing as a shame marker, or to show the literary techniques that in combination construct and build the character.

In her studies, Brown also emphasizes the fact that shame is a “psycho-social-cultural construct” (“Shame Resilience Theory” 45), where both emotions, thoughts, relations and cultural expectations play a part in producing shame. The social and cultural components also tie neatly in with Goffman’s theories about the rules and regulations in society and the expectations in every individual of meeting them. Interestingly, Brown shares how up until quite recently very little research has been done on shame, how it acts, the “anatomy” of shame, and how to become more resilient towards shame (“Shame Resilience Theory” 43). Even though this area of study has gained considerable ground in recent years, this helps to explain why this approach has not frequently been applied to literary studies, as has been my experience when trying to find previous analyses in the field. As such, this paper aims at contributing with important perspectives in this relatively new way of looking at literature.

When considering how to present my findings from Giovanni’s Room, I initially spent a considerable amount of time trying to present them in the same chronological order as they were given to the reader in the novel. However, even though this made sense on a stylistic level, it did not do justice to the point I was trying to make – showing that the various literary building blocks of shame relate to, develop, and build on one another. Therefore, I have decided to present my analysis following the title of the thesis. In an organic fashion, it will parallel the smallest building blocks of the body – the cells – with that of the smallest building blocks of a novel – the physical words and letters. From there, it will move up the anatomical ladder, one step at a time, by investigating the literary tissue of shame and by looking at how shame is formed and operates. Then it will consider the literary organs by considering shame seen through avoidance. The penultimate subsection will look at literary organ systems by diving into shame in character and narrator relations, while the last section will look at the literary body, where shame as an inhibitor for character development is a central theme. This
way of presenting the text – an organic approach to an achronological novel – may at first seem radical to the reader, but it is my goal, and hope, that this way of analyzing *Giovanni’s Room* will expand and deepen the way one looks at a text from a shame perspective. Hopefully, by the end of the thesis, this method will turn out to be both rewarding and open the eyes of the reader to new ways of looking at this and other texts that deal with shame.
1. The literary body of shame: from the smallest line on a page to a complete characterization

1.1. The Cell: shame in typography and language

This first subsection will explore the basic building blocks of *Giovanni’s Room* on a literary cellular level. In order to do this, it will consider how the actual words look on the physical pages and how this potentially can reveal shame thorough typography, word combinations and the choice of language.

Let us first start, like all good novels, with a conflict of interest. And for the fun of it, in celebrating the achronology of this particular novel, let us start almost at the end. In Giovanni’s and David’s very last quarrel in Giovanni’s room, we meet a very subtle way of passing on information to the reader, where the smallest of textual markers is used to indicate and support the feeling of being split and divided by shame. When Giovanni, passionately and desperately, asks David what he feels, David replies: “I feel nothing now” (141), but only a few sentences later he says “I was shaking” (142), which shows either that David is lying to Giovanni, or that he is in so little contact with his emotions, that he has closed them off to protect himself from being overwhelmed. Otherwise, he would maybe not be able to leave Giovanni, as his mind has decided that he has to. And when being closed off, a body that shakes is only a body that shakes, as he cannot risk feeling at this moment what that actually means in terms of emotions. However, between these two seemingly contradictory sentences only separated by ten or so lines, the following sentence occurs: “I – I cannot have a life with you’” (141). And it is this sentence that so beautifully and subtly shows, with its dash, both a textual symbol to indicate a pause, a hesitation and stylistically and literally an emotional divide in David, a divide this thesis will explore progressively from different literary angles. The first “I” represents the true David, the David that deep down wants to follow his feelings, but which is overruled by the other “I”, the one that conforms and gets the final word.

This demonstrates how such a small literary device, a sign to indicate a pause, at this place in the novel, when the reader is aware of this divide in David, functions to underline even more what we already feel to be true. This inner struggle is demanding too much of David, as he is not able to let go of the demands and expectations of the second “I” and does not see how it could be possible to be the first “I”, and the first “I” only. Giovanni explains this struggle movingly after David, in desperation says: “‘But I’m a man,’ . . . ‘a man! What
do you think can *happen* between us?” (142), and Giovanni simply says: “‘You know very well,’ . . . ‘what can happen between us. It is for that reason you are leaving me’” (142).

The use of the smallest of lines that possibly reveal shame is also found when Hella and David meet again after she has been in Spain. Their reunion ends up in her room, where there is a strange build up to their unavoidable, and perhaps compulsory, lovemaking. When Hella asks David if he wants children, he answers: “‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I’ve always wanted that.’ I turned to face her, very quickly, or as though strong hands on my shoulders had turned me around” (123). Here, it is as if someone else turns David around, and with Erving Goffman in mind, it is tempting to see this as being a representation of the internalized and automatized heteronormative expectations of David’s father and society in general. This idea goes hand in hand with the letter to his father that follows a few pages later, which we know is based entirely on lies, and interestingly ends with the cliché: “She’s already made me a very happy man” (124). With Hella pulling and society pushing, it shines through how passive David is in all of this, as if he is just drifting along and being at the mercy of feelings and other people’s expectations of him.

When we reach the part in this scene, where it is clearly “in the air” that lovemaking is to follow, this is not only omitted, but it is marked, for the first and only time in the novel, by a long line, which is not a completely new chapter but which, nonetheless, indicates a discursive and temporal break. However, at this point in the novel, this omission of the sexual act, and the line that follows, is based on a different type of shame than what we have seen previously in the novel between David and Joey, David and Giovanni or David and Sue (which will be discussed in subsection 1.3). This time around it seems to be based on a part of him being ashamed, or maybe saddened, by the fact that he is not able to stand up to the will of his father or the heteronormative pull of Hella, or even to make an independent choice of his own.

One thing is textual markers, such as lines and dashes, but what happens when one chooses to make all the letters in a word slightly thinner and tilted to one side – also knowns as italics? There is a literary convention of using italics when one wants to stress or underline a word, and often this same typography is used when once chooses to include foreign words in the text. Both these techniques are used amply in Giovanni’s Room. Sometimes, when knowing the French word and its corresponding connotations, one even gets the impression that the words are “double italicized”, using both theses conventions at once. One good example of this is how David talks about certain “fairies”, in the sense of flamboyant, (hyper) feminine gay men, in the bar where he first meets Giovanni: “There were, of course, *les folles*,
always dressed in the most improbable combinations, screaming like parrots the details of
their latest love affairs” (26). Here the relative subordinate clause, “of course”, helps in
further emphasizing our impression of David’s attitude towards men choosing to express
themselves in this way, and is thus indirectly showing his own shame. At the same time, it
also says something about his idea of what it means to be gay, his idea of manhood, and also
echoes the words of his father, from whom he has internalized and adopted this notion of
what it means to be a “real man” and not, in a metaphoric way, a Sunday school teacher.

Sometimes the italicized word shows both emphasis and irony, and perhaps even
verges on sarcasm. In this respect, David’s obsession with his manhood is further underlined
by Jacques’ comment: “‘I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment’ – he
paused – ‘that immaculate manhood which is your pride and joy’” (30). Other times, it is the
italicized English word directly which reveals, by being emphasized, contempt and shame: “I
always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody, for a man who
wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man
would certainly not want one of them” (27).

This ambiguity and inner struggle that resides in David is beautifully described when
we as readers are taken back to his youth and his sexual encounter with Joey: “I was suddenly
afraid. It was borne in on me: But Joey is a boy” (9). Here we see presented exactly what
Goffman talks about when he explains how stigma, and the shame derived from it, has its
roots in the expectations and norms of society (2). These very expectations are internalized in
David, where he suddenly “wakes up” to this reality in the morning and somehow has to
remind himself about the fact that Joey is indeed a boy, and not someone he as a boy himself,
according to social norms, should have an intimate sexual relationship with. This is both
underlined by the powerful use of italics in this quote and confirmed by David himself, as he
just a bit further down the page says: “I was ashamed” (9). In a more subtle way, it is also
emphasized further, again by the use of italics, as he exclaims: “I could have cried, cried for
shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this
could have happened in me” (9).

I make a special point of adding this latter quote, as it captures beautifully the subtle
difference between simply stating that one is ashamed and using more subtle literary
techniques that show how shame is created and stored in the human psyche. In defining the
difference between shame and guilt, Brené Brown says that guilt is a verb and shame is a
noun. Guilt is what you do and shame is something you are (“Shame Resilience Theory” 50).
Therefore, in this quote it is also worth noting how a seemingly innocent literary stylistic tool,
such as italicizing a word, is not only used to emphasize that word. For, in the context of shame, this underscoring also points directly to the difference between shame and guilt, where the narrator identifies with this shame as something becoming an inherent part of him ("in me"). This makes the short and apparently innocent word “in” point far beyond itself, potentially, and fascinatingly, saying a lot more about shame than the word “shame” has the power to.

We also see David’s shame as a narrator shining thorough these thin, sloping letters via the use of French words. Being set in France, the narrator has chosen to use quite a number of French expressions throughout the novel. Some of these expressions are translated, but many of them are not. From a narrator’s point of view, this either assumes a narratee with a certain knowledge of French, or that giving certain French words here and there, words that are not all that important for the over-all comprehension of the text, simply adds a touch of “Frenchness”. When first reading this text, I was looking for which French words David was using, to see if they could say something about him as a character. After some time, I realized that it was more interesting to look at what words were not being translated by the narrator.

Most of the time, one could argue that the narrator, as mentioned above, assumes that this type of French is understood, that he is using simple phrases that even the American reader, although not traditionally known to be polyglot, would be familiar with from the media or popular culture. Still, there is also a possibility that that the French is not translated when the narrator does not want us to understand the full depth of his character, where the French is used to withhold information, and in this way also can serve as secondary shame marker. For instance, when Giovanni in desperation says to David: “Ne me laisse pas tomber, je t’en prie” (105), this can be translated into: “Don’t let me fall, I beg you”, but this translation is not given in the novel. One plausible reason for this can be that the narrator does not want the narratee to know what he is being asked, so as not to be judged for letting Giovanni do exactly that: to fall into the void of his own destiny without anyone there to catch him.

This way of hiding behind the French is also found when Giovanni is talking about David with Guillaume, where interestingly most of their conversation is given in English, but as soon as it comes to how Giovanni defines his relationship with David, the narrator has chosen to change the language. The first French sentence seems at first to be paraphrased by the English sentence that immediately follows, giving the narratee the impression that this is the correct translation, which it both is and is not. For one could argue that “I am not alone any more” (108) covers the gist of “Mais à ce moment là je n’avais pas un copain” (108), but
it is also possible to argue that this is a deceptive translation. If one were to translate this sentence more directly, it actually says: “But at that moment I did not have a boyfriend”, where the powerful and loaded word ‘boyfriend’ conveniently has been edited out of the so-called translation, making us wonder whether the narrator intentionally avoided this word, as it carries too much direct connotations to what they have together compared to the much more suggestive and vague “not being alone”. Interestingly, one could also argue that even in the French sentence, there is an ambiguity of not stating things directly. This is due to the fact that “copain” in itself also carries a double meaning, where it in French is used interchangeably to talk about both friends and lovers.

