

Caught in the Middle: Homosexual Guilt, Liminality, and
the role of the 'Novel of Identification' in Post-World
War, Pre-Stonewall America

Thesis by
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of
English

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to give special thanks to my thesis advisors, Dr. Melanie Sherazi and Professor Kristine Haugen for seeing the potential in my work, and allowing me to undertake this project. My thanks go out to all of my English professors that I've had during my time at Caltech, since without them, I would not have the passion for the major that has driven me to finish this project.

I'd like to thank all of my friends who have offered me emotional support through this journey. I would like to give special thanks to my mother and father who have supported me financially and emotionally during my time at Caltech, and Jeremy who has been my second parent at Caltech since day one.

I would finally also like to express my heartfelt appreciation for the LGBT community. This thesis hopefully demonstrates that so much has changed since the '50s and '60s; however, even now there is still much work to be done for true equality to be realized.

ABSTRACT

The 1950s and 1960s are often regarded as a transitory time period for the American homosexual man, overshadowed by the end of World War II and the tumultuous and radically influential Gay liberation movement beginning in the 1970s. The time period is marked by the publication and increased scrutiny of several influential novels: Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* (1964), Chester Himes's *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (1937), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948). These novels highlight the tensions of competing forces of continuing repression and increasing acceptance, and complicate and explore the richness and heterogeneity of the gay identity, even before it has fully nucleated in pre-Stonewall America. The novels' protagonists often have strained relationships both with the conventional society in which they live, but also the homosexual communities that exist around them. The protagonists recast their homosexual relationships as ephemeral, exceptional in nature, or with conventional labels, revealing complex and contradictory ideas about their own sexual identities. The protagonists are forced to come to terms with their identities, a process more complicated than simply coming out to the world and crossing the not-so-singular threshold often associated with the contemporary 'gay closet.' Finally, the novels' often tragically unresolved endings challenge the idea that they may serve as "support" novels for their gay communities; instead, they are better understood as novels of "identification", since they uncompromisingly cover issues that have gone uncovered before this period, *identifying* the problems that the isolated homosexual may feel, and highlighting and scrutinizing a lack of conventional resolution.

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Part I: Introduction

The 1950s and 1960s are often regarded as a transitory time period for the American homosexual man, overshadowed by the end of World War II, and the tumultuous and radically influential Gay liberation movement beginning not much later in the 1970s that is catalyzed by Stonewall in 1969. With the close of the World War and the revitalization of the American suburban ideal, there is a noticeable sense of increased scrutiny of the gay man from a domestic perspective during the time period. On the other hand, several influential LGBT organizations such as the Mattachine Society are founded, and many gay men begin to more candidly ‘hide in plain sight’ in the cities, reflecting a societal relaxation as well. The time period is marked by the publication and increased scrutiny of several influential novels, such as Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* (1964), Chester Himes’s *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (1937)¹, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), and Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948). These novels of the period highlight the tensions of these competing forces of continuing repression and increasing acceptance, and will be the primary focus of this thesis.

Before diving headfirst into these novels, it is important to introduce several concepts laid out by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1985) which resonate deeply with the problems that are explored throughout the thesis. Although her work focuses on literature at the turn of the 20th century, these concepts translate in useful ways to the equally as radically shifting 1950s and 1960s during which these novels were being read. Sedgwick defines a societal shift in thinking of homosexuality as a “matter of prohibited and isolated genital acts” to “a function of stable definitions of identity” that takes place in the nineteenth century (83). Although more than a century later, this gay identity (at least as a label) seemed to have

stabilized, the threshold of identification which exists between homosexual actions and identification with homosexuality is an important divide upon which much of the novels' conflicts hinge. She notes homosexuality as a stable identity "does have a real power to organize and describe [...] experience" (Sedgwick 83); however, the novels candidly explore the homosexual label's power of othering and ostracizing those to whom it is applied. Thus, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between homosexual actions and identity, and specifically the protagonists' embrace of the former while skirting the latter as a reflex of societal anxieties.

Sedgwick stresses the ways that the search for a "Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity" (44). This frame of thinking is especially key to the thesis since, as a transitory period in both homosexual and American history, it is important to keep in mind the ways that the time period embodies "[not] the supersession of one model [of sexual identity] and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist" (Sedgwick 47). Rejection of the notion that these novels must unilaterally move towards a more progressive future aids in reconciling the often puzzling conclusions of these novels. They focus less on redeeming the protagonist within society, but on personal redemptions, and even conversely on a candid but often necessary depiction of the pain and tragedy that homosexual men face during this time period. Both tragedy and unpublicized redemption are perhaps best summarized in the notion of the 'novel of identification', which stresses less on a desire to publically redeem homosexuality, but factually and honestly identify the problems that the gay reader may personally feel.

With these analytical concepts in place, it is possible to identify how these novels complicate and explore the richness and heterogeneity of the gay identity, even before it has fully nucleated in pre-Stonewall America. The novels' protagonists often have strained relationships both with the conventional society in which they live, but also the homosexual communities that exist to varying degrees adjacent to them. The protagonists engage in homosexuality and homosocialization, but often recast their relationships as ephemeral, exceptional in nature, or hidden behind conventional labels such as 'roommate,' 'friend,' or 'cousin.' In these protagonists' attempts to avoid the brand of homosexuality, the act of conventionalizing or hiding their relationships seems to isolate the protagonist even more between these two spheres, since these attempts reveal complex and contradictory ideas about their own sexual identity. Furthermore, these labels break down in times of emotional intensity or distress, forcing the protagonists to come to terms with the reality of their identities, a process more complicated than simply coming out to the world and crossing the not-so-singular threshold often associated with the contemporary 'gay closet.' And although these novels focus on relationships, at their breaking points these relationships become a lens of introspection through which the novel can focus on the protagonist as an isolated individual. The novels' often tragically unresolved endings challenge the idea that they may serve as "support" novels for their gay communities; instead, they may more aptly be understood as novels of "identification" in the way that they uncompromisingly cover issues that have gone uncovered before this period, identifying both the problems that the isolated homosexual may feel, and highlighting and scrutinizing a lack of conventional resolution.

**Part II: Ephemerality and personal redemption as coping mechanisms for
fears of the future at the intersection of domestic and societal pressures
during the 1950s and 1960s**

Isherwood's *A Single Man* both normalizes and exposes homosexuality by portraying an individual whose daily life is simultaneously mundane and meticulously self-conscious and set apart (through his being a professor, expatriate status, and most importantly, homosexuality). By rooting George's everyday experiences in the post-War American suburban ideal of Los Angeles, the novel explores how the solitary homosexual struggles with anxieties surrounding his perception 'hiding in plain sight,' and consciousness of his own insignificance paled by a society that is still homophobic at large. George's daily life complicates the idea of the closet as a singular threshold; instead, he commutes across its boundaries everyday. Finally, to cope with such tensions, George partakes in ephemeral experiences of homosocialization that challenge the monotony of his daily life, and which parallel equally as spontaneous moments of protest that he shares only with himself, the reader, and other men that he interfaces with in fleeting moments.

George begins the novel by painting a portrait of the domestic Los Angeles into which he is reluctant to fully integrate. For example, as opposed to his neighbors' homes, "[which face the street frontally [and] wide-openly" (Isherwood 24), his own home he describes as "the lair [one would] choose for a mean old storybook monster[, a] role that George has found himself playing, with increasing violence, since he started to live alone" (Isherwood 21). He further illustrates this defiance by noting the ways that he, aesthetically, differs from the domestic ideal. George's lack of children, not pursuing a white-collar job, and (with the death of Jim) his lack of a domestic partner serve as identifiers which alienate him from his conventionally domestic counterparts.