The potential shame that lies hidden behind using French words with a double meaning and “creative” translations is further revealed when the sentence is not translated at all: “Je suis avec un gar maintenant” (108). Directly translated, it says “I am with a man now”, which seems to be more direct and straight to the point than the narrator is emotionally capable of transferring to the narratee in English. This non-translation reaches its peak when Giovanni declares his love for David in the following sentence “Je t’aime, tu sais?” (110), and David answers in the directly confirmative and not in the reciprocal: “Je le sais, mon vieux” (110). One could say that here David only confirms that he knows that Giovanni loves him, and thereby does not say the same in return; however, in the end, he uses a French expression, “mon vieux”, which, contrary to the direct translation of “my old one”, in French also functions as an endearment in quite intimate relations. This unwrapping of such a small piece of dialogue beautifully exemplifies how a foreign language used as a literary device can have multiple layers to it, and shows the enormous ambiguity that lies both in David the character – when he cannot return with direct words Giovanni’s declaration but still adds an intimate endearment – and in David the narrator who chooses to put the exchange in untranslated French.

At rare instances, we also learn about David through his inner thoughts put in italics. If this was done throughout the novel as a convention for conveying inner monologue, there would be no reason to notice this, but only in a very few places in the novel is David’s inner life displayed textually like this. One good example is when he ponders how to juggle his relationship with both Giovanni and Hella: “I was thinking. Perhaps I can get out of it without having to tell her anything” (123). In a peculiar way, this rare occurrence seems to get us closer to the true voice of the character than we have been previously in the novel. One could say that this is no longer the character filtered through the narrator’s voice – it is no longer the
narrator narrating directed to the narratee – but, rather, the character, being self-aware as a character speaking directly, as an accomplice, to the reader.

Sometimes traces of shame can also be hidden in how words are combined unexpectedly, where a “negative” premodifier stands in front of and juxtaposes a more positively loaded word. In their doubleness, they give an extraordinary intensification of the modified word, but, at the same time, the device catches the ambiguity and the internalized struggle of someone who has his heart and desire in one place and his thoughts and conventional ideas in another. Thus, the words are not only used to, almost oxymoronically, modify each other, but they also “modify” and say something about the person uttering these words combined in this way. Take for instance David’s reflections on how he is grateful for Hella not being in Paris when he meets Giovanni: “I could not even pretend to myself that I was sorry she was in Spain. I was glad. I was utterly, hopelessly, horribly glad. I knew I could do nothing whatever to stop the ferocious excitement which had burst in me like a storm” (42, my emphasis). Here we see this internal struggle played out clearly, where the words are also saying that he knows, due to conventions and norms, he should not feel this way, but he cannot help it even though it is both indescribably joyful and frightening at the same time. In this way, how the words are combined, are reflecting David’s inner struggle between sense and sensibility, and shame and desire.

In looking at word use, it is interesting to linger a bit on a sentence from the very beginning of the novel: “I was thinking, when I told Hella that I loved her, of those days before anything awful, irrecoverable had happened to me” (5). Here we hear about a past incident and how this changed the way David looked at his love for Hella, or on love in general. In hindsight, we might believe that he thought he did not know what love was until he met Giovanni, which changed and expanded his notion of what love meant and felt. Still, I want to focus on the latter part of this sentence, and more precisely on the words “awful” and “irrecoverable”, which precisely touches on Brown’s difference between shame and guilt: Not only are his feelings connected to Giovanni awful, not only are they irrecoverable, but they are also something that represents a permanent shift in David, in the way he sees himself. I make a special point of this, as this piece of information at such a relatively early stage in the text has a rather complex build up and refers to several incidents that have already happened, but of which the reader is so far unaware. It is uttered from an analepsis, referring back to a point in time that happened before another point in time that is still before the time from which the sentence is uttered. It is possible to say that this is simply a technical writing tool that Baldwin uses to create suspense and curiosity and to make us want to read more.
However, if we try to see this from the narrator’s point of view, and how he combines words and phrases and portions out information, it is tempting to see this rather explicit confession of his transformed state after having met Giovanni as somehow conveniently and strategically placed at such an early stage in the story. In this way, he has come clean – he admits that he has been forever changed by his encounter with Giovanni – but the reader will most likely not understand what he is really referring to, and thereby it may quickly be overlooked, and hopefully forgotten. What he is alluding to may not necessarily be clearer when having finished listening to his story, but I would argue that this is David admitting his deep love for Giovanni, and, at the same time, acknowledging his intense sensation of shame connected to this feeling of love. This is an excellent example of how words can refer to shame directly by pointing to and hinting at it. At the same time, it also shows how words combined can point beyond themselves, where potentially none of them individually carry in them signifiers pointing to shame, but, collectively, they function as a “group signifier”. This makes it sometimes more telling and interesting to look at how something is referred to, rather than looking at the reference itself.

1.2 Tissue: how shame is formed and operates

Having been given an introduction to how shame can be hidden stylistically in how words are presented and look on the physical page, it is now time to move up one literary anatomical level to look at the tissue of shame and what Giovanni’s Room has to tell us about how shame is formed and how it operates.

When reading David’s story about his first sexual experience with another man, we first learn that this encounter with Joey in his youth is the lie (one of many) made to Giovanni that David regrets the strongest. This regret, and how it is presented, is noteworthy on several interwoven levels, where it is fascinating to ask why it is that David feels particularly guilty for having lied about having had sex with another man long before he met Giovanni. The reader would perhaps be naturally inclined to think that it is more common to feel guilty about having lied about his girlfriend Hella, or having had sex with the student named Sue, after having started his relationship with Giovanni. One potential explanation for this could be that he did not want to make Giovanni jealous and, as his first male lover, wanted to make him feel special. A second reason could be that it was important to make an explicit point about Giovanni being the first, and in this sense not defining himself as a gay man, but more in the lines of a man simply having sex with another man for the first time, and thereby avoiding
any shameful and stigmatizing labeling. Thus, the dishonesty of not sharing who he truly is, and thereby avoiding true intimacy with Giovanni, is something that David regrets strongly and feels shameful about.

However, herein also lies another possible interpretation that lies in the liminal space between psychology and literary studies. As David stands there in his house in the south of France, looking back at his younger days, we see how shame has the potential to carry over and be transferred from one shameful episode to another, with the power to magnify itself threefold: First you experience a shameful episode (sex with Joey), then, secondly, you are too ashamed to share your shame (not talking about it with Giovanni) because, thirdly, the relationship which you are currently in is something you feel shameful about (his liaison with Giovanni). It is even possible to see this from a fourth angle, where withholding information is related to the power dynamic in their relationship, and how David does not want to give this knowledge to Giovanni, as it would potentially give him a certain control over David.

The notion of time also ties in well with how shame can be formed from a young age, and the numerous jumps back and forth in time in this novel (as will be explained in subsection 1.3) can both be seen as secondary shame markers and as good examples of how shame is constructed in the individual. Early on in this novel, we get some of the back story from David’s early childhood presented in the form of memories and even scenes, where some of these memories are quite telling in a subtle way. Take for instance: “Ellen [David’s aunt living with his father] spoke of my mother often, saying what a remarkable woman she had been, but she made me feel uncomfortable. I felt I had not right to be the son of such a mother” (13). This shows how the internalization of differentness starts quite early for David. If one looks to Goffman’s formation of stigma, this seemingly innocent sentence may indicate something more than just a simple estrangement from his deceased mother. This is further supported in a scene when we hear about David being thirteen years old and listening to his aunt having a fight with his father, a fight about him. Not only does the adult David explicitly say that he remembers this particularly well, but as the narrator, he also dedicates time and text to explaining this episode. Nonetheless, it is not certain that the young nor the adult David understand or know where the key element of this episode lies. By giving it narrative importance, though, by sharing it and slowing textual time and story time down to a scene, the narrator indicates that there is something of significance here, even if it may not even be consciously available to him. Thus, it is left to us, the readers, to look for meaning and to create the causal link between why this scene is given and what its implications may be.
Brené Brown has a very interesting image of how shame works. She says: “Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it – it can’t survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy. The most dangerous thing to do after a shaming experience is hide or bury our story” (The Gifts of Imperfection 10). In this respect, his summer with Joey, the car accident David has some time later, and the conversation between father and son, or rather the lack thereof, that happens in the aftermath of the accident, can be interpreted as closely linked and pivotal moments where David starts to internalize his own shame: “The incident with Joey had shaken me profoundly and its effect was to make me secretive and cruel. I could not discuss what had happened to me with anyone, I could not even admit it to myself” (15-16). Note especially here how it is described as something that happens to David, as if it is both external and foreign.

From these connected episodes in his youth, we also see how small episodes that alone may not be seen as having anything to do with shame, together indicate and point towards shame. Having a car accident in itself does not necessarily say anything about shame, likewise not communicating well with your father, as this may be the case for many fathers and sons and may be completely detached from shame, nor is having same-sex encounters in one’s youth necessarily a guarantee of carrying around shameful feelings. Still, looking at these factors together, and how they are presented literarily may show how this car “accident” can be seen as a shame induced suicide attempt. This claim is also supported by how some studies demonstrate that “homosexual males account for more than half of male youth suicide attempts” (Downs 43), and knowing that David himself knew very well that he was too drunk to drive.

This makes even more sense when one looks in detail at the conversation David has with his father after waking up from the accident. Right there and then in the hospital bed is the crucial moment when he could have come clean to his father about him and Joey. Unfortunately, due to these two men living on different planets as far as sexuality and communication is concerned, the occasion is never seized. Actually, one could say that David tries to open his heart to his father, but he is only able to understand David’s words in the first degree, and thereby David feels neither met nor seen. We as readers, however, are invited to see the ambiguity in David’s words, and we now, some pages into the story, start to understand that the words David uses have a different meaning than how they are interpreted by his father. Therefore, his father’s non-understanding, and our growing understanding, plays out in a powerful contrast, as it is emotional and painful to see two human beings talking past each other to such an extent, both literally and metaphorically. “I wanted to tell
him everything – but speaking was such agony” (18), David says, where “everything” here includes so much more than the details about the accident. He continues: “I’m sorry,” I said, suddenly. ‘I’m sorry’. I did not know how to say what I was sorry for” (18), where his father’s response – “Don’t be sorry, . . . Just be careful next time” (18) – clearly shows that they are not talking about the same thing. This way of not being understood and even not allowed to fully express oneself is turned up a notch when David finally starts to cry: “Daddy,” I said. And began to cry. And if speaking had been agony, this was worse and yet I could not stop” (18). This is met with: “Don’t cry,” he said, ‘don’t cry’” (19), where his father’s reluctance to welcome these tears could both be related to them representing a lack of manhood (real men don’t cry), and as a way of comforting his son. The accident, after all, which his father thinks is the reason behind David’s tears, caused no severe physical damage to anyone.

Unfortunately, none of these interpretations help David in lifting the emotional weight off his shoulders. Finally, David says: “‘We were drunk’ . . . ‘We were drunk’. For this seemed somehow to explain everything” (19). The use of “everything” gives the reader multiple possibilities of interpretation, but we now start to understand that this is not referring to the fact that David and his friends were drunk when they were driving, but rather, that Joey and David had been drinking that night when nothing would ever be the same again, and is giving this as an excuse for why things happened the way they did. These key episodes of secondary shame markers culminate in David concluding: “For I understood, at the bottom of my heart, that we had never talked, that now we never would” (19). With this, he starts to meet the world with a closed heart and a belief that it is best to hide your shame at all costs: “I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well – by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion” (20). This “constant motion”, revealing his shame avoidance, is found more or less physically in David’s “flight” to France, his evasiveness with Hella, his going back and forth with Giovanni and his travels to the south. However, in a closer look, we shall see in the next subsection that this way of remaining in “constant motion” is also reflected in smaller, indirect, evasive “motions” like body language, how the story is narrated, alcohol consumption, and even how the story is structured on a textual level.

At other times, Giovanni’s Room teaches us about the feeling of shame directly when it is mentioned more explicitly in the text. One example of this is when Giovanni and David have just met, and David, however confused and filled with mixed and new feelings, concludes: “But I was glad. I was only sorry that Jacques had been a witness. He made me
ashamed” (42). One way of looking at this is simply to say that David feels ashamed and projects the reason for this onto Jacques. In other words, it is easier for David to find someone or something outside of himself to blame. In this way, he does not have to relate as strongly to his shameful feelings, as they somehow have an external source. Arguably, it is also possible to say that the reason for why he feels ashamed in front of Jacques is because he has now seen David’s softer, deeper and more emotional side, where, instead of being completely drunk and craving carnal sex with another man, it is somehow more stigmatizing to connect emotionally to a man in a way where his heart is involved.

Cyraina Johnson-Roullier also seems to touch upon these ideas when she says: “And because of David’s own personal dilemma, which ostensibly is about homosexuality, but in reality is about the consequences of self-deception, the problem of homosexuality becomes not a motive for protest, but rather a metaphor for society, in the form of social injunction, of what one is not, at all costs, to be” (940). In this way, his real manhood is not under siege if he is only having sex with other men. But, as soon as it becomes something more, something intimate and sharing beyond the strictly physical, the idea and image of himself has to be readjusted. It is this process, and this “discovery”, that becomes the shameful part, the shameful part David sees reflected in the way Jacques looks at him. The shameful part that no one at all costs, is to see.

This attitude of sharing and “educating” one another in the world of shame is also found in another passage where David does not see how he judges his friend for fellating other men, while he accepts, at least to a greater degree, being fellated himself: “‘Tell me,’ I said at last, ‘is there really no other way for you but this? To kneel down forever before an army of boys just five dirty minutes in the dark?’ ‘Think,’ said Jacques, ‘of the men who have kneeled before you while you thought of something else and pretended that nothing was happening down there in the dark between your legs’” (56). This does not necessarily reveal a double standard in David, but might as well be an example of how he, through society, has adopted certain norms that place certain acts in a gay hierarchy, where some acts are “more” gay than others, e.g. being passive vs. being active, or, as in this case, fellating vs. being fellated. Thus, certain acts between men are more shame inducing than others. In this way, we start to understand that, as a way to compensate for his own shame, David alleviates parts of his own struggle by passing this shame on to others who conduct “even more” shameful acts than himself. Therefore, seeing where David, or any other character for that matter, is shaming others, or trying to make himself feel better, is both a good place to see how social
norms are internalized, and in which areas these characters are experiencing and feeling shame themselves.

We also learn more about David’s shame and how he experiences it indirectly by watching how and what he notices in other characters, where this can be seen as reflecting back on himself. One strong example of this is when Giovanni talks about how he first met Guillaume, and David the narrator, gives the following description of Giovanni: “He looked at me and I saw in his face again something which I have fleetingly seen there during these hours: under his beauty and his bravado, terror, and a terrible desire to please; dreadfully, dreadfully moving, and it made me want, in anguish, to reach out and comfort him” (61). One rewriting and interpretation of this is that David also has a need to heal his desire to please. This also shows how, when one has become terribly “proficient” in the act of pleasing by identifying heteronormative expectations and meeting them to the best of one’s abilities, this also plays out, and continues, in the closest and most intimate of relations. Not only is David able to identify this need in Giovanni, but he also, ironically, senses a need to reach out to him, to please him as well. In other words, by noticing this need in Giovanni, and reacting to it so strongly (by the use of words such as “terrible”, “dreadful”, “moving”, and “anguish”), David is indirectly both saying that “I too have this” and “I too want to reach out to myself with comfort and understanding”. This information is obviously not consciously available to David, as he, at the time of narrating, would not be able to admit this need to himself. Thus, this information is not consciously given, but is, nonetheless, indirectly and subtly available to the reader, both as a general character trait of a literary character on its own terms, and also as a secondary shame marker due to the nature of how this trait has been formed.

At the end of part one in the novel, which is the longest time – text time – we ever spend in this house in the South in the entire novel, we learn more about how stigma, with its corresponding shame can be formed in society. David’s move to the south is both an escape from society, and from himself, but we also see that he feels alienated from the villagers. This beautifully, and creepily, shows how society observes, controls and regulates as a combined unit to finally install and internalize in the individual what Michel Foucault would call self-policing (503-7). Here shame seems to be a part of this mechanism, where the norms from the “village” (family, media, society, nation, etc.) are competing with desires and emotions. David is painfully aware of this, at least when it comes to being in a “village” that is not his own: “I can make no answer to her last, sardonic thrust, having forgotten that in a small village almost every move is made under the village’s collective eye and ear” (66-67). This is further underlined in how the village works as a microcosm of Goffman’s social regulations,
where the landlady, without Google tracker or social media, is aware of David’s every move: She knows, with the help from the people in the local café, that he has not been eating there, the bus driver can inform her that he has not ridden with him for the past few days, and her only focus and heteronormative expectations of him is to get married and have “bambinos”. This is also where we see repeated David’s relationship to his father and how this is closely knit with acceptance on the grounds of being a man, a real man according to their standards. Here the older men in the south are described as father figures when David projects on them a certain patronizing regard: “They treated me as the son who has but lately been initiated into manhood” (65). I would argue that this feeling is also something David experiences in Paris as well, but rather this time it is internalized, as he has carried his “village” all the way across the Atlantic.

The main source of David’s shame is revealed when he imagines that his landlady will abolish all his sins, for as he says: “My crime, in some odd way, is in being a man . . .” (70). Here, especially enforced by the religious undertones in this part of the text, it is as if David feels cursed or doomed, and that he, as a man, is born with original sin. For, according to his logic, it is his masculine desire and passion – which he has not been able to control, which he is not able to escape, even in a remote village in the South of France – that has led to his downfall. Consequently, this “flaw” in him is what has made him treat Giovanni the way he has. The added shame from this is seen when he imagines the landlady potentially being Giovanni’s mother: “If she knew what I had done to her son” (67). This makes it into a triple shame: One, for being with Giovanni; two, for hurting him emotionally; and three, for not being able to do anything about it. However, this sequence also captures exactly how the emotions and the mind pull in different directions; where after having gone into the emotional, he quickly talks “sense” to himself: “But, of course, she is not Giovanni’s mother” (67).

On the first page of Chapter Three in Part Two of the novel, David says: “I had thought of suicide when I was much younger, as, possibly, we all have, but then it would have been for revenge, it would have been my way of informing the world how awfully it had made me suffer” (103). As noted earlier, David’s car crash can be seen as an indirect reference to suicide as a shame induced act, and in this more explicit quote it is interesting to look at the word “possibly” used as a modifier, showing that he may have a feeling that wanting to kill yourself when you are young is, possibly, not completely normal, as most young people do not seriously consider committing suicide. It is also worth noting how the narrator refers to how much the world had made him suffer as a young boy, but nowhere is
the source of this suffering explicitly mentioned. Still, from a shame perspective, one can see this referring to how much effort and energy it takes to conform to and play after the rules of society. Or as Thomas Lloyd, President of Georgetown’s LGBTQ Student group says in his TEDx Talk “Why am I so gay”, talking about his past before he started owning his identity: “I had to expend all my creative energy on covering what it was that made me different.” This conformity, or playing by the rules, is brought up again as an adult after the episode with Sue, when David thinks about how easy it would be to follow to the norms of society: “I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned” (104). Still, this wish is beautifully juxtaposed with the following phrase from the same page: “What a long way, I thought, I have come – to be destroyed!” (104). Here the reference to being destroyed is at least twofold: it can simply be seen as referring to how his attraction towards other men is what is leading to his destruction, and that if it had not been for his weakness, in not being able to withstand the desires and temptations therein, his life would have been so much easier. However, at this point in the text, especially with the previous reference to his childhood, it is also possible to see this destruction as a critique of society, where the burden of carrying around stigma and pain has the power to destroy a person to such an extent that contemplating suicide becomes very real and has an almost tangible presence in one’s everyday life.

Even after having looked into all these approaches to understanding the tissue of shame, no other scene describes so intensely and violently the destructive sides of how shame can operate and function within the human psyche, as when Giovanni and David, a bit more than half way through the novel, stands face to face, body to body, in Giovanni’s room: “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” (118). This strikingly and dramatically shows– even though the source of their individual shame may be different – how shame can become so destructive that those who feel it, if pushed far enough, are willing to kill or be killed. All this, only to remove the imagined source or manifestation of this feeling, represented by both their own body and the body of the other.

1.3 Organs: shame revealing itself through avoidance

This next section, one step up the literary anatomical ladder, will look closely at all the different ways shame in an oxymoronic way reveals itself by various ways of hiding.
One of the most obvious and noteworthy examples of avoidance in this novel are the numerous places where the narrator in different ways jumps back and forth in time—sometimes within one sentence, sometimes several times within the same paragraph and recurrently within every chapter. One interpretation of this can be that the moving back and forth in time is not simply arbitrary, but is done at moments that are particularly filled with shame. Therefore, the jumps in time also become a literary tool that reveals shame. But how are we to understand the concept of time in a literary context where sometimes one year can be summed up in a short sentence, or one day can take up three hundred pages? Here Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan helps us by differentiating between story time and text time. Since it is difficult to consider text time as the time it takes to read a text, as readers have a different reading pace, it is much more constructive to look at text time as the amount of text used to describe an event in a story. She says: “Acceleration [few words used to describe events that stretch out in time] and deceleration [many words used to describe events that take little time] are often evaluated by the reader as indicators of importance and centrality” (56). That said, here I would argue that sometimes the reverse may be true, where an acceleration and sometimes even a deceleration can serve as a way of avoiding a topic by skipping it entirely, or trying to slow down the process as a way of not getting to the core of the matter.

In this respect, it is interesting look, for instance, at how David is standing in the house in the South of France looking out of the window thinking back to his younger self’s meeting with Joey. The “text time” here seems to be only a few sentences, more or less corresponding to the image we get of the story time of adult David in the south, where he simply is standing in front of the window looking out for a few seconds. This is in stark contrast to the memory of the meeting with Joey that lasted a whole summer and is decelerated considerably over four plus pages of text, when we read about what became their last night together. In these pages, we are coming close to real time by being given a scene that slows down even more with descriptive pauses, where story time can be said to stand still, with only text time running. In this respect, it is how this scene ends that becomes truly revealing with regard to how shame can be hidden in the way in which the narrator chooses, consciously or unconscious, to present the story: “We had our arms around each other. It was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted nearly doomed bird which I miraculously happened to find. I was very frightened; I am sure he was frightened too, and we shut our eyes” (8).