The ways that George differs outwardly seems to reflect inwardly as his own mental isolation and internalized homophobia. This is reflected in the way that George imagines how his neighbors, like Mr. Strunk, think of him. For example, he narrates: "Mr. Strunk, George supposes, tries to nail him down with a word. *Queer*, he doubtless growls. But, since this is after all the year 1962, even he may be expected to add, I don't give a damn what he does just as long as he stays away from me" (Isherwood 27). Although this is purely speculation of George's behalf, this fantasy of Mr. Strunk's preconception of George sheds light on George's own inward-perception of his sexuality. As a reaction to these forces, and in an attempt to maintain enough plausible deniability to blend into his domestic surroundings, George conceptualizes a set of layers behind which he hides. He 'puts on' these layers as he dresses up in the morning, saying "[i]t must be dressed up in clothes because it is going outside, into the world of the other people; and these others must be able to identify it" (Isherwood 11), othering his externally-facing body as an 'it' in contrast to his internal narrating psyche. The contradiction and tension between George's internal consciousness and external body only widens as George enters deeper into society as the day goes on, and the divide between the narrative perspective provided to the reader and the everyday actions depicted alongside George's internal monologue is a tangible manifestation of the closet that George continually crosses in his daily life. Although George, from the narrative perspective, is much more comfortable with his sexuality than the protagonists of the later novels, the barriers that he constructs to shield himself from scrutiny by his peers, and the echoes of internalized homophobia and shame, are key in understanding the peculiarities of how George and the other protagonists navigate their daily lives.

Los Angeles is a city which normalizes and erases George's differences, and serves as proof of George's ability to function like any other inhabitant; however, it also is a setting which serves to remind George about his own individual insignificance, paled by the societal forces which still lean strongly in a homophobic direction. George exemplifies this first point in Los Angeles' freeways. The flowing network of cars allows George to blend in, a reversal of his sticking out in the domestically-ideal neighborhood he lives in. It is important to remember that, given that homosexuality is still outlawed in 1962, George is still a petty criminal. The city thus serves a backdrop into which George can blend and alleviate the anxieties of being detected, a fact which prides him: "Like everyone with an acute criminal complex, George is hyperconscious of all bylaws, city ordinances, rules and petty regulations. Never once has he seen his passport stamped [or] his driver's license accepted [...] without whispering gleefully to himself, *Idiots—fooled them again*" (Isherwood 33). Although George initially paints the freeways as fast and panic-inducing to novices (Isherwood 33), he feels a special "kind of patriotism for [them,] [...] because the fact that he can cope proves his claim to be a functioning member of society" (Isherwood 33). However, the monotony of his daily commute also reminds him of the inaction that this conformance represents. He describes "an impassive anonymous chauffeur-figure with little will or individuality of its own" that takes over his body as he drives to work (Isherwood 36). Although this character can be easily identified as the 'highway hypnosis' that takes over any bored commuter, this chauffeur-figure also symbolically represents George's autonomic conformance to the societal pressures that he feels as he 'closets' himself and prepares to present a socially acceptable Professor George later on in the day. He fears that this chauffeur-figure is "tak[ing] over much larger areas of [his own] life" (Isherwood 40),

suggesting George's own anxieties around his eroding volition that is caused by his inability to act out past the barriers of the closet he places himself into.

This democratizing and levelling force of the city helps conceal George's own culpability as a homosexual, but has a dual consequence of reminding George of his own insignificance in the way that he conforms to a society that still paints homosexuality in a negative light. On his way to work, he notes that "[a] local newspaper editor has started a campaign against sex deviates (by which he means people like George), saying [t]hey are everywhere" (Isherwood 36). George remains powerless to fight back against this homophobia because he, like other homosexuals in the city, are not organized to make a stand against this systematic oppression. George is conscious of this fact, relating it when an argument about anti-Semitism in the 1930s arises in his classroom. He suggests that the class "leave the Jews out of this" and instead "think about [prejudice] in terms of some other minority, any one you like, but a small one—one that [is not] organized, and [does not] have any committees to defend it" (Isherwood 70). Importantly, at this moment, "George looks at Wally Bryant" (Isherwood 70), who is a student of his that he assumes is also gay, "with a deep shining look that says, I am with you, little minority-sister" (Isherwood 70). At times like this, George demonstrates the fleeting moments of solidarity and unspoken identification with other homosexuals, resonating with Jim in *The City and the Pillar*, who at the height of his life in New York City describes "the quick glance[s]" between "amused conspirators" that feel like "a form of freemasonry" (Vidal 163). However, George still feels abandoned as he recognizes that he and other homosexuals cannot defend themselves in a significant way when paled by the sheer size of the city that surrounds them, and it is not until

the 1970s that homosexual communities are organized enough to make a stand against this oppression in large cities such as Los Angeles.

George seems to feel that he should not be grouped with other ‘subversive’ characters, such as his co-worker, Grant, who George notes has stood up against book-bannings and disrupts anti-Communist lectures. Although George has “his seniority, his license to play the British eccentric, and, in the last resort, his little private income” (Isherwood 86), George feels himself too “scared” to stand up for the same things that Grant does and subvert society in the same way (Isherwood 87). Although George certainly has the potential to do so, as a result of these domestic and societal pressures, George fears the consequences of acting (and specifically, acting *out*). The suburb's microscopic attention to detail pressures him to hide himself or conform to a domestic ideal that he can only partially emulate, and the city's imposing size reminds him that he is alone and unorganized against systematic and sometimes violent oppression that arises from within. Between these two extremes, he often finds himself *contemplating* action instead of acting on such radical thoughts. For example, at several moments in the novel, he considers “[doing] something drastic, [like] tak[ing] a plane to Mexico City and be[ing] drunk for a week and run[ning] wild around the bars” (Isherwood 23); but deep-down, a voice in his head, “coldly bored with him” (Isherwood 23), says “[y]ou won't, and you never will” (Isherwood 23), reminding him of his fear of disrupting the status quo. George constantly suggests that there exists the potential to radically challenge the monotony of his daily life, but in the same breath he recoils by denying his own ability to enact such radical change.

One of the most tangible and tragic manifestation of George’s own fear of commitment is his betrayal of his deceased partner, Jim. He says that “An uncle of Jim’s whom [he had] never

met—trying to be sympathetic, even admitting George’s right to a small honorary share in the sacred family grief” invited him to Jim’s funeral, but “[...] becoming chilled by George’s laconic [...] *No, thank you*, to the funeral invitation—decid[ed] no doubt that this much talked of roommate hadn’t been such a close friend after all” (Isherwood 126). George refuses to acknowledge his own mourning of Jim, since displaying such emotion reveals their intimacy that is still socially unacceptable. In this moment, George is more concerned in making sure that Jim’s living relatives are convinced that their relationship was not significant, and therefore not suspect, than accepting Jim’s passing through the symbolic action of attending his funeral. Later, when asked by his neighbors of Jim’s whereabouts, "George answers that [...] he has just heard from Jim and that Jim is fine" (Isherwood 29), although George knows that Jim has passed. This excuse of sorts is a result of George’s fear of being identified as homosexual, with his own reluctance to acknowledge Jim’s passing and its significance to George. As a result, “[t]hey ask him less and less often” (Isherwood 29), slowly erasing Jim from George’s life and from others’ perceptions of him, but dually preventing him from ever reaching closure in the wake of Jim’s death. In these subtle betrayals of Jim’s significance to him, “more bit[s] of Jim [are] lost to him forever” (Isherwood 102); George’s inability to both personally and socially move on from Jim’s death manifests itself in George’s own deep fear of his future, entangled in his fear of death and of being forgotten or snubbed out in his solidarity and due to homophobic erasure.

Homosocialization can be seen as a tactic that George uses to fight his ever-consuming fears of inadequacy. Feeling especially invigorated in the afternoon, George notes the "scowling youths on the corners" who "see him as a potential score" (Isherwood 104), and considers "getting [one] of them to climb into the car, ride back with him to his house [...] and take part [...]"

in the wrestling bout of his pleasure" (Isherwood 104). Although George eventually turns down this idea, rejecting their "bought unwilling bodies" (Isherwood 104), he still "claims a distant kinship with the strength of their young arms and shoulders and loins" (Isherwood 104). This section highlights this 'kinship' that is important in reminding George of his own remaining virility and vitality. Conversely, his interactions with his student Kenny are more difficult to immediately parse and understand; however, they also demonstrate important characteristics of George's homosocialization such as its ephemerality and necessarily ambiguous nature. These interactions carry the possibility of coded sexuality, with George and Kenny having a naked swim and eventually going back to George's home. On the way back from their swim, George notes Kenny's undressed state, exclaiming "[y]ou're going to walk home like that? Are you crazy? They'd call the cops" (Isherwood 164). Kenny rebuts, saying "[n]obody would have seen us. We're invisible—didn't you know?" (Isherwood 164). This recognition that their interaction is 'invisible' in a way combats one of the major pressures of George's homosexuality, being his fear of identified as different or socially unacceptable.