It is quite understandable, considering that this novel was published in 1956, that it contains no explicit description of sexual scenes between men, still, one way of avoiding this issue all together could simply have been to turn up the text time and omit it completely in an
ellipsis jumping directly to the morning after. Still, instead of doing this, the narrator chooses to jump back to the primary narrative and give his own reflections on what happened from the safe distance of both a time several years later and on a different continent. Immediately after this, David jumps back to the past and goes right back to slowing down both text and story time by describing Joey right down to the minutest detail: “He looked like a baby, his mouth half open, his cheek flushed, his curly hair darkening the pillow and half hiding his damp round forehead and his long eyelashes glinting slightly in the summer sun” (8). Since the narrator is willing to keep the same pace in the story before and after what happened sexually between these two boys, rather than choosing simply to make an omission within the scene, this could indicate that it is an event that the adult David is still too ashamed to truly examine. This is further supported by how this memory is written in the past tense and seems to be focalized through the eyes of an adult David, and not the young David, in the way that the words belong more to the vocabulary of an adult man rather than a boy in his late teens, with some examples being: “The most beautiful creation I had ever seen” (8), “my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing” (9), “the very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness” (9).

This same type of avoidance also seems to occur when Davis looks back on his sexual relation with Giovanni, now as an adult, and is particularly evident the first time they are together in Giovanni’s room. Even though the reader can deduce that the story between Giovanni and David continues in a more physical fashion this evening, we are not brought along on this journey, at least not in text time, and the scene ends by David describing that he, rather helplessly, is pulled down on Giovanni’s bed with “everything in me screaming No! yet the sum of me sighed Yes” (64). This is another strong example of how internalized shame is shown in the narrator, not only by what he is telling, but more so by how it is being told. Textually, after these last words, and the complete ellipsis of their lovemaking, we are not only separated physically from the main narrative by a space or a paragraph, and neither does simply a new chapter suffice, but, via a considerable amount of textual time, seven or so pages, we are projected forward in time and later lead into a whole new part of the novel, Part Two. During this textual “escape” in time, we see how the narrator takes us, and himself, back to the here and now of the South of France, while David as a character in his own story, the selected and narrated memory of himself, reaches the climax of his first physical encounter with Giovanni in the past. Quite tellingly, the first thing David in the south comments on is the snow, which rarely falls in the south of France. In both a symbolic and metaphorical sense, this can be seen as a need to cool down the situation from flaming hot, forbidden
passion to the icy cold, quiet innocence of the snowflakes, where the snow both has the power to cover and make into ice, to stagnate and preserve. It is also possible to take this one step further, where the episode with Giovanni is so strong and overwhelming for David, that it is partly experienced as a trauma, where the somehow mundane and completely arbitrary escape in time, with its equally arbitrary change of topic, becomes a much needed dissociation.

This break in story and text can also be interpreted as a need for the narrator to distance himself, as if he, by assuming that the reader also finds what he has done as shameful as he does, needs both a considerable amount of story time and text time in the form of physical pages between him and what was going on with Giovanni. This is not the first time that David has had sex with another man, yet it is the emotional attachment and involvement between them, the intimacy that David feels, which seems to be the most gay, different, queer, shameful and degrading to him. In his mind, a real man may have sex with and dominate whomever he pleases, regardless of gender, but as soon as emotions and attachment are involved, shame also comes into the picture. In this sense, what we see played out is a double source of shame, first for being emotionally attached by having opened up intimately in general, and then for this intimacy being shared with another man. Therefore, his last thoughts in Giovanni’s room – the binary opposition of yes and no – and this new part of the novel, illustrates and underlines the dichotomy of David’s inner struggle between sense and sensibility, what he thinks he ought to do, and what he truly wants to do.

Shame avoidance is not only found through how the narrator relates to time, but also how the character of David relates to others. When for instance Giovanni, after they have been together for some time, asks if Hella is still his mistress, David answers him with quite abruptly “of course” (79). In this way, it is as if David wants Giovanni and the reader to think that Hella would still be his mistress, even when he is sleeping with Giovanni. It is almost as if he is telling Giovanni: “Just because we are sleeping and living together does not mean that I’m gay, because I, of course, have a female mistress, which proves that I, contrary to whatever we have together may look like, am a real man”. From this point of view, it seems like David is trying to convince himself of this as much as Giovanni.

This is an excellent example of the complete and utter shame induced denial that takes place in David, where the relation between these two men is something that is best left undefined to continue their safe status as unavowed lovers. Giovanni is also partly playing and underlining this game, when he explains how he is not so interested in women for the moment and finishes his sentence with “Et puis –” (79). The English translation of this would be something close to “and then” or “anyway” and in this way stands for everything that is
not said between them, and everything they are and have together. It is also worth noting, that this word is not translated, which adds yet another layer to the holding back of the narrator, in one way, unconsciously, showing that he does not want the narratee to know what Giovanni is insinuating. Their difference, and not talking about what is really at the core of the matter, also shows when Giovanni suggests that they could still see each other after Hella comes back: “‘But we would certainly be seeing each other, why not?’ ‘Why not? Supposed she found out?’ ‘Found out? Found out what?’ ‘Oh, stop it,’ I said, ‘You know what there is to find out’” (81). Where the key here is that none of them, especially not David, is willing to enunciate exactly what is it that they have together. This shows how, even within the confinement of Giovanni’s room, literally and metaphorically, there is little room to put words to what they have together, and how, by talking about women, they somehow are able to hold up their manhood for themselves and the other. Unfortunately, this is also what comes between them, and may help to explain exactly why and what it is that David is holding back.

This poignant scene ends when David realizes, and is willing to admit to himself and the reader – although at the safe distance of the past tense and not in a scene – that for a moment he really loved Giovanni. However, almost at the same time as this realization happens, David sees another boy and is shocked at how he allows himself to feel a similar type of attraction to this boy as well, and therefore shifts from love to blaming Giovanni for having awakened this passion and drive in him: “The beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again” (84). Here we see that his reference, what he states as “the beast”, is not necessarily sexual desire, as one may easily assume, but, rather, the capacity to love another man, where it is almost as if his searching for love, looking for love, seeing himself being able to open up to another man, is the beastly nature to which he is referring.

It is also possible to find shame induced avoidance when looking at how David the narrator chooses to hand out or withhold information to the narratee. For instance, in the very first chapter of the novel, we start to understand how one of David’s major issues about being gay is how it links to manhood, and more precisely his idea of what it means to be a man, which he has learned and adopted from his father from an early age: “‘And listen,’ said my father suddenly, from the middle of the staircase, in a voice which frightened me, ‘all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say man, Ellen, I don’t mean a Sunday school teacher.’ ‘A man.’ said Ellen, shortly, ‘is not the same thing as a bull. Good-night’” (15). This shows how shame, and the reasons for shame, sometimes are presented in novels in a way that may escape the reader at a first reading. Since most novels are read only once, they may escape the reader entirely, with the result that scenes like the one mentioned above,
containing important or key information, may only be understood as such in hindsight, when most readers may have forgotten this information, especially since it is less explicitly presented.

Rather than the narrator stating bluntly: “One of my key issues with being gay is that I have adopted my father’s ideas and concepts of what it means to be a real man,” this information is subtly hidden within the text. There can be several reasons for this. For one, it is more interesting for the reader to try to create this causality or to bridge the gap about why certain characters behave the way they do, to feel that he understands them, and, especially then, as the story and text progresses, having his predictions and hunches confirmed (or needing to be reevaluated). In this way, the reader is taking an active part in the reading process and feels included as a co-creator. Still, in order for this to happen there has to be enough reminders, hints and clues on the way for the reader to pay specific attention to them, and there has to be a plausible connection between the hints and the final generalized characterization we make up as readers. Therefore, if there are too few indicators of a certain character trait, or there is too much textual time between when the subtle hints are given and the episodes that help us understand and see the information in context, it may be difficult so see this link for the reader. Yet, if this is the case in a novel – that the reader is not able to see the image the narrator is trying to paint – it does not automatically mean that it is not a well-constructed story. It could actually mean that one is dealing with avoidance, avoidance due to shame, in the sense that the narrator would rather prefer to see that this link be not understood, which seems to be one plausible explanation for why this scene is presented the way it is.

In this novel, we also see how David uses sex with women as an emotional escape, where sex with women both confirms his masculinity and for some time takes him away from himself. In his meeting with Sue, it is worth noting how the narrator spends considerable textual time and slows down the story time to a scene, almost as if to make a break in the text and the story. The dedication of six or so pages to this scene – one of the longest scenes in the entire book – becomes especially peculiar, because we have never heard about Sue before and will never hear about her again. However, in this scene, we, together with David, get to contemplate how sex does not necessitate intimacy and does not even have to involve desiring the other person, but rather can be a way to escape, flee and push down his shame. This is found in the smallest of indications. For instance, when David, in all his audacity, directly is asking to have a drink at her place, with quite explicit sexual overtones, we see how his body speaks a different language: “I forced myself not to drop my eyes” (97), which ironically, and
tellingly, is the opposite problem of what he was facing with sailor, which will be discussed later. This literary tool of letting the eyes speak symbolically, continues when she takes him up on his offer and convinces him to buy something to drink, to make sure that there will be something in the arrangement for her as well. But now his gaze reveals a different side of him that needs to be hidden, as if his true nature may be revealed in his eyes: “It was I, then, that felt a dreadful holding back. To avoid looking at her, I made a great show of getting the waiter” (98). This image of the eyes is also used again twice more after their love making with different references: “But she saw nothing in my eyes – she stared at me as though I had made a long journey on a white charger all the way to her prison house” (101). The narrator even explains his feeling explicitly: “I could scarcely bear to watch the struggle occurring in her face, it made me so ashamed (102).

When it comes to the sex scene, we also see that this contains more explicit content than any of the sex scenes between Giovanni and David, and even David and Hella. It is possible to see this in different ways. First, as a narrator who is ashamed of going into the details of sex between men, especially because he is a part of it. Second, more explicit description of his sexual encounter with a woman displays the narrator’s manhood in front of the narratee. Third, since this scene is described in such an ambiguous way – where certain passages verge on rape – notions of patriarchy, manhood, colonialism and dominance, and maybe even Americanness, are further enhanced. And fourth, this scene, in all its detailed explicitness, is a metaphor for David’s struggle with his shame, where a way of displaying this indirectly is to show how he literally and figuratively tries to violently empty this feeling out of his system, but to no avail: “Well, let her have it for Christ sake, get it over with; then it was ending and I hated her and me, then it was over, and the dark, tiny room rushed back” (100). Notice here that the reference to “the dark, tiny room” may both refer to the physical room he and Sue are currently in, and also the emotional shameful place in his heart that he has not been able to escape from, that now comes rushing back with full force.

Towards the end of the novel, David finds a sailor whom he spends several nights with, and it is only after this point – his last sexual relation in the story – it is possible to compare and contrast his previous sexual relations and potentially see them in a shame perspective based on how they are presented textually. Because it is interesting to notice how – especially when so much of his shame is tied up with and linked to his sexuality – the sexual acts that involve men are the ones that are given the least textual space. And within this category of male sexual relations, these acts are only hinted at, where the more emotion and intimacy there is in them for David, the less it is mentioned, and hence less textual space is
devoted to them. On the other hand, when regarding the sexual relations with women, the less intimacy they contain, the more textual space is dedicated to them. This way of giving the most violent and carnal acts most textual space shows how it is important for David as a narrator to show himself as a man, and thereby – in revealing the struggles of being a man – he also reveals the rage and shame that is controlling him.