George notes the ambiguous nature of their interaction, saying that "even if all this doubletalk has not brought them any closer to understanding each other, the not-understanding, the readiness to remain at cross-purposes, is in itself a kind of intimacy" (Isherwood 82). This ambiguity serves several purposes. It is important to leave this interaction without describing anything necessarily explicit, both for the book's own publication and reception by the public readership; however, it leaves a glimmer of possibility for the homosexual reader to fantasize what may have occurred between the lines, an implication subtly hinted in the narrative's identification of the reader and suggestions such as "let us suppose" which invite the reader to

speculate past the black-and-white text on the page (Isherwood 186). This homosocialization has the effect of George's own self-exploration, with Kenny saying "I'm not saying you don't teach us a lot of interesting stuff--you do--but you never tell us *all* you know about something..." (Isherwood 79), and George responding "Well--maybe that's true, up to a point. You see, Kenny, there are some thing you don't even *know* you know, until you're asked" (Isherwood 79); The importance of homosocialization on self-exploration and self-reflection is echoed in subsequent novels, even if later protagonists are less comfortable with the identity that inherently comes with these actions. Homosocialization, to George, is a powerful way to deconstruct the homophobia that he feels pressuring his daily life in the way that it is unique and ephemeral. It serves as a radical rejection of the future in its necessarily present-focused immediacy. In its isolated nature, it fractures both the regularity of the past and the monotony of the future, both patterns which George feels are increasingly consuming his life and vitality.

At spontaneous moments, George fights back with sparks of perseverance. In these sparks, George displays an aggressive sense of survival which seems to contradict his increasingly fatalistic picture of the future. For example, George considers at one moment in the parking lot outside of his university that it might be hopeless for students to be pursuing academic careers such as English, and writing "poems, novels, [and] plays" (Isherwood 48). In a spontaneous spark of protest, he turns in on himself, seeing himself "absurdly, inadequately, in spite of himself, almost, [as] a representative of [...] hope" (Isherwood 48). The novel's candid exploration of George's life, in a similar way, serves as an example that it is not hopeless to be a homosexual man living in the 1960s, although George does note that "the great hurrying majority [could] never stop to dare to believe that it could conceivably be real" (Isherwood 48).

As a novel of identification, George's purpose in focusing on the full gamut of his feelings throughout the novel, from hopelessness to pride, is to candidly portray them for the gay reader; that is, to demonstrate that both internal tensions and triumphs do in fact exist sometimes in contradictory harmony. This is perhaps most candidly exemplified when George describes himself as a "creature [that] will struggle on and on until it drops[, n]ot because it is heroic[, but because] it can imagine no alternative" (Isherwood 9). This existential retort seems to resonate strongly with the state of gay liberation in the 1950s and 1960s, focused more on survival and subsistence than on the radical attack on homophobia that begins in the 1970s. Furthermore, in response to the hostility that George feels from his neighbors, he proclaims: "But your book is wrong, Mrs. Strunk, says George, when it tells you that Jim is a substitute I found for a real son, a real kid brother, a real husband, a real wife. Jim wasn't a substitute for anything. And there is no substitute for Jim, if you'll forgive my saying so, anywhere" (Isherwood 29). Although this dialogue exists only within his mind and in the narration of the novel, he shows the reader that in fleeting moments and in small portraits of intimate experiences, the life that he kindled with Jim was and still is meaningful, if only to himself. Thus, despite its focus on the individual, moments like this remain a radical response to the homophobia that George feels throughout the novel, and the novel's end portraying and redeeming George as an individual (and lack of a larger societal impact) is not necessarily a failure.

**Part III: Challenging self-definition and identifying the marking
characteristics of homosexuality within ‘othered’ spaces, and the redeeming
role of homosexuality’s portrayal at society’s fringes**

Unlike George, whose discovery of his homosexuality and resulting internal journey of acceptance happens prior to the novel, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* portrays a protagonist, Jimmy, who discovers homosexual and homosocial tendencies within the novel, and within the isolated setting of a prison. The setting of the prison resonates with the later novels’ distancing their protagonists spatially from conventional society as they discover their own tendencies, and this and the later novels depict a self-discovery’s wide gamut of outcomes during the time period. Like other petty crimes that occur within the prison, homosexuality is punished, ignored, and condoned to varying degrees in ways that subtly reflect the opinions of homosexuality in larger society. Himes attempts to subvert society’s conventional definition of homosexuality by abstracting it away from general society in the setting of the prison, allowing it to be explored much more candidly and openly compared to general society, and raises the question of the role of the closet for individuals who do not necessarily identify as homosexual. Homosexuality shifts from a dehumanizing role at the beginning of the novel to one that has the later effect of softening the initially cold, vile, and emotionless prisoners. Jimmy’s own relationship to homosexuality too undergoes shifts as he grows more experienced with living within the prison walls. In the end, Jimmy focuses his attempts to convince society that “a convict is a human, too” (Himes 259), and dually, the novel can be read as an attempt to show, in the same vein, that that homosexuals are humans too.

Jimmy's initial impression of homosexuality in the prison centers around its offensiveness and inhumanity. Those who participate in homosexuality are, according to Walter, animalistic, lewd, dirty "bastards [who are] after every new kid that comes [to the prison]" (Himes 30). In many ways, this picture of homosexuality in the prison reflects a conservative, conventional picture of homosexuality held by larger society during the time period, focusing on the unthinkable dirtiness of its sexual aspects. Jimmy associates the sexual aspects of homosexuality with carnal, animalistic desire, with the prisoners who are allowed free reign "raping each other" and "ceas[ing] to be human" (Himes 161). This initial impression of homosexuality does not seem to fade, even well after his first 'relationship' with Walter and after befriending Blocker, he still seems to be disgusted by the thought or depiction of sex. One night after the prison fire, "he [sees] an indescribably lewd act of degenerate sex staged by two naked, sex-mad, marijuana-jagged convicts" which "outrage[s] [...] his senses" (Himes 163), and drives him "outside" to "[stand] sucking in the air, trying to get the dirt from his lungs" (Himes 163). This terror and animalistic impression resonates with Jimmy's initial feelings in the prison which he is still new to and wholly unfamiliar with.

Interestingly, these feelings of claustrophobia, desperation, and grotesqueness are also the conditions in which Jimmy himself begins to explore homosexuality. On the night of the prison fire, he tells Walter: "I want you to-to—I want you for a w-woman. I don't want no more of this goddamn cousin stuff" (Himes 107). This reveals Jimmy's ironic stance on homosexuality that only grows more complicated as Jimmy's relationships become more and more intimate throughout the novel. In this time of emotional and physical turmoil, Jimmy describes being "on a tide, and the tide was carrying him away from everything he had ever known or seen or heard

or thought; he wanted something to grab to; and there was nothing” (Himes 100). This desperation and resulting desire to ‘grab’ onto something perhaps suggests his experimentation and the source of his homosexual longings in the novel, and that of the other protagonists that will be covered in the later sections.

As Jimmy becomes more experienced with living in the prison, he begins to forget about the society which he misses outside of the prison walls. Explicitly, he says that “before, there had been girls outside the walls; now there were only walls” (Himes 68). His isolation from society allows him to become more and more isolated from societal homophobia, resulting in a shift in the way that he thinks about his own sexuality as well. This is similar to David’s isolation in Paris in *Giovanni’s Room*, effectually distancing himself from the American standards of sexuality and the resulting internalized homophobia. Jimmy begins to joke around with his friends, saying things like “one time don’t make you a girl-boy anyway” (Himes 87), suggesting a more fluid definition of sexuality that can exist within the prison walls compared to the outside. However, the disgust that Jimmy brings to the prison towards homosexuality makes way for a more new system of scrutinizing other men, more lax and drawn across different lines, but with the same intention of enforcing a boundary of acceptability (and which parallels the tactics that David uses to distinguish himself from the other men in the Parisian gay bars). Specifically, scrutinizing effeminate behavior and creating labels surrounding effeminacy and homosexuality become most important in delineating what is grotesque versus acceptable in the prison, both in Jimmy’s mind and systematically as seen with block 5-D (the ‘degenerates’ block).

As he becomes more exposed to the various types of men in the prison, he is able to more effectively put into words the physical characteristics that differentiate those with whom he is

uneasy. After the prison fire, Jimmy describes “the prostitution” of “[c]onvicts clad in feminine undergarments [and] bright colored kimonos” (Himes 164), and associating the “odor of perfume” with the “sweat [and] rumbling” of implied sex. Later on he moves prison blocks and into a new four-person cell with a prisoner named Chump Charley, whom he describes as having a complicated routine of bathing, shaving, and powdering. He juxtaposes this description with terms like “whore” and “a wench on the make” (Himes 220), associating such bodily attention with sexual promiscuity. The prison as a whole systematically oppresses the effeminate and more explicitly identifiable homosexuals, and being labeled as dirty, effeminate, and ultimately homosexual is an irreversible process, marked primarily with being transferred to the 5-D ‘degenerates’ block. Lively, Jimmy’s second significant ‘partner’ in the prison and one who continues to complicate Jimmy’s own sexuality in their increasingly candid expressions of affection, is sent away to 5-D, and Jimmy states that “[a]s long as he was in the company with other convicts, he could have denied [his tendencies]; but once in 5-D it was like a label on a can” and “[h]e was a ‘whore’ [...] and that was that” (Himes 202). This shift represents Jimmy’s own increasing adjacency to the homosexuals in the prison, in the same way that David’s increasing adjacency to the homosexuals in the gay bars of Paris allows him to scrutinize them with more nuance. However, by recasting the unthinkable disgust of homosexuality that Jimmy feels earlier in the novel into one that might be wrong but to a much milder degree, it parallels a partial, not-yet-complete acceptance of homosexual behavior that takes place during the time period.

Jimmy participates in homosexual and homosocial relationships in spite of these critical opinions towards homosexuality. In an attempt to distance himself from these negative

connotations which pervade his own conscience and that of the prison, Jimmy's relationships become recast under new titles. These titles, such as “cousin” (Himes 42), allow them to be seen as more conventional, but perhaps act in a more subversive way in their tendency to make the underlying relationship more approachable and thus easier to accept. For example, his first homosocial relationship with Walter becomes one of “cousins” (Himes 42). Renaming this relationship, however, does not lessen its intensity—Walter even suggests that they “ought to cut [their] arms and mix [their] blood” to ‘consummate’ their cousinhood. Later, Jimmy offers to purchase a pair of shoes for Walter, jokingly adding “[y]ou’re my kid, I’ve got to keep you looking pretty” (Himes 57). In this way, Jimmy’s recasting himself as a provider or father-figure in his relationships might suggest his own attempts to distance himself from a purely romantic definition of the relationship (that is, to draw the relationship along more utilitarian lines), and to re-masculinize himself in the face of any homosexuality or homoromanticism that may take place in the relationship. Certainly it seems that conventionalizing these relationships through assigning these roles is a reflex of heteronormative society’s tendency to erase the purely romantic aspects of the relationship. However, it also allows the richness of their relationships to be translated in a way that is interpretable for both homo- and heterosexual readers.

The tendency to attribute alternative titles or roles to homosexual relationships is one that is echoed in *A Single Man*, with Jim being George’s ‘roommate’; however, George seems to use this role in a reversed way, seemingly to reduce his relationship to that of ‘roommates,’ and nothing more. However, in a similar way, fleeting moments of George’s past such as their reading alongside each other (Isherwood 115) and their subtly intimate morning rituals (Isherwood 12) demonstrate that George’s calling Jim his ‘roommate’ serves to enrich his

memory of his lost partner, and is much more than just an excuse for their cohabitation. On the other hand, the prescription of roles such as ‘father/son’ and ‘roommate’ and ‘kid’ does not fully absolve the relationship of its homosexual culpability. In the prison, when Jimmy attempts to get his ‘kid’ Lively moved out of the degenerates’ block, he realizes that the notes that he has been smuggling to Lively have been used as evidence against him. Lively accuses Jimmy, saying “now you’ve gone and queered me sure enough” (Himes 211). Thus, in this intersection of various consequences that come from the attribution of homosexual relationships with alternative titles and roles, is interesting to consider the ability for these roles to simultaneously familiarize, ‘queer,’ and obscure these homosexual relationships within the settings that they exist.

Although Jimmy’s perceptions of homosexuality seem to shift and soften over the novel, at the threshold of the prison gates, homosexuality and homosocialization seem to wither back and become unthinkable yet again. Blocker’s friendship is one of Jimmy’s most cherished relationships in the novel; however, when Blocker is granted freedom and leaves the prison, he never writes to Jimmy and Jimmy “never hear[s] of him again” (Himes 238). This suggests a major shift in Blocker’s importance towards their relationship once he is not confined within the same space as Jimmy. Jimmy is victim to this, too, even within the prison walls; after reading a letter from the Governor considering his pardon, “all of his desire for freedom surge[s] back [and] [c]onvicts [become] detestable again” (Himes 269). He makes this association even more explicit by stating his desire “[not to] get involved in another sordid prison ‘friendship’” (Himes 269), and states that his previous relationship with Lively had been a mark of “how easy it [is] to lose his reason, his sense of balance” when his desire for other men begins to develop again (Himes 269). He makes a direct comparison to being tempted into another homosexual

relationship and purity, stating “I’m trying to get a pardon and I want to stay clear” (Himes 271), and again later on in the novel (Himes 282). Jimmy’s own internal conflicts surrounding homosexuality past the prison gates can be seen as a solid manifestation of the closet, equally as impossible to escape.

Regardless of how significant Jimmy makes his relationships seem in the moment, Jimmy constantly suggests that when it's his time to leave, he will also 'revert' back to his heterosexuality. Even in Jimmy’s arguably most significant relationship with Rico, who enters the prison late in the novel and spends the bulk of his time with Jimmy in unprecedented intimacy and nearly worshipping him, Jimmy seems to brush off the significance of their relationship at the threshold of the prison gates. When Jimmy and Rico are talking about their families and the possibility of leaving the prison, Jimmy flirtingly suggests “[m]aybe I’ll fall in love with [Rico’s mother], too [...] [s]he seems very young and I go for the Rico family” (Himes 304). Rico is irked by this suggestion that Jimmy would abandon their own attraction for a more conventional one, and Jimmy rebuts by saying “I’m a man, biologically speaking, I like women” (Himes 304). This distinction between Jimmy’s attraction to Rico within the prison walls, and the closest societally-acceptable alternative, his mother, outside of the prison walls, complicates Jimmy’s relationship to homosexuality. When given both options, Jimmy will take the more conventional one, even if it means betraying the relationships that are significant to him otherwise. This resonates with rhetoric that *Giovanni’s Room*’s David tells Giovanni, stating that if his fiancée were with him then he would not be with Giovanni. Homosexuality being depicted as an ‘exceptional’ desire that can only be contained within the prison walls, or France, or a single spontaneous night, is a recurring problem in these texts that challenges the extent to which

homosexuality can be seen as socially accepted or normalized outside of these exceptional circumstances. This is somewhat curbed by the end of the novel, when Jimmy is finally himself accused of ‘degeneracy,’ and how this shift manifests itself reveals larger social shifts of the time period.

Jimmy focuses the latter part of the novel on writing a biopic in which he strives to convince the world that “A CONVICT IS A HUMAN, TOO” (Himes 259). The latter half of the novel also features his most candid and intimate acceptance of his homosexual behavior, with his relationship with Rico and eventual accusation of ‘sexual degeneracy’; thus, the novel, in a way, tries to demonstrate a parallel and equally important claim that *a homosexual is a human, too*. These two ideas are intertwined, and inform Jimmy’s gradual acceptance of his intimacy with Rico. He states,

But in that place of scarred, distorted souls, of abnormality of both body and mind, he felt that there was something about their relationship which transcended the sordid aspects of homosexuality, and even attained a touch of sacredness [...] And if the gods he worshipped were pagan gods, who could tell him better? Jimmy asked himself. No one in there. (Himes 323)

In even his most candid and sometimes unforgiving pictures of the prison, Jimmy desires to show how humanity can still exist within the oppressive environment. The homosexuality and homeroticism that takes place in the end of the novel, with its often conflicting levels of societal acceptance and tolerance, is the key to understanding the bridge across this divide. As Jimmy narrates, homosexuality too begins as something that is initially so vile that it could only be conceived to exist within the prison walls, but eventually becomes a source of genuine joy for

Jimmy and Rico (Himes 300), amongst his other relationships that he participates in before theirs.