Still, it is not only his shame about his sexuality that is present in this novel. His shame is also directed towards his own body, that he also somehow tries to escape. When the narrator towards the very end says: “Take off your clothes, something tells me, it’s getting late” (167), this seems to come from his unconscious, where taking off his clothes is an opportunity to stand “naked” in front of himself. This shows how David starts to understand that time is slowly running out for him and for Giovanni (“it’s getting late”). As he stands in front of the mirror, as in a fairytale, David sees apparitions of Giovanni’s and, most importantly, his own body: “Which is under the sentence of death . . . It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation” (168). Notice here how David sees this body as “trapped in time”, which lends evidence to the concept of non-development and stagnation (which will be further discussed in subsection 1.5). Also, his wishing to break the mirror is another way of wanting to break himself, as the image he sees is the projected image of others on him that he has internalized, and therefore now looks at his own body through the stigmatizing eyes of others.

As David stands there naked in front of the mirror, he continues: “I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife” (168). This seems to represent the ultimate source of his misery and his shame, and in wondering how he can save it from the knife, he is saying the he believes that if he was able to take away the source of his desire, to escape it, everything would be different. At the same time, this image of the knife ties horrifically well in with France looking at Giovanni the same way as David looks at his sex in the mirror, by literally and figuratively cutting him away from society with the guillotine.

Escaping from shame can also be seen in how David relates to alcohol, with numerous references to drinking being found throughout then novel. I would argue that the drinking obviously serves a socio-cultural purpose, but also, at the same time, functions as an emotional protection. David’s drinking is for instance omnipresent in the meeting with his landlady in Part One Chapter Three of the novel and can be seen as both an anchor, something to hold on to; as a way of relieving shame and sorrow; and maybe even as a way of trying to avoid emotions entirely. Sometimes this is explicitly stated in situations that are
uncomfortable for David, for instance when the landlady is poking around in his house and asking insinuating questions: “I wish, now, I that I had my drink with me” (67). Other times the shame, or dealing with shame and emotions, are hidden in mere descriptions of gestures, where they are both symbolically and almost physically flushing down emotions: “‘You really must take my advice, monsieur, and get married.’ At this, suddenly, we both laugh. Then I finish my drink” (70). Here he does not only “drink down” his emotions and sadness from not getting married, but, rather, from being on the diametrically opposite end of that scale, having just “failed” a gay relationship quite miserably. This drinking as a flight, protection from intimacy, or even, possibly, as a way to reach intimacy, is also captured in the very last sentence of this same chapter, when David describes how they, he and Giovanni, “stumbled homeward together so many desperate and drunken mornings” (71).

The shame that David is feeling towards Giovanni is also showing in how physical acts traditionally displaying intimacy between men, can have the power to show a certain withdrawal and escape on David’s behalf. When during a small quarrel in Giovanni’s room, David suggests that they take a walk (to get out of the narrow and confrontational confinement of the room, I would suggest) and makes the following movement: “I grinned and cuffed him roughly, football fashion, on the neck” (110). This type of physical contact between men is traditionally placed somewhere on the more “heterosexual” side of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s continuum of homosocial bonding (1-5), and would normally be a sign of closeness and camaraderie between men. However, in this case, since Giovanni and David have been much further up on the “homosexual” side of the homosocial scale, it is a sign of withdrawal and taking one step back. Still, this withdrawal is not effortless for David and comes with lots of inner anguish, perfectly showing in his last uttered words in this scene: “I smiled and I really felt at that moment that Judas and the Savior had met in me. ‘Don’t be frightened. Don’t worry’” (111). Here his words are used to calm himself as much as Giovanni. After this, we return to the south of France, almost as if it becomes too shameful for the narrator to include the rest of the lies and hypocrisy that surely accompanied the remainder of that evening.

Escaping thorough jumps in time, by drinking, having sex with strangers and distancing himself from his lover are all indicative of ways in which David tries to avoid his shame. Nonetheless, few other relations show this better than his ambiguous relationship with Hella, where, in order to “pass” as a man, David seems completely and utterly dependent on her to do that job. When David meets Hella again after she comes back from Spain, so many points in the text show directly and indirectly how it is a struggle for him to balance his
feelings for Giovanni with those for Hella. This gives a double sensation of shame, both for having feelings or thoughts about Giovanni, and also for not being loyal to Hella in having these recurring feelings. For, as he says when he sees her for the first time and hopes that simply her presence, the mere sight of her would change everything: “But nothing happened” (119). This can mean that now, after having felt a different kind of love with Giovanni, the love he had for Hella seems to be rather bleak in comparison. Still, he tries to force himself to change, and instead of listening to his feelings, it becomes more of a mental exercise to persuade himself to stay focused on Hella: “I told myself not to think of Giovanni yet . . . Still, I knew very well that this was not really possible: He had already divided us” (121). Here we see the divide that David is referring to is also an internal one, where he has opened up something within him that creates this. This divide is beautifully and subtly caught in the following quote: “I kept kissing her and holding her, trying to find my way in her again, as though she were a familiar, darkened room in which I fumbled to find the light (121). Notice how the reoccurring symbol of a room used as a literary device throughout the novel is employed in this context. Here Hella is described as a room that he has visited previously, where he looks and searches for a way to make it feel and look as it did before. At the same time, this image also evokes the feeling that this is happening in yet another metaphorically darkened room, which Giovanni has opened up in David. In this way, David’s attempt to make everything feel the way it used to with Hella also becomes an attempt at using Hella herself as a torch to light up this other room.

Another good example of how the narrator sometimes places ambiguity and hidden confessions in the mouth of David is when Hella is asking David about Giovanni a bit later in this same chapter, after they have all met: “‘Oh?’ she said. ‘He has a mistress?’ ‘He had a mistress,’ I said. ‘He also had a job. He’s lost both’” (132). When David was talking about Giovanni with Sue, he was also refereeing to Giovanni having a mistress, which we understood to be a right out lie. Now, we can read this not only as a lie, but also as the opposite, a type of confession. This time, the mistress he is talking about is indeed himself, hereby admitting to himself, and partly to the narratee, that he was truly Giovanni’s mistress, but by not saying this directly it is not something one can accuse him of.

The last way of escaping one’s shame that I would like to discuss in this section, is how the final chapter of the novel contains a form of an imaginary scene. Here the narrator looks back at how he imagined what he thought happened to Giovanni when he was not present. In a subtle way, this combines memory and imagination that gives him more clarity and omniscience than seems to be available to David the narrator in the other parts of the
novel. In this context, the comments about David contained in the imagined scene reveal what David thinks that others think about him and also what David, consciously or unconsciously, thinks about himself. But, since it is “only” an imaginary scene, he cannot be held truly accountable for anything said therein. “The Americans always fly” (154) is a perfect example of this, which potentially reveals how David the narrator or David’s higher self is aware of how he constantly tries to run away from himself and his shame. At the same time, dedicating textual space to this imaginary scene also says to what extent David has not come to terms with the outcome of him leaving Giovanni, and needs to invent a type of closure for himself. In this, his guilt shines through by the mere fact of simply telling this imaginary story and in the details and dramatic add-ons he includes: “No one appears on the boulevards to speak to him, to save him. He feels that he is dying” (155). Interestingly enough, it is also possible to replace Giovanni with David in this line and say: “No one appears on the boulevards to speak to David, to save him. He feels that he is dying”, which shows how this fictional scene is as much about David as it is about Giovanni.

In this imagined world of David, Guillaume becomes a representation of everything David has internalized as disgusting and shameful about being gay, where the relationship between Giovanni and Guillaume parallels that of David and Giovanni, where Giovanni’s shame in front of Guillaume equals David’s shame in front of Giovanni. For David, Giovanni is representing so many of his “dirty” sides, which he is not willing to look at, like intimacy, love, and tenderness. At the same time, he feels responsible for having “killed” Giovanni, and, ultimately, Giovanni’s death becomes the death of David’s soul. This image is further strengthened when we are brought into Guillaume’s room, which mirrors the notion of Giovanni’s room. This becomes even more powerful, as David at certain times also may have wanted to kill Giovanni himself, seeing in him an external factor that represents the source of his shame, not seeing that it comes from within. This is stunningly and horrifically recreated in the scene where, when strangling Guillaume, Giovanni feels lighter and lighter, as if the shame is lifted off his shoulders proportionally to the life force ebbing out of his victim. As the source of his shame fades away, we also see how Giovanni is pulled violently and suddenly back into the normal physical world: “Then Guillaume fell. And Giovanni fell – back into the room, the streets, the world, into the presence and the shadow of death” (157).
1.4 Organ systems: shame in character and narrator relations

Having now looked at the cells, the tissue and the organs of *Giovanni’s Room*, this thesis will move on to look at how the two dominant literary organ systems – the narrator and the character of David – relate to one another, the reader, and the narratee. In doing so, it will explore how shame can be found also in these literary relationships.

“I [Giovanni] have only just found out that I want to live.’ He and Guillaume, Giovanni still smiling, exchanged a look which I would not have been able to read even if I had dared to try” (49). These words are written as David, Giovanni, Guillaume and Jacques are about to decide where to eat the morning after David has met Giovanni for the first time. At a first glance, this may be a way of presenting David in a humoristic and lighthearted way, pretending ever so slightly that he is flattered by this insinuating compliment, a compliment that he makes a big deal of pretending not to get or even “dare” to understand. So here, in an ironic tone, the narrator means the opposite of what he is saying: he knows what this look between them means, but pretends not to be able to understand, since “understanding” this would be assuming certain beliefs about himself, Giovanni and their new relationship. The “daring part” here can be seen in two ways at least: one pertaining to self-esteem and the other to shame. For all four of them know, deep down, that the reason why Giovanni all of a sudden has found a reason for living is that he has met David, he has become his *raison d’être*. For David to admit that he could be a person like that for someone else, especially another man, stretches his self-esteem and his notion of himself considerably; thus, by indirectly revealing his shame in enjoying this attention from Giovanni, David’s pride and joy is hidden in a “double sentences” like this.

However, in this we see David shining through *both* as a narrator and a character in the text. Because here he is concerned with telling us the story, painting an image for the reader of who he wants to be seen as, and “forgetting” this role as a narrator for a split second, focusing more vainly on himself as a character in a story he is telling with himself in the lead role. This is a character who has just been given a huge compliment, but a compliment coming from a source, and awakening feelings in him, he is only with difficulty willing to accept. In this way, we see how shame is revealed, however subtly, by the narrator wanting to portray himself in a different way for the narratee, so that we shall not think a certain way about him. In other words, shame is revealed in the way the narrator relates indirectly to the narratee. Another example of this is when David says a bit later in the chapter: “I am smiling too, I scarcely know why; everything in me is jumping up and down
(53), where “scarcely” in all its non-affirmative nature is so ambiguous that the reader hardly knows what to believe about the true feelings of David the character, nor how deep the self-knowledge of David the retrospective narrator runs.