This depiction of Jimmy's most intimate moments has the roundabout consequence of humanizing the picture of the convict, too, since Jimmy demonstrates that he and the other prisoners can be sources of complex, sincere feelings, and even "hero[ic]" actions even though they have committed detestable crimes (Himes 99). Rico's affection and softening of Jimmy reconnects him to "the normal people in the normal world" and "people there beyond the walls in love whom he could not see" (Himes 324), simultaneously bridging the oppressive walls of the prison and the oppressive structure of homophobia that is built up in the earlier part of the novel. Jimmy's own self-acceptance becomes complicated at the close of the novel, when he is accused of 'degeneracy' and moved to Block 5-D. Although Jimmy says that "he could see his and Rico's relationship in its true perspective [and] he did not have any regrets" (Himes 360), and thus suggesting his own blossoming self-acceptance, he still makes an attempt to contact the outside world and tell his mother "that the charge was not true" (Himes 359). This contradiction is justified perhaps in the way that Jimmy sees his own self-acceptance as "[j]ust for himself" (Himes 360); it is okay that there exists a disconnection between personal acceptance and the failure or refusal to strive for societal acceptance as well. The novel makes an important effort to focus on Jimmy's own overcoming his individual culpability. Much like George's spontaneous actions at the end of *A Single Man* that are destined to never see the light of day, there is still merit in a novel's depiction of experiences at face value, for the homosexual or sympathetic reader, even if they are never intended for the larger society to see or to influence their opinions of homosexuality.

Part IV: Self-exploration and self-rejection at the interface of conventional society and an extant homosexual community, the influence of guilt, and the ineffectuality of conceptually and literally ‘running away’

Leaving the prison walls, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* explores isolation in more abstract terms, but with more tangible consequences. Baldwin’s novel explores a protagonist, David, who seems to be stricken by internalized homophobia and an peculiar inability to mesh with conventional society. Throughout the novel, he is made to doubt and reject his homosexuality due to societal pressures which are ingrained at a young age. Ironically, he both interfaces with and rejects membership of a homosexual community which is extant and flourishing, suggesting internalized homophobia even in men who are adjacent to these communities during this time period. David distances himself from by moving to Paris, nominally in an attempt to flee his homosexual desires, but with the implied notion that leaving the strict American society allows him to *explore* these tendencies as well. Nonetheless, he begins a relationship with another man by distinguishing it from other homosexual relationships, and in depicting the rise and subsequent downfall of this relationship the novel serves as a poignant example of ‘anti-cautionary’ novel: instead of cautioning against the consequences of homosexuality, it warns against a society which wilts the naturally-budding romantic and sexual relationships between men.

Since so much of the novel hinges on David’s own internalized homophobia, is important to focus on the root of these feelings. David’s first candid homosexual experience takes place early on in his life, unlike Jimmy’s in *Yesterday*, raising questions about the origins of his homosexuality *and* homophobia, and reflecting the ways that that both manifest later on in the

novel. After a passionate night with his childhood friend, David recounts that “[he] was suddenly afraid [and his] own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in [him] seemed monstrous” (Baldwin 8-9). David immediately connects his own homosexual desires with bodily grotesqueness, a tendency which returns when his relationship with Giovanni begins to sour, such as when David notes that “[Giovanni’s] touch could never fail to make [him] feel desire; yet his hot, sweet breath also made [David] want to vomit” (Baldwin 105). However, like Jimmy in *Yesterday*, David also makes the comparison between homosexuality and effeminacy. He states “[he] would lose [his] manhood” if he continued to feel the desires that he did that night (Baldwin 9). This, too, is reflected when David notes that he “play[s] the housewife after Giovanni [goes] to work” (Baldwin 88), soon after rebuking himself by proclaiming “I am not a housewife—men never can be housewives” (Baldwin 88). David’s motivation for moving to Europe seems to be, in part, to escape the temptations of homosexuality. Even from a young age, a typical American boy like David already dissociates homosexuality from manhood. Interestingly, at such a young age, there does not seem to be a specific event which places this internalized homophobia into him, instead reflecting a societally ingrained set of beliefs that are present in the time period. This is confirmed when David is arguing with Giovanni about the acceptability of their relationship and he notes that in America, “[p]eople have very dirty words [for] this situation” (Baldwin 81). Thus, this already strongly ingrained and internalized homosexuality and homophobia reflect a similar contradiction between the actions and resulting thoughts of regret that are felt by strongly by Jimmy in the first half of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*.

David's initial reaction to this deeply ingrained homophobia informs his decisions that drive the conflict of the novel, and more broadly reflect reactions to the pressures of homophobia that the homosexual reader during this time period might sympathize with. David asks himself, "how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in me*" (Baldwin 9), suggesting that David is well aware of the *internal* source of the homosexuality that he is ashamed of. He makes the decision "to be lonely" and make a "flight" as a reaction to the shame he feels (Baldwin 10). This 'flight,' although easily understood as his distancing himself from society out of shame and to avoid any temptations that may linger from his childhood, might also be interpreted more subversively. David leaves American society to explore his own sexuality in a setting which more readily accepts him. This is evidenced by David's suggestion that he says that "[he] wanted to find [himself]" in France (Baldwin 21). Although the purpose of this introspective journey is left abstract and for the reader to speculate, David also seems conscious of exactly what he ends up finding out about himself even before the narrative in France begins, stating: "I think now that if I had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be the only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home. But, again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat for France" (Baldwin 21). There is a marked irony here, since David is very clear to state that his decision to leave for France is part of the 'flight' from homosexuality and its shame; however, ironically these same actions turn out to only enable him further, exemplified by his relationship with Giovanni, and by the fact that he "[knows] what [he] was doing" by leaving for France (Baldwin 21). The tendency to move in order to both escape and explore identity is one which will be explored at length in the final novel, *The City and the*

Pillar, and highlights the chasm between homophobia and homosexuality that both protagonists are conceptually trapped.

Especially salient in highlighting this irony between the attempts to distance himself from homosexuality that David vocalizes in the narrative, and his actions that actually transpire which only seem to enable him further, is his peculiar adjacency to the homosexual communities in Paris. He notes that “[m]ost of the people [he] knew in Paris were [...] of *le milieu* and, while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim [him], [he] was intent on proving, to them and to [himself, that he] was not of their company” (Baldwin 22). It is important to note that he cares about proving this to himself, since the narrative has made clear that this internalized homophobia is already deeply ingrained in his psyche. Ironically, however, he states without much justification that “[he] did this by being in their company a great deal and manifesting toward all of them a tolerance which placed [him] [...] above suspicion” (Baldwin 22-23). This ironic practice of socializing with homosexuals is not new to David in Paris, though; he notes that he has a run-in “while [he] was in the Army which involved a fairy who was later court-martialed out” (Baldwin 20), suggesting his 'sympathies' peeking out but promptly being scared back into him is a periodic occurrence in his life.

Although David finds himself in the same bars as the homosexuals of Paris and interacting with them quite regularly, he goes to lengths in the novel’s narrative to distance himself from them, much like Jimmy, who attempts to distance himself from the ‘other’ more homosexual prisoners in the prison in *Yesterday* through the prison’s strict classifications along the lines of effeminacy. In a similar way, David narrates homosexuality in the novel as frivolous, materialistic, and emotionally vulnerable. Much like Jimmy’s depictions of the homosexuals of

the prison, they are ridiculous, but ultimately not dangerous; he depicts “*les folles*, always dressed in the most improbable combinations” and “screaming like parrots” about “their [hilarious] love affairs” (Baldwin 26), but is sympathetic to them as well. David notes that “they always called each other ‘she’” (Baldwin 26-27), criticizing their gender ambiguity by stating that “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” (Baldwin 27). The gay bar also becomes a space in which David can prove his own exceptionality. He recounts “[being] accused of causing a minor sensation by flirting with a soldier” (Baldwin 27), but then uses this as a springboard to completely reverse and claim that “no matter how drunk [he] may have been, [he] could not possibly have done such a thing” (Baldwin 27). Thus, David becomes a spectacle in his being “sort of queer for girls [himself]” (Baldwin 30) in the gay bar, appropriating the label ‘queer’ but distancing himself from other homosexuals at the same time. This may resonate with an underlying tendency for the contemporary homosexual of the period not to want to identify with a community that is depicted so pejoratively, but still who desires to be ‘exceptional’ in a very similar way to homosexuality. Nonetheless, the depiction of an extant and somewhat organized homosexual community is significant for the novel, because although David disavows membership in the community, it still depicts a multitude of homosexual men who are allowed to exist more or less as they are during the time period.

Like most of the ‘flirtatious’ dialogue in both *Yesterday* and *A Single Man*, David and Giovanni never initially vocalize the fact that they are both sexually and romantically attracted to each other. Instead, it is implied and unspoken, perhaps to avoid acknowledging the fact that what exists between them is homosexual attraction. David and Giovanni construct their

relationship as exceptional, distancing themselves from ‘conventional’ homosexuality, but at the same, sacrificing a solid foundation upon which to build their relationship. David is initially ashamed of the fact that his newfound attraction to Giovanni is proof that he has failed in his attempt to distance himself from the others in the gay bar, being “all that [Jacques] had waited, often scarcely hoping, so many months to see” (Baldwin 42). However, Giovanni seems to combat the claim that his hooking up with Giovanni is proof of David’s homosexuality that the bar patrons had been speculating when he “lean[s] back against the taxi window, allowing his arm to press [David’s] shoulder lightly, seeming to say that [they] should soon be rid of [Jacques and Guillaume] and should not be distressed that their dirty water splashed—[they] would have no trouble washing it away” (Baldwin 45). Thus, Giovanni’s body language, or at least David’s interpretation of it, seems to sacrifice the other homosexuals in the novels, whom Giovanni later calls a “disgusting band of fairies” (Baldwin 140), in order to absolve their own relationship of the negative qualities that they associate with homosexuality. This is not, however, an attempt to make their relationship into a heterosexual one. Giovanni notes that “[he does not] seem to be very interested in women right now—[but] [p]erhaps [he] will be again” (Baldwin 79), explicitly suggesting that their relationship is different than Giovanni’s attraction to women. For a period in the novel, these attempts to make their relationship singular, and thus immune to the societal scrutiny of homosexuality, succeed to a degree. David truly seems to be happy, on a particularly optimistic day stating “that such childishness was fantastic at [his] age and the happiness out of which it sprang yet more so” and for “[a] moment [he] really loved Giovanni” (Baldwin 83). However, it is important that these same tactics that David uses to set his relationship apart begin to precipitate both the downfall of the relationship and the precarious foundation upon which

David builds his own ideas of his homophobia and homosexuality, with David stating both his ecstasy and fear are “nourished from the same roots” (Baldwin 84).

David’s comfort begins to break down when his attractions start to become less of an *exception* towards Giovanni, and more of those homosexual *tendencies* of which he fears. He notes that “Giovanni had awakened an itch, had released a gnaw in [him]” (Baldwin 83). Instead of a singular and special attraction to just Giovanni, he seems to begin to feel attraction to other men as well. For example, a boy passes between David and Giovanni in the street, and David recounts “[investing] him at once with Giovanni's beauty and what [he] felt for Giovanni [he] also felt for him” (Baldwin 83). Although Giovanni finds this comedic, “the sound of [Giovanni’s] laughter turn[s] into a scene from a nightmare” (Baldwin 83-84), serving as evidence of David’s own male tendencies. This ‘itch’ threatens the fine line that he has drawn between him and the regular homosexuals whom he is disgusted with earlier in the novel, and the consequence is that David fears that he, too, will eventually become one of the pitiful men in the bars he frequents. David describes what this transition may look like when he visits Les Halles after meeting Giovanni. He sees “an old man, who looked like a receptacle of all the world's dirt and disease, and a young boy, a redhead, who would look like that man one day, if one could read, in the dullness of his eye, anything so real as a future” (Baldwin 54). The consequence of this is the stark realization that David’s concept of homosexuality utterly lacks a future, reflecting a larger, still flawed societal picture of homosexuality. Jacques explicitly references this dilemma when he addresses David in Les Halles when his relationship with Giovanni is still budding:

How long, at the best, can it last? Since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, hélas! In the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they will be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But 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.

(Baldwin 57)

The novel, through Jacques's interestingly clear-headed speech to David, demonstrates that in the moment David and Giovanni's relationship can be, to quote Isherwood, "almost beautiful" (28); however, any conceptualization of a homosexual relationship with a *future* is out of the question, and the only solution is reached "if one of the parties is already dead, or, better yet, both" (Isherwood 28). Such a relationship can only exist in the present, or in a snapshot, paralleling the ephemeral moments shared by George and his student Kenny, the intimate flashbacks of George's life with his deceased partner Jim, and the myriad of relationships that Jimmy uses to pass time in the prison in *Yesterday*, all of which are societally pre-ordained to fall apart, end, or evaporate in ephemerality. The unfortunate fact, though, is that David cannot embrace this ephemerality, instead choosing to self-destruct his relationship out of fear of the future.

No matter how much David tries to escape the scrutinous lens of homophobia, he seems to never be able to escape it. He knows that Hella will eventually return, and despite any relationship with Giovanni or self-acceptance that he might kindle, homosexuality will not be

redeemable “in [his] country[;] after all, [he] didn’t grow up [in France], [he] grew up [in America]” (Baldwin 81). The feasibility and acceptability of their relationship thus becomes the primary point upon which Giovanni and David argue at the end of their relationship. The future of their relationship is, in a tongue-and-cheek way, tied intimately into their sexuality, highlighted when David asks “what [he thinks] can *happen* between [them]” (Baldwin 142), and Giovanni candidly responds “you know very well [...] what can happen between us” (Baldwin 142), an innuendo in response to David’s question about their future. David’s simply *being* in Giovanni’s room, and thus participating in the relationship within, is too guilt-inducing for David to handle, and thus leaving the room becomes David’s primary goal in the latter part of the novel. He notes that “Hella [is] on her way back from Spain and [his] father [finally agrees] to send [him] money, which [...] [h]e was going to use it to escape [Giovanni’s] room” (Baldwin 77). When Giovanni confronts him about his decision to leave, David retorts by asking “[w]hat in the world do[es] [Giovanni] want [him] to do” (Baldwin 141), and claims that “[he cannot] help the way [he] feel[s]” (Baldwin 141), ironically appropriating similar language used by homosexuals to justify their own lack of choice of attraction.

Although David clearly demonstrates that he does not see a feasible future as a homosexual, he also seems not to be able to envision a feasible future in which he is happily and heterosexually married to Hella, either. He seems to need to “delay the moment which would commit [him] to [Hella]” (Baldwin 121), reflecting universal fears about his own future regardless of the decisions he takes. Although the most tangible tragedy of the novel is Giovanni’s desperation, murder of Guillaume, and subsequent execution (all of which David seems to have some influence in causing), the novel’s more abstract sense of final

disappointment hinges on the fact that David seems to exist in a limbo between two people who genuinely love him, tragically and antithetically being able to return either one's love and spoiling both relationships. Giovanni seems to understand this, saying "[David] never [has] loved anyone" and that "[he is] just like a little virgin [walking] around with [his] hands in front of [him] as though [he] had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe diamonds down there between [his] legs" (Baldwin 141). Giovanni's insult reflects David's inability to commit directly to his fear of sexuality, either homosexuality for its unconventionality, or heterosexuality perhaps due to his knowing it will forever dissatisfy him. Thus, David exists at the threshold of the closet, unable to step fully within or without, and all of his potentiality seems to vanish at this ever-growing chasm at the door frame.