A beautiful example of how the narrator tries to be intimate with the reader, and thereby also revealing parts of his insecurity and shame, happens when Jacques tells David that he should be glad that what is happening to him is happening now and not much later (with reference to falling in love with a man and coming to terms with his sexuality). To this David answers: “‘What is happening to me?’ I asked. I had meant to sound sardonic, but I did not sound sardonic at all” (55). This shows what the character wants to portray to his fellow characters, but by commenting that he did not succeed in this, the narrator shows how he honestly wants to know the real answer to his question.

At this point in the novel, we start to understand that there is a lack of information available to David about himself caused by denial, both as a narrator and a character. Still, we as readers are given parts of this information in subtle ways, sometimes even without the narrator knowing that this information is being given. Here, one telling example is when the narrator dedicates half of page 77 to talking about spring in Paris. This shows how the use of metaphors in combination with focalization can be used as an effective literary tool to say something about the inner state of a character. Here, when he is commenting on how much everything is changing and opening outside of him, he is also showing how everything is opening up inside of him. This is an interesting example of something that can be interpreted both psychologically and literarily in the sense that what we notice in the world around us, thorough projection, is reflecting our inner state; where, for good and for bad, we can only see what is already inside of us. On the literary side, we see how landscapes, in this case the city of Paris, and how they are described, reveal what Rimmon-Kenan refers to as the emotive component of the focalizer (81). In addition to this, the imagery being used – people undressing a bit more day by day as if peeling of layers of layers of conditions, restrictions and shame – says that when the weather becomes milder, it is safe to undress, or, in other words, when one is loved like David is now, it is safe to open up more and more, day by day.

Still, David is not saying directly that he is in love. This may be because he is not aware of it, and with his restricted and controlled emotional apparatus, it is no wonder if this is the case. It may also be due to the fact that he is too ashamed to admit this to the reader and himself, both as a character and, in retrospect, a narrator. Thus, one way of letting this feeling come forth, maybe unconsciously, is through the safe distance of describing how the metaphoric arrival of spring gradually warms up the bodies of the Parisians. Unfortunately,
David is not able to open up completely, and this is shown to the reader in the following way: “Even at my most candid, even when I tried hardest to give myself to him as he gave himself to me, I was holding something back (78). As this is not elaborated in the text, we as readers are left not knowing whether this “something” is something David knows and understands, or if it is, as it is to the reader, outside his understanding and knowledge. Interestingly here, I would argue that having covered so much text and story time by now, it is almost as if the reader, when being given this information, is able to interpret it better than David can, since he seems to be unwilling to confront it.

Nevertheless, avoiding intimacy does not necessarily mean that one is ashamed. When Giovanni and David talk about women, it is interesting to see how Giovanni has the same attitude to women as David has (had) to men, but where the latter is shame induced, precisely to avoid intimacy, and the former seems more natural and accepting, not necessarily trying to or needing to seek intimacy from women: “I perhaps don’t like women very much, that’s true. That hasn’t stopped me from making love to many and loving one or two. But most of the time – most of the time I made love only with the body.’ ‘That can make one very lonely,’ I said. I had not expected to say it. He had not expected to hear it. He looked at me and touched me on the cheek. ‘Yes,’ he said” (80). This displays how, again, David seems to be talking more about himself and his own loneliness than that of Giovanni, where something in Giovanni’s statement about making “love only with the body” echoes David’s approach to his sexual relations, not to women, but to men. This way Giovanni can be said to be more in contact with his true feelings, and has a willingness, and an openness to connect with David, another man, in an intimate way. Fascinatingly, here we see how David is carried away despite himself, saying how surprised he is at his own reaction. This – the comment on how he did not see his own reaction coming – shows that it may come from his unconscious, thus he cannot fully be held responsible for it. It is also possible to see the comment about what he has just uttered more along the lines of the narrator commenting on himself as a character. In this way, we see how David is both surprised at his own reaction and uses this as a way of controlling the narratee’s interpretation of himself, as if saying, and thus reveling his shame in his need for controlling how he is seen and interpreted: “If you, the narratee (or even the reader) are making certain assumptions about me because of this statement I just made, I can tell you that it surprised me as much, if not even more, than it surprised you. And, I did not deliberately and consciously show any intimacy now, as that would be something gay ‘Sunday school teachers’ would do, and not someone like me, a real man with all of his manhood fully intact”.

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The need to make such a comment about something one has uttered is found in what lies *behind* such a revelation, behind such an outstretched hand of a comment saying: “that can make one very lonely”. Because this is precisely seeing the other in front of you, recognizing and acknowledging his emotions and reaching out by, at least indirectly, sharing some of your own feelings and experiences. In other words, such a comment *is* an act of intimacy. This intimate act is underlined and supported in both how David recognizes and sensibly interprets how Giovanni had not expected this comment either, and how Giovanni, being more open and less afraid or shameful about intimacy between men, responds physically to David’s sudden “forgetting-not-to-be-intimate” by reaching out to touch him in a non-sexual but intimate and tender way. This passage discussed above illustrates in an excellent way the struggle a homodiegetic, extradiegetic narrator, narrating a story in which his own person plays the main part, has in controlling or giving the “right” image of himself. In these small glimpses or cracks between the conflicting interests of the character and the narrator, even though they are essentially the same person, one can find a discrepancy that indicates different attitudes, thoughts and emotions, among them the feeling of shame, where this shame may reflect back upon either the character, the narrator or both of them simultaneously.

At certain crucial points in this novel, it also seems as if the narrator is taking one step back in terms of intimacy with the narratee, and almost pulls slightly away from the situation. Consider the following quote from the beginning of the very last chapter: “It was a terrific scandal. If you were in Paris at the time you certainly heard of it, and saw the picture printed in all the newspapers, of Giovanni just after he was captured” (149). For the first and only time in the novel, there is a direct reference to a “you”, being the receiver or addressee of this story. It is obviously possible to see this “you” used semantically as one uses “one”, but there is a feeling here that what is written in the following paragraphs is presented in an overly neutral and objective way, as if it was an article in a newspaper. In this way, the “you” becomes the opposite of what it normally would construct. Rather than creating closeness and intimacy, it produces a cold, matter-of-fact narrative distance. This may indicate a need for the narrator to take a bit of distance himself, to not be affiliated with this case, so as not to feel responsible, as he most certainly does. This beginning is strongly and abruptly contrasted with jumping directly into a dialogue with Hella in the main narrative. Here David all of a sudden becomes obsessed with the truth, for Giovanni’s sake. This shows both how he is feeling responsible for Giovanni’s destiny by having taken the fear and shame-based decision of leaving him, and also how – by engaging deeply with the actual physical details of this case,
as another way to distract himself in a type of escape – he does not have to relate to his own feelings. As their conversation progresses, Hella asks this very pertinent question: “‘You lived with him. Can’t you tell whether he’d commit murder or not?’” (151), and David answers in a very telling way: “‘How? You live with me. Can I commit a murder? . . . How do you know I’m what you see?’” (151), revealing that he somehow feels responsible for the death of Giovanni, and also how he metaphorically, by quitting him, has committed another murder, that of killing parts of his emotional self.

At this point in the text, we also start to see how the scenes from the past begin to catch up with and merge with the scenes from the present. This can be viewed as David’s two worlds approaching each other. This happens not only in how the past is approaching the present – in the sense that the story that has been told in long flashbacks from an almost fixed point in time, lasting only a day or so, is now nearing exactly this point – but also, tellingly, in how there are small clues and textual reminders binding them together. “We were sitting in the big room, where I am standing now” (159), and “there was a bottle there then as now” (160), are both good examples of this. This literary feature underlines the closing in of time, how two worlds almost collide, and how his number one escape – alcohol – is also present, then as now.

Even if the story of the past that has been kept at a safe distance is now approaching the present moment, a type of distance seems to last through to the very end, where the story of Giovanni’s execution cannot be seen as a prolepsis, nor an analepsis, but, rather, as a part of David’s imagination, where the two worlds and levels of narration finally fully meet. Still, it is worth noting that this imagined meeting of two worlds – the one he has been telling from, and the story he has been telling – only meet in story time in the sense that it is happening right at the moment of narration, but does not share physical space with the narrator. Nevertheless, this seems to be the closest David will ever come to linking these worlds and shows how the point from which he has been telling the story has been from the safe distance of space and time. As the novel progresses, and the two storylines approach each other, the simple act of telling his story is a potential opportunity for the narrator to come to terms with who he is and integrating his past into his present moment and life.

It is interesting to see this in connection with how Arthur W. Frank in his book The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics describes the function of storytelling: “People tell stories not just to work out their own changing identifies, but also to guide others who will follow them . . . In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as guide to the other’s self-formation” (17-18). It is possible to see this split of David being both a narrator
and a character in his own story, as an attempt to reclaim and own his own story with himself being both the storyteller and the listener at once. However, as these worlds never truly meet, we see how not living his own story, and always keeping some parts of his life at a safe distance, can be seen as a protection from his own shame, where the source of the shame is allowed to come only so close. In the same symbolic way as the wizard Gandalf the Gray in Lord of The Rings fights the Balrog, a creature of fire and shadow, by putting his staff firmly down and denying it access into the last bridge that leads into the outside world and into freedom, David is also looking at his inner demons and saying: “Go back to the shadows. You shall not pass!” Unfortunately – as opposed to Gandalf who takes up the fight, lets his old persona die and comes victorious and reborn out on the other side as Gandalf the White – David does not seize this opportunity and sends his Balrog back to the darkness to lurk there for eternity. Thus, intimate love with a man for David will never see the light of day nor be a part of his “time”.

At this point in the text – much in the same way as time is closing in on David – we also see how the borders between the narrator and the character are starting to become blurred. When David talks to Hella about Giovanni, he says: “He was so beautiful … I had not meant to say it” (160). This reveals a doubleness in the sense that his commentary can be directed both to the narratee and to Hella. Rimmon-Kenan describes how it is possible to see the narrator’s presence ranging from completely covert to fully overt (97-101), and how these terms can be useful in understanding how the narrator positions him- or herself in relation to the story being narrated. In this context, even though one can say that there is a tendency to see David the narrator being more and more visible as the story progresses, i.e. more and more overt, I find it more useful not to look at how open, visible and present he is to the narratee and the reader, but rather, how open, visible and present he is to his own role as a narrator, and more specifically to the story he is telling himself, about himself. In this sense, it is possible to re-appropriate these terms and rather engage with the overtness and covertness of the narrator to himself. One good example of this is when David feels the need to talk to Hella: “Perhaps I wanted to say too much” (160). This shows that even in retrospect he does not understand everything about himself, or that, due to the restraints and weight of his own shame, his mask is starting to fall, both as a character and a narrator.
1.5 The body: shame as an inhibitor for character development

Having gone through the fundamental anatomical parts of *Giovanni’s Room*, it is now time to look at how all these pieces come together and investigate whether they let us form an overall image of the whole literary body – the characterization of David.