Part V: Anxiety due to a shrinking distinction between sexual action and identity, and possibility of redemption of the homosexual community in the face of a novel's violent and shocking ending

Along the same vein as *Giovanni's Room*, *The City and the Pillar* depicts a protagonist who deals with the emotional consequences of a homosexual experience early in life. However, in this novel, the protagonist Jim does not run away; instead, he tries over the course of several years to rekindle this teenage sexual experience with his friend Bob. During his search for Bob, Jim travels throughout America and increasingly engages himself with other men. In this way, Vidal offers a candid exposure of the diversity of homosexual communities in America; however, Jim has trouble identifying with these communities even as his own homosexuality is increasingly treated openly, suggesting an internalized homophobia rooted deeper than simply the shame of being caught. The novel's tragic ending raises the question of whether *The City and*

the Pillar can be seen as a novel written to support the gay community, and treating the novel as a "cautionary" tale may fall short of its intended significance.

Like *Giovanni's Room* and *A Single Man*, the novel opens on a portrait of Jim's domestic setting and implicitly explores the setting's influencing his psyche and later actions. However, unlike these two novels that juxtapose the domestic ideal with internal and external homophobic pressures respectively, the novel seems not to depict the same conflict at its opening. This lack of internal guilt leads to his continued endearance towards Bob throughout the novel, and perhaps stems from Jim's external conventionality and attractiveness. The novel paints Jim as a perfect all-American boy, and his ability to 'pass' as a conventional American enables him to explore the homosexual and heterosexual worlds with ease. He is described as "tall and handsome" (Vidal 15) and "perfectly ordinary [with a] body [that] pleased him, the result of much exercise" (Vidal 20). Unlike other protagonists, like David from *Giovanni's Room* and Jimmy from *Yesterday*, Jim does not seem to have a fundamentally 'flawed' nature. He is not a criminal, he does not seem to have a traumatic past event to set off his rebellions, nor does he seem to be emotionally troubled from a young age. Although his relationship with his family is at odds, this is not due to his own inherent flaws; ironically, it seems to be due to his own conventional attractiveness and merits, with Jim making "the error of [...] not at all [being] the sort of small, potentially gray son Mr. Willard ought to have had" (Vidal 20). Surprisingly, even the childhood sexual experience that sets the novel's plot in motion is one that Jim looks back on positively, and ironically, it is this infatuation with the experience that drives him to fail to 'choose a side' between the homosexual and heterosexual worlds that he mingles between. Although Bob calls the experience "awful kid stuff" (Vidal 30); Jim seems to feel much less guilty, saying "[he]

liked it” as a response to Bob’s declaration that “[he does not] think [that it is] right” (Vidal 30). Although Jim seems to be conscious of the societal perspective of homophobia, his own idealization of his encounter with Bob seems to center around the idea that Bob is Jim’s “twin” (Vidal 24). It is this special distinction of Bob being his “ideal brother [or] twin” that makes him “content” with their sexual experience (Vidal 24), and this distinction is later important in Jim’s inability to move on and his subsequent downfall at the end of the novel.

Although Jim’s ability to pass as a regular, all-American man is beneficial to him, it also becomes a point of contention when he fails to, unlike Bob, settle down in a conventional American lifestyle later on in life. Young Jim is described as attractive, but he seems to “afraid of girls” (Vidal 19), and his excuse to others is that he “[does his] traveling on the other side of town” (Vidal 20). The phrasing of this excuse resembles homosexually-coding, suggesting an subtly innate or subconscious knowledge of Jim’s homosexuality. Later on, a shipmate learns that Jim is still a virgin (Vidal 41), and while this is not necessarily problematic at Jim’s age, his failure to ‘consummate’ his heterosexuality becomes a major turning point in his life. This failure hinges on Jim’s obsession with Bob and subsequent inability to conceptualize sex with anyone that differs from Bob. He notes early on that he “dream[s] occasionally of women, but most often he dream[s] of Bob, which disturb[s] him when he [thinks] about it” (Vidal 42). On the ship, Jim is displeased by an older woman “trying to seduce him” (Vidal 39), and he feels “[s]uddenly homesick [and] lost” (Vidal 39). A later attempt to lose his virginity with a woman his own age (and thus enter into the practicing world of heterosexuality) seems to be spoiled by a sense bodily grotesqueness, and while Jim “want[s] desperately to be carried away by the music and the whiskey and [the] girl, [...] all he could think of was the flecks of dandruff in her hair”

(Vidal 49). This failure seems to proselytize him; he declares that “no longer care[s] whether or not he [is] different from other people” (Vidal 52), and that “[h]e would not exorcise the ghost of Bob even if he could” (Vidal 53). This sentiment is distinct from David’s, who never decides to actively give up heterosexuality or acknowledge that women are not the ones for him. However, this also does not imply that Jim has accepted that he is homosexual at this point; instead “he decide[s] he [is] unique” (Vidal 66). Much of the novel hinges on the interesting and sometimes contradictory ways that Jim distinguishes his love for Bob from homosexual attraction, and how this distinction leads to the novel’s somewhat delusional conclusion that relies on Jim’s belief that Bob will drop everything and pick up their shared homosexual experience.

Jim’s rejection of the heterosexual norm and self-ostracization happen simultaneously with his discovery of an extant homosexual community beginning when he moves off of the ship and to Los Angeles, traveling further from his native community and deeper into a world that challenges his own perspectives on homosexuality. Jim’s discovery of this homosexual community closely resembles that of the previous two novels, and the “several stages” of reaction that Jim goes through “after his discovery that there were indeed many men who liked other men” are almost identical to that of David and Jimmy (Vidal 59). Like both of these men, Jim’s initial feelings towards homosexuals is that of “disgust and alarm” and careful scrutiny (Vidal 59). However, as he acquaints himself and places himself more closely adjacent to this community, he soon transitions to a discriminatory model that characterizes homosexuals by identifiable characteristics, such as “their tight, self-conscious manner [and how] they moved, neck and shoulders rigid” (Vidal 59-60). David and Jimmy also seem to use identifiable physical factors to distinguish homosexuals as they become more comfortable with their homosexual

communities. The depiction of the homosexual community in this novel is important to show how much it offered in terms of a sense of community to even the most blatantly self-denying homosexuals of the time period. For example, “Jim [finds] Shaw not only an agreeable companion but, more important[ly], informative” (Vidal 72). He shows Jim an underground world of homosexuality, such as “the secret Hollywood where, so it was said, nearly all the leading men [are] homosexual” (Vidal 72). This reinforces the concept established by George in *A Single Man* and David in *Giovanni’s Room* that the city can dually hide the homosexual, but also foster a homosexual community at large. It is interesting to consider how the city fails to pressure Jim in this novel the same way as George in *A Single Man* (which lacks any mention of an organized homosexual community), and how the extant homosexual community to which Jim finds himself adjacent helps offset the crushing pressure of the city even if he does not identify with it.

Much like in David’s case, Jim’s adjacency to the homosexual community does not initially imply complacency or membership; soon after moving to LA, when someone “trie[s] to seduce [Jim]” he becomes “quite unnerved, and violent in his refusal” (Vidal 60). However, unlike David, his insistence initially not to identify with the homosexuals that he interacts closely with seems to be less motivated by his own inability to draw parallels between his attraction to Bob and the homosexuality that others practice around him. He makes “no connection between what he and Bob had done and what his new acquaintances did [because too] many of them behaved like women” (Vidal 66), seemingly echoing the same justification made by David and Jimmy to distinguish their own relationships from those they look down on. Later on, even after he begins his relationship with Shaw, Jim clearly recognizes that “[h]e was not in love with

Shaw, nor did he pretend to be” (Vidal 72), because “the idea of being in love with a man was both ludicrous and unnatural” (Vidal 72). His love of Bob is different, described as “a man [finding] his twin [... which] was rare and something else” (Vidal 72). On the other hand, David in *Giovanni’s Room* fails to distinguish his attraction to Giovanni from other homosexuality in this way; this becomes one of the reasons that his attraction to Giovanni fails under the crushing weight of his internalized homophobia. However, Jim’s time spent with men is much more forgivable to him because of this delicate distinction that he constructs, nothing “but a temporary halt on a long voyage whose terminus was Bob” (Vidal 71). In a reversal of David’s situation, his inability to compare his attraction to Bob with those of other homosexuals is perhaps one of the key reasons that Jim fails to accept the inevitable failure of his attraction to Bob ever coming to fruition. The novel notes that “he had made no connection between what he and Bob had done and what his new acquaintances did [since] [t]oo many of them behaved like women” (Vidal 66); the inability to accept that his desires are simply homosexual in nature seems to stem from the same homophobic roots as his failure to identify with the communities that he finds himself involved in.

As Jim’s subsequent relationships with men deepen in both feeling and intimacy, the neat distinctions that Jim uses to distinguish his special affections towards Bob begin to dissolve. When his second relationship with Sullivan begins to blossom, he notes that he is “excited not only by their lovemaking but also by Sullivan as a person” (Vidal 83). This seemingly contradicts the cool disinterest that he underlines in his previous relationship with Shaw, and that he used as justification to distinguish the seemingly economic relationship from his much more

intimate feelings towards Bob. Sullivan seems to perfectly identify Jim's early life, further eroding any claim to a uniqueness that transcends homosexuality:

It starts in school. You're just a little different from the others. Sometimes you're shy and a bit frail; or maybe too precocious, too handsome, an athlete, in love with yourself. Then you start to have erotic dreams about another boy—like yourself—and you get to know him and you try to be his friend and if he's sufficiently ambivalent and you're sufficiently aggressive you'll have a wonderful time experimenting with each other. And so it begins. Then you meet another boy and another, and as you grow older, if you have a dominant nature, you become a hunter. If you're passive, you become a wife. If you're noticeably effeminate, you may join a group of others like yourself and accept being marked and known. There are a dozen types and many different patterns but there is almost always the same beginning, not being like the others. (Vidal 84)

Like David in *Giovanni's Room*, his being easily classified into the same stereotype as other homosexual men by Sullivan becomes a point of contention. Jim attempts to integrate in a way, and when he moves to New York, Jim notes that “[f]or a time, he hoped that if he saw enough of the queens, he might begin to like their society and be happy in it” (Vidal 164). However, later on, he says “[b]ut this was not possible” (Vidal 164), and after Shaw leaves New York, “[he] drop[s] out of the gay world, preferring to haunt those bars where he could find young men like himself” (Vidal 164). Thus, although he cuts himself off socially from the homosexual community that may have offered him support, he maintains a solitary and covert identity which isolates him even further from society.

Much of Jim's failure to accept being homosexual and the resulting necessity to distinguish his attractions centers around his fear of the word 'queer.' To draw a parallel to *Yesterday*, it is his Block 5-D, his analogue of being irreversibly marked as different. On the night out with his shipmate Collins, his failure to have sex with a woman is met with Collins' proclamation for her to "[l]et the queer go" (Vidal 52). This is contested by Jim in his mind, who claims "[h]e was not what Collins had called him" (Vidal 53). He questions why he should not be given such a name, recognizing that he indeed is disinterested in the "ancient and necessary duet" of heterosexuality and distracted by "the image of Bob" (Vidal 53). However, he continues to believe such a title as queer is "too monstrous" for him (Vidal 53). After he begins his relationship with Shaw, a homosexual acquaintance says "maybe [Jim is] not queer, but *this* is an exception" (Vidal 65), showing Jim's continued reluctance towards the title even after his homosexual tendencies begin. Queer is a classificatory term, and Jim's refusal to be labelled with it reflects a deeper reluctance to accept commitment to either the heterosexual or homosexual identity. Jim's inability to recognize and accept the ephemeral and finished nature of his childhood relationship is a reflection of this fear of commitment, since through maintaining its unique and special nature, the resulting uniqueness of his own sexual identity absolves him from the same scrutiny as his homosexual peers. He fears both sides of the coin, noting his discomfort at the idea of Bob "leading the same sort of life [as him]" (Vidal 93), but on the other hand, "experience[ing] a sudden panic" when he considers the possibility that "he had waited years for a reunion with a man who cared only for women" (Vidal 179). This inability to settle for either leads to Jim's delusion that Jim and Bob's relationship is special, a delusion that finally boils over at the closing of the novel.

This delusion comes to a boiling point between Jim and Bob during their night in New York City. Although they fondly reminisce on their sexual past, with Bob joking that “[they] were just a couple of little queers at heart” (Vidal 201), when Jim tries to have sex with Bob, Bob rebukes him, saying “let go of me, you queer” (Vidal 202). This emotional juxtaposition of the contrasting feelings packed in the word ‘queer’ comes tumbling down on Jim, and the frustrating falsehood of the delusion that Jim harbors about their relationship compromises his carefully constructed self-image built over the years, finally exploding in violence during the novel’s climax. Specifically, the novel’s climax of Jim’s raping Bob most difficultly brings to question the novel’s potential to redeem homosexuality, since it demonizes the same homosexual protagonist that the reader attempts to understand or identify with throughout the novel’s progression. However, the necessity of the novel’s having a tragic ending speaks to the continuing homophobia of the time period; a happy ending with Jim’s rekindling a relationship with Bob or settling down perhaps with some other man would have dually been unacceptable by conventional society, and also detract from the novel’s critical angle in condemning society as well. Like the ending of *Giovanni’s Room*, the novel’s tragic ending is invested in criticizing the societal forces that drive the protagonist to harm those closest to him, even if it means betraying the protagonists’ individual morality in the process. The sexual nature of the novel’s ending—emphasized in the fact that in the novel’s first publication, Jim *murders* Bob, not rapes him (Vidal *xvii*)—perhaps reminds the reader of the sexual tension and sexual self-aversion in which society traps Jim. This demonization of Jim serves not the purpose of demonizing homosexuality itself, but instead the societal circumstances that drive Jim to take out his frustration through such violent means. Interestingly enough, after the framed story ends, the

novel states that “soon [Jim] would move on” (Vidal 207), suggesting redemption, perhaps of Jim, but perhaps instead the homosexual community that Jim seems to betray in his violent act of insecurity.

Part VI: A concluding retrospection through the novels’ peculiar but rich perspectives on homophobia and homosexuality during the time period

These novels highlight the importance (and often contradicting nature) of relationships between identity, space, community, and visibility during the time period. They reveal and explore the internally and externally homophobic motivations for the protagonist to reject or hide their homosexual identity, and the gamut of protagonists explored in this thesis spans from men who have lived their whole lives with their secret male partners to those who are repulsed by their own spontaneous sexual desires and experiences. In their exploration of the city and domestic spaces, the migrant and sedentary protagonist, and the homosexually- and homophobically-charged space, these novels identify the heterogeneity of homosexual experiences that occur during this time period. However, all of the protagonists share parallel and related challenges, with societal and internal pressures hindering their ability to openly express their desires and live their daily lives. Furthermore, in the novels that depict extant homosexual communities (*Giovanni’s Room*, *The City and the Pillar*, and *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*), membership in such communities are often scorned, and those who practice homosexuality openly and candidly are often ridiculed or looked negatively upon by the narrative, raising the question of the novels’ role in supporting the communities about which they are written and who read them. However, a closer look at the way that they candidly treat painful realities reveals the way that these novels generalize the concept of ‘support’ in their refusal to sugar-coat the often

contradictory identities, strained relationships, and tragic experiences that the homosexual reader may feel himself.

Even through these often painful narratives and confusing or tragic endings, the novels attempt also to show the reader hope, saying “I am with you, little minority-sister” (Isherwood 70). They question “[w]hy should any of us hide” by claiming “[w]hat we do is natural, if not ‘normal,’ whatever that is” (Vidal 94-95). They remind the reader that self-acceptance needs not to be publicized for it to be significant, and that homosexual and homosocial experiences can still be cherished even if they are ephemeral and come to an end. They challenge the idea that “[Americans have] settled, solved, put in [their] place [...] all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love” (Baldwin 34), suggesting that change is still on the horizon. And regardless of the scorn, these novels continue to depict living homosexuals and homosexual communities that, for the most part, live their daily lives in its immediacy, in their own present day, not simply sitting around and waiting for a better future to come.

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