In order for us as readers to make an image of who a character is, we gather information in various ways. We learn about the character through his speech, actions and descriptions made by others, and sometimes even indirectly by how the character in question describes or behaves with others. In the case of a first-person narrator like David, most of the time he is quite aware of his own feelings and is able to explain (or present) himself in a conscious and self-aware way with profound reflections on himself and others. Even so, when it comes to telling us about how his body reacts or moves, sometimes it is as if David is giving away signals about his own character that he, as the narrator, is not aware of giving. In this respect one could say, however subtle these signals may be, that we are looking into the core of the character, as he is presenting us with signals he does not understand himself. Therefore, due to the unawareness of sending out these signals, he is neither able to edit or modify them in order to “control” what type of information reaches the reader. Thus, in looking at both what is being suggested through the body and what literary techniques are being used to narrate the body, we get to see “behind” the true nature of a character. In this way, these signals are bordering on being both psychoanalytical interpretations of shame and an evaluation of literary devices used to depict shame.

One glance away from something unpleasant, or one gesture of a certain kind, is not enough to say something general about a character, but when these movements and physical reactions accumulate and repeat themselves, especially within the same scene, it is worth paying attention to them. One example of this is the first time David meets Giovanni. First we hear how David presents both a reaction to meeting Giovanni and his interpretation of it, helping (or guiding) the reader to see things the way he does: “I realized I was quite happy to be talking with him and this realization made me shy” (32). Here we see how all of a sudden, in relation to another man, feelings are involved, and how these are quite different from mere carnal lust. As the meeting progresses, we see how it brings out physical reactions that even David is unable to understand, which reveals, I would argue, his internalized shame and how the mélange of good feelings, and the thought that these feelings are not allowed, are both present in the body at the same time. The physical reaction described at the end of a paragraph in the middle of his first conversation with Giovanni, hanging almost in loose air, both in the
physical text and semantically, with no added explanation is a good example of this: “I felt a tightening in my chest” (32).

At first, we could be lead to believe that David oscillates only between not understanding some of his reactions and emotions, and describing those that he does recognize and understand. In this way, we would interpret the sentence “His smile made me feel a little foolish” (33) in the same way as the one above, with David giving a natural and plausible reason for reacting the way he does. Still, it is also possible to understand this sentence as revealing how he is not in contact with his emotions, as his lack of words for truly expressing his full range of emotions reveals. For, in this context, can we absolutely be sure that “foolish” is the right word to describe this feeling? Is “foolish” truly what he wants to say? I would argue that this might as well show a lack in David of differentiating his own feelings. So, either by hiding or not knowing what his feelings are – by not finding the appropriate words to describe them – he reveals, indirectly, to be someone who is not in contact with, or deliberately hides, his feelings.

As this initial meeting with Giovanni continues, we see how David’s body is revealing more and more of what he is truly experiencing, but which he is not able to appropriately describe, either to himself or the reader, where small movements of the body also have the potential to say more than words: “My sullenness delighted him. ‘You’re charming,’ he said. ‘Do you always speak like this?’ ‘No,’ I said, and looked down. ‘Almost never’” (36). Here the small description of turning down the head and his answer, “almost never”, can be seen as a reaction to how David, in meeting Giovanni, suddenly forgets to be self-aware, controlled and measured, how he has forgotten himself, in spite of himself, and rather, instead, is eager, natural and in the flow of the moment. Then, suddenly, he is brought “back to himself” by Giovanni’s question, and lowers his head in shame for having acted this way. This “new” sensation is underlined by how he reacts when Giovanni looks at him: “And his look made me feel that no one in my life had ever looked at me directly before” (36-37), and is further supported again by a physical (and auditive) reaction, telling the reader – either consciously or unconsciously, as the narrator – to pay extra attention to this, as he himself does not understand fully what is going on: “‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘he’s [Jacques] certainly not very dear to me,’ and felt again, at once, this strange tightening in my chest and wondered at the sound of my voice” (37). This scene ends quite tellingly when Giovanni goes out on the floor of the bar and David is left with a feeling of having gone too far, having gotten carried away, by being too much his true self: “I watched him as he moved. And then I watched their faces, watching him. And then I was afraid. I knew that they were watching, had been watching both
of us” (38), with David being afraid that they now will judge him as he previously has judged them.

In order to make up a global image of who David is, how he is affected by shame, and understand how we as readers end up with an impression of him, it can now, at this point in the analysis, be useful to look back at the beginning with fresh eyes: In the opening paragraph, David projects himself into an imaginary future, where “It will all be the same, only I will be stiller” (4). It is precisely in this statement, how everything will be the same, where he will act and behave as he always does, we get our first glimpse not only of how David sees himself from the outside, but also of some of his habitual patterns of behavior. It is these patterns, when combined, that participate in giving the reader an impression of his character, just as Rimmon-Kenan points out when she explains how aspects of a character combined make up a character trait, and how different traits combined make up our impression of the character (37-38). In this imaginary, non-temporal fantasy, we see for the first time how David often is preparing for the future by imagining different scenarios and how he would potentially react to them: “There will be a girl sitting opposite me who will wonder why I have not been flirting with her” (4). In this one sentence alone, we both start to share the thoughts of the imaginary girl about why David will not flirt with her, and we also see how it is a habit for him to constantly observe and evaluate himself and being aware of the observations of others, constantly being on the alert.

It is also interesting to notice how David says that he will “be stiller”. It is too early for the reader to understand or have an opinion about what this stillness may allude to, as we have not yet gathered enough information to make what Rimmon-Kenan refers to as causal connections (19), to feel as readers: “Oh, this is why he says this”. Yet as readers we bring this information with us and start to accrue a curiosity and later a (subjective) understanding of what David’s stillness may be about. His stillness may refer to how Giovanni represented a source of desire, love, unrest, attraction, distress, and shame, and how, for however brief a moment, David imagines that when Giovanni is gone, all his inner turmoil will be appeased. Then, finally, the source of his shameful feelings will be gone, and he will be still.

Over the first few pages, this is followed by phrases like: “Nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom” (5), or “the great difficulty is to say Yes to life” (5). At a first reading, these phrases may also be interpreted in different ways, but even after having turned the last page of the novel, one may wonder what this means. It is important to remember here, that this is David looking back at a period in his life with all the accumulated knowledge and information from this period. Only after the reader has been introduced to
what David has experienced through his version of the story can he begin to understand and make sense of these sentences, not based on his personal experiences as a reader, but from the point of view of David’s story. And it is also in this way an analysis of the words and sentences David uses in his narration has to be viewed: from the point of view of what Gérard Genette refers to as the homodiegetic, extradiegetic narrator (248).

Therefore, in order to better understand and grasp who David is deep down, I find it useful to look at places where words and sentences say something about David’s identity, or rather, his struggle over it. For it is precisely in his search for his own identity – in the shameful triangle between who he thinks he ought to be; who he, deep down, feels that he is; and how other characters perceive him – we as readers start to form an image of who he truly is. For instance, when going to the American Express office, we see here, halfway through the novel, how his inner struggle and opposition, among other things, is linked with being an American. In a humoristic yet deadly serious way, he tries to explain this feeling: “And I resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called not an American because it seemed to make me nothing” (89). To fully understand David’s struggle, it is tempting here to swap “American” with other words like “gay”, “man”, “gay man” “foreigner”, “lover”, “coward”, “boyfriend”, “mistress”, “bad son” or “good son”, to feel and see if they potentially ring as true, or even truer, than the original noun. At the same time, there is a certain clinging to an American identity, which represents manhood. Thus, as long as he identifies as a true American, he cannot at the same time also be gay. Therefore, this ambiguity may help to explain why he also deeply resents his fellow Americans in the American Express office for the limitations they represent.

Another perfect example of David’s inner state – both seen from the point of view of a literary analogy and a psychological projection – is when he is eavesdropping on two girls who are having a conversation about their recent love affairs in the queue of this office. Here their conversation can be seen as his inner struggle, where each of the girls represent one end of the spectrum of sense and sensibility. They might as well be his inner dialogue about whether to choose Giovanni or Hella, with everything they represent of insecurity and shame, and certainty and heteronormative expectations, respectively. In almost a cartoonesque fashion, one could imagine that David has a white and a black angel sitting on each shoulder, and that their voices are manifested externally in the conversation between these girls:
One of them had fallen in love with a Swiss boy; so I gathered, from the low, intense, and troubled conversation she was having with her friend. The friend was urging her “to put her foot down” – on what principle I could not discover; and the girl in love kept nodding her head, but more in perplexity than agreement. She had the choked and halting air of someone who has something more to say but finds no way of saying it. “You mustn’t be a fool about this,” the friend was saying. “I know, I know,” said that girl. One had the impression that, though she certainly did not wish to be a fool, she had lost one definition of the word and might never be able to find another. (90)

This quote also shows, as mentioned earlier, that noticing how and what David the character notices in others, what he projects, judges or condones and what David the narrator chooses to present or omit, contributes to making the reader form an image of David.

This Americanness fused with manliness is also continued in his brief meeting with the sailor in the street after having visited this bureau: “I was staring at him, though I did not know it, and wishing I were he” (92). Again, this subordinate clause of not being aware of his own gaze is interesting in different ways as a literary tool which may reveal shame. First, it can be seen as an unconscious act, where he is excusing himself, as if he was not looking voluntarily, but that it happened naturally before he could catch himself controlling it, as in a Freudian slip. Second, it may be interpreted as something natural, in the sense of being a natural instinct to look at other men, for their approval or reciprocal admiration. Third, he needs to inform the narratee about the fact that he is not aware of staring himself, and this way he is “washing his hands clean”, not taking responsibility for committing this “gay” act. Fourth, can we really trust the narrator to tell the truth, that he did not realize he was staring? If not, this could be a way of trying to paint a different, more ideal image of himself for the narratee, and thus, indirectly so, possibly revealing, by lying, something that is so shameful it needs to be hidden. These latter arguments are supported by David’s reaction of complete and utter despair when he interprets the sailor’s look back at him as being full of “instantaneous contempt” (92).

Interestingly, in this process of finding or rejecting his different identities, among them different ways of being gay, David himself reaches a conclusion that touches upon the difference between desire and intimacy (in his words “affection”). Here he sees one of these identities as being more gay and less manly, thus more shameful than the other – as if spending time with Giovanni has changed something in him, and that in his eyes now, something more shameful than carnal lust has the potential to shine through: “I knew that what the sailor had seen in my unguarded eyes was envy and desire: I had seen it often in Jacques’ eyes and my reaction and the sailor’s had been the same. But if I were still able to feel affection and if he had seen it in my eyes, it would not have helped, for affection, for the
boys I was doomed to look at, was vastly more frightening than lust” (92-93). Notice also here the use of “unguarded”, where it shows that his natural tendencies, the way he is, is something that has to be controlled so as not to shine through, and he has to make sure that the inner David does not show. Also, it is a terribly unpleasant revelation for David to realize that he now, if he is not watching himself at all times, has the capacity to look at other men in a way other men have looked at him previously, in the affectionate way that David so much despises. In this, one can also see that there lies not only a shame of now having become just like the other “objects” of despicable gay men that he looks down upon, but there is also potentially another level of shame. Here, for the first time, David feels what his own “instantaneous contempt” towards Jacques, and others like him, may feel like, when it is directed towards himself.

Another way of knowing the identity and nature of the main character more directly is through how others see him. This is perfectly shown in Giovanni’s rampage the last time they are together in his room: “I have never reached you . . . you tell nothing but lies. What are you always hiding? And do you think I did not know when you were making love to me, you were making love to no one? No one! (137). In this context, it is especially interesting to look at one of Yasmin DeGout’s arguments: “That both homoerotic and heterosexual characters are linked by a common theme – the inability to face oneself and the subsequent inability to love – serves to universalize Baldwin's work” (433), where this is a good description of how David relates to himself and his shame. For how can he truly see and be present with Giovanni when he is not willing to, or able to, see and be present with himself?

There is also another subtle yet interesting place to look when trying to understand the totality of David – namely in the novel’s title. Theodor W. Adorno claims that “the title is the microcosm of the work” (4), and in this respect, a thorough anatomical analysis of David is not complete without having looked at the meaning of the title of the novel in which he exists. The various interpretations change and modify themselves throughout the novel, as our understanding of David also grows and modifies. By noticing how Giovanni’s room is described as being “almost not in Paris” (46), and how “his room was in the back, on the ground floor of the last building on this street (63), we understand the room as a metaphor for all that is hidden from view, pointing to the unconscious. However, when Giovanni exclaims: “I will show you my room” (63), it is not only his physical room that he is talking about, but also a room in his own heart that has the potential to open up a room in David as well. David somehow feels this intuitively and says both in joy and terror: “He locked the door behind us, and then for a moment, in the gloom, we simply stared at each other– with dismay, with
relief, and breathing hard. I was trembling. I thought, if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost (64). This quote is dense with ambiguity (dismay vs. relief), corporal reactions (hard breathing and trembling) and symbolism in the sense that it is not really the physical room that he needs to get out of, but the room full of emotions that is opening up in his own heart, and between them, a room that is so much more than pure desire. This presents another possible interpretation of the novel’s title, where Giovanni’s Room is also that place of intimacy between two men, that place that David feels so much shame about and that Giovanni has opened up for, literally and figuratively, in his room.

In the following quote from the beginning of Part Two, yet another possible perspective is also given: “My father had agreed to send me money, which I was not going to use to help Giovanni, who had done so much to help me. I was going to use it to escape his room” (77). Here Giovanni’s room is not just referring to the physical apartment, but also representing Giovanni’s love for David. This is a type of love he has never felt before, which opens up a special place in his own heart, and can be seen as Giovanni’s room inside of him. Unfortunately for David, this is the most shameful room to open of all of them, and as it turns out, once opened, it can never really be closed again completely. This way, searching for an escape from Giovanni’s room is also an attempt to escape his own shame.

Having now come to the end of this literary anatomical study, I would argue that what we see in David is actually a good example of what Downs claims when he says: “The traumatic effect of growing up in a world where we must hide the truth of our strongest feelings causes our development to stall” (235). In this case, David’s lack of character development is caused by the stagnating effects of his shame. Before he is able to really look at this, he will forever postpone his own maturity and development. In other words, if we were to use Joseph Ewen’s system of character classification, seeing characters on three different axes—complexity, development and penetration (Rimmon-Kenan 40-42) – David can be seen as a complex character who, due to shame, has stagnated in his development and therefore lacks a clear and concise understanding of his inner life. This lack of development also shows what shame does to the individual by keeping him from reaching his full potential. This is exemplified by his inner monologue taken from 1 Corinthians 13, verse 11: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (168). Here it is possible to see both the fact that, since he is not allowing himself to become the man he truly is, he will forever stay undeveloped and unemancipated, and that he sees, in a self-judgmental way, his desire and love for men as a childish thing belonging to the past. I also see this linked with Christopher Stuart’s comment,
where he says it even more directly: “Ashamed of his love for Giovanni, he condemns himself to a life of perpetual scouring and self-loathing” (67-68). In the context of my argument, it is interesting to notice the religious undertones of the word “condemn” and the timelessness of the word “perpetual”.

In this reference to the Bible, it is also interesting to notice what is not being said, as what is being said, because the non-quoted part of 1 Corinthians 13 continues for another two verses, with an ever-increasing validity for David – thus the reason for omitting it. Notice the repeated image of the mirror and how to become oneself by knowing and accepting all one’s parts fully: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (New International Version, 1 Corinthians 13.12). In the Bible, becoming whole and seeing clearly can be seen as what happens when God’s love and grace enters your heart, but in this context it is possible to see it as what will happen if David starts to love himself, all of himself: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13.13).

How it is impossible to run away from one’s shame is beautifully captured towards the end, when David describes the symbolic flaming horizon of the morning and how some of the torn-up pieces of the letter from Jacques, containing information about Giovanni’s execution date, blow towards him. This shows how his unresolved issues will always follow him. As long as David is not willing or able to turn around and look at the source of his shame, it will take its place in the seat next to him in the local French bus, and ride (with) him wherever he goes. Thus, with shame as his travel companion, development and growth will at best be difficult and at worst impossible.
Conclusion

Rimmon-Kenan says in the opening of her book: “Analysis requires emphasize on the issue under consideration, but texts are richer than anything such an isolation of aspects can yield” (4). In such a way, I see that a literary text, and in this context Giovanni’s Room, can rise from being seen as inferior to a scientific study on shame, to having the potential to stand shoulder to shoulder with academic texts from the social sciences. Thus, the novel does not necessarily need other books to show how it is talking about shame, as it is explaining, directly and indirectly, the anatomy of shame on its own premises. In addition to this, as this analysis has shown, our understanding of Giovanni’s Room can be useful to have in mind when looking at other novels, new and old. In this way, Giovanni’s Room does not only become yet another book one can apply literary theories to, but in and of itself it gives theory that can be used to shed light on other books. In this way, it also has the potential to add to, question and alter existing theories on shame.

Sometimes, with its subtle and humane qualities when it comes to portraying and explaining shame, this novel even has the power to rise above its academic counterparts by not only showing how shame acts and controls the lives of literary characters, but also by influencing the reader in different and deeper ways. In this way, literature may bypass the defense mechanisms of the more analytical intellect and go straight to the emotions. When this is the case, we think we read about someone else, and therefore our guard is down, but, just as we read about David judging others for things he is not ready or willing to see in himself, so do we as readers interpret, notice and get moved by things that we, exactly through the process of reading, may recognize on some level inside of us.

It is even possible to take this further and see how the narrator, or in the ultimate sense the author, can use characters to say something broader about shame, by using certain characters as representatives for entire nations. In his contempt for David as a representative for Americans, Giovanni shows how much he despises Americans and what they represent when he imagines how they would, in a colonialist fashion, come to his village in Italy just to be “looking at me and looking at all of us and tasting our wine and shitting on us with those empty smiles Americans wear everywhere and which you wear all the time” (138).

In this way, with his empty, protective smile, it is possible to also see David’s shame as a representation of the American shame over killing indigenous people, racism, unequal distribution of resources, and hypocrisy in imposing norms on other nations that the United States is not able to follow itself. Therefore – in the same way as this shows through
secondary shame markers in the individual, in the form of lies, lack of intimacy, constant escape and diversion, and overcompensating with almost violent hypermasculinity – this shows how Americans also run away from their past and their present, and potentially then also their future, through consumerism, the media, popular entertainment and warmongering. In this way (to prolong my point from subsection 1.3 of David’s imaginary scene of what happened between Giovanni and Guillaume), David is to Giovanni as Giovanni is to Guillaume as France is to Giovanni. Where the use of the guillotine is a powerful symbol of how France is trying to cut off its own shame, which powerfully reflects David in front of the mirror wondering how he can save his own (troubling) sex from the knife.

This representation of nations with shame is equally valid for France, where the “scandal” regarding the murder of Guillaume, committed by a young gay man, reveals how the shame of French society operates. For it is possible to see how Giovanni alone is not responsible for this, but rather a product of the relation between Italy and France, with Italians then being seen more as second-class citizens in society. Here only a limited set of norms and standards are accepted and all types of deviations are stigmatized, and thus accompanied by shame. The rather commentator-like voice of the narrator captures this beautifully, which echoes both the American and French rhetoric of our time regarding reactions to terrorism: “It is necessary to find an explanation, solution, and a victim in the outmost possible speed” (149). In this example, we see clearly, just as today, that instead of looking inwards – at for instance how one has exploited others through colonialization or stealing of resources – to find the answers for why certain people or groups of people feel a need to act in extreme ways, one chooses to avoid this introspection. In this way, David’s struggle becomes a metaphor for America’s shame, and also the shame of France, where it can expand Goffman’s theories about how humans within society work, to how societies function with each other. Here the scapegoating of Giovanni is an example of how society operates to cover and hide its own shame at not being able to follow or comply with the rules, norms and regulations they themselves have set up:

Fathers of families, sons of great houses, and itching adventurers from Belleville were all desperately anxious that the case be closed, so that things might, in effect, go back to normal, and the dreadful whiplash of public morality not fall on their backs. Until the case was closed they could not be certain which way to jump, whether they should cry out that they were martyrs, or remain what, of course, they were: simple citizens, bitter against outrage and anxious to see justice done and the health of the state preserved. (150)
This unwillingness to come to terms with the underlying reasons behind such acts, is also beautifully pointed at when the narrator says how the news explains and explores every detail about the murder, except the *why*. “Why was too black for the newsprint to carry and too deep for Giovanni to tell” (153). This also shows how literature has the power and potential to be so much more than only a self-referential universe, where this novel shows how coming to terms with one’s own shame can be as difficult for a society as it is for the individual, where shame operates and shows up in different yet similar ways.

With so much potential resistance to intimacy, one interesting way to view this novel in its totality, is actually as an act of intimacy, of opening up and of reaching out. Precisely because David was *not* able to allow himself to be intimate with Giovanni, and rather let his shame lead the way, the act of narrating this story becomes in and of itself a testimony to what happens when you internalize other people’s expectations of you and feel ashamed when you realize that your truest, deepest nature goes against these very expectations. In this way, *Giovanni’s Room* becomes an act of forgiveness, a prayer and a confession. When Hella towards the end says: “‘But Little boys – ! . . . I’ll never again, as long as I live, know what they want. And now I know they’ll never tell me. I don’t think they know how’” (165), she is also pointing towards the fact that in such a society, with limited possibilities for self-expression for men, then as perhaps now, there is not a language available for them to fully express their emotions. In such a way, this book is also an attempt a giving a voice to these little boys.

A final, concluding observation, possibly more questionable, but still worth mentioning, is that there is, at a number of places in the novel, a feeling of quite a distance in time and space between the narrator at the point of narration and the story being narrated. We could believe, and maybe hope, that after this story, David comes to terms with his shame and dares to live out who he truly is, and that this story is narrated from the safe haven of a comfortable and soft sofa in a big house surrounded by a white picket fence in a quiet American suburb. However, if we focus more on the religious images that are present in the novel, the narrator can actually be seen as dead at the time of narration, where it is left to the reader to ponder what type of death he has gone through, be it a physical, spiritual or psychological death. If this is the case, what lead to his death? Was it murder? Or maybe suicide? Or was it the indirect result of a life exposed more and more to destructive choices due to shame, a shame he was never able to deal with, look at or completely understand the anatomy of?
Works Cited


Armengol, Josep M. “In the Dark Room: Homosexuality and/as Blackness in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*.” *Signs*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2012, pp. 671-693.


