

Terri Griffith

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Nicholas Alexander Hayes

DePaul University – The School for New Learning

GIRLISH GAITY: 1950S COLLECTIVELY-AUTHORED FEMININITY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* AND THE MISS RHEINGOLD ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

Abstract: In *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin explores the contentious nature of American manhood and male sexuality. Baldwin uses depictions of womanhood to contrast and define the parameters of masculinity. The secondary character Sue acts as a foil for the novel's protagonist. Furthermore, Baldwin uses her to critique collectively-authored American femininity by comparing her to Miss Rheingold, a popularly elected spokeswoman for Rheingold beer. This essay explores the way in which Baldwin characterizes the femininity of secondary character, Sue, and the way this depiction works to define the masculinity of the protagonist, David.

Keywords: femininity, advertisement, Miss Rheingold, James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is generally recognized as a quintessential Gay American novel. Its depiction of male sexuality has proved a poignant, pre-Stonewall narrative. But Baldwin's story is not one that is solely focused on the experiences of men who have sex with men. His perspicacity provides a damning reading of white American masculinity and its defining mythology which his protagonist describes as "[his] ancestors conquer[ing] a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" (*Giovanni's Room* 3). The myth of the rugged, individual man and his "immaculate manhood" dominates the relationships between the protagonist and his lovers, male and female (*Giovanni's Room* 30). Scholars have extensively explored dominant masculine narrative currents. Our paper explores the way in which Baldwin characterizes the femininity of secondary character, Sue, and the way this depiction works to define the masculinity of the protagonist, David.

The foregrounding of this masculine narrative is given depth and gravity by a feminine background. Baldwin recognizes the way masculine and feminine nature play against each other, not as complements but as foils: "Men and women seem to function as imperfect and sometimes unwilling mirrors for one another; a falsification or distortion of the nature of the one is immediately reflected in the nature in the other" ("Preservation" 597). The dominant and defining position in which he places mascu-

linity is not surprising since it supports his observation that “[t]he American idea of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity” (“Freaks” 815). This American assertion produces many of the dominant cultural binaries: “cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white” (“Freaks” 815). In “James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man’s Estate,” Mae G. Henderson furthers and narrows this argument by explaining that David’s romantic relationships are foils for each other, in particular “the brief encounter with Joey [a boy David knew in high school] and the more extended affair with Giovanni parallel and contrast with the seduction of Sue, a rather pathetic white American expatriate in Paris on whom David attempts to test his virility” (317). Much of the novel revolves around Baldwin identifying and defining white American masculinity, both its source and its consequence. David’s sole focus throughout is establishing and maintaining his “manhood,” which he does through constant comparison to that which he considers feminine. By placing David’s construction of masculinity at the center of the novel, Baldwin by extension, emphasizes the cultural construction of femininity. David’s mother who died before he could form many memories of her anticipates the role women play throughout his life. She haunts his dreams: “...blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach, so enormous as to swallow me alive” (*Giovanni’s Room* 10-11). The dread she represents overshadows both his long-term heterosexual relationship with his fiancée and his sexual encounter with Sue. Although Sue is a character who is only briefly alighted on in the novel, she represents unpretentious American femininity that is particularly vulnerable to social pressures and validation. Baldwin accentuates Sue’s vulnerability by describing her as “blonde and rather puffy, with the quality, in spite of the fact that she was not pretty, of the girls who are selected each year to be Miss Rheingold” (*Giovanni’s Room* 95).

Miss Rheingold was an apt emblem for collectively-authored femininity and immaculate womanhood. While David and the rest of the expatriate community were finding themselves and testing their boundaries in post-war Europe, men and women in the US were invited to cast their ballots for candidates to select each year’s Miss Rheingold. From 1941 to 1964, the comely representative of New York state’s popular Rheingold beer was an advertising mainstay. The Miss Rheingold competition, like many beauty contests, was a public forum on femininity. But unlike other tacit forums, the overt nature of the contest made the femininity in this context more fully participatory. Any individual sexual impulse was sublimated to the aggregate sexual impulse of all voters and beer consumers in this context. Additionally, the contest itself regulated the identity of the contestants, homogenizing them to a yearly ballot of six nearly identical



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL HESSE

COSTUME DESIGNED FOR MISS RHEINGOLD BY FIRA BENENSON • NECKLACE BY VAN CLEEF & ARPELS

Hillie Merritt

ELECTED MISS RHEINGOLD 1956!

MILLIONS OF VOTERS went to the polls this year to cast more than 20 million ballots for Miss Rheingold 1956. It was the closest, most exciting election in Rheingold history. And the winner is brown-eyed and lovely Hillie Merritt.

Hillie is as pretty as this picture. She likes to play tennis and go dancing. She keeps up with all the latest books and loves to spend an evening at the opera. Her smile and personality make her popular *wherever* she goes!

Now as winner of America's second-largest election, Hillie Merritt will receive a contract worth \$50,000. She wins exciting trips to Hollywood and

Europe, too. But most of all, Hillie will be the girl *you* see in Rheingold advertising—everywhere!

Be sure to look for Miss Rheingold 1956 whenever you're at a store or tavern. She's the best—and prettiest—reminder that Rheingold is always beer as beer *should* taste... clean and clear with a distinctive Extra Dryness that's never equaled by another beer! Yes, *Extra Dry* is the reason why Rheingold is the largest-selling beer in the East.



Brewed by Liebmann Breweries, Inc.
Master brewers for more than 119 years.



1956, 1955, Liebmann Breweries, Inc., 200 West 10th St., New York, N. Y.

Rheingold Beer advertisement. Gourmet Magazine, January 1956, back cover.
From the private collection of Terri Griffith

pleasant faces. The candidates embodied the tropes of mainstream American beauty: white, young, agreeable, able-bodied, cisgender, fair. These tropes of American beauty were, and arguably still are, collaboratively authored by the media that offered up the prospective Miss Rheingolds for public validation through the beer-drinking audience who voted on her. These tropes offered a simulacrum of beauty, if not actual beauty. The qualities of Miss Rheingold were not simply popularly driven and collectively-authored, they were ubiquitous. The January 1956¹ advertisement introducing the year's winner in her new role also promised that "...Hillie will be the girl *you* see in Rheingold advertising—everywhere!" (Rheingold Beer advertisement).

Readers in 1956 would have interpreted the complex potentialities of identity through the advertising referent of Hillie Merritt and the previous fifteen Miss Rheingolds. The Miss Rheingold campaign ran on radio, television, national periodicals, and in-tavern promotions throughout the East Coast. Literally millions of people voted for her, which makes it interesting that current readers, certainly those born after 1964 when the competition ended, would probably miss the reference to the long-running beer advertisement. The actual voting in the competition took place in taverns and bars, the type of establishments that would be willing to place a cardboard ballot box on the counter or be tempted by free Rheingold advertising specialties such as coasters. Traditionally, watering holes such as these have been considered men's spaces, even if women were provisionally allowed. Prohibitions against women sitting at the bar or having specific hours in which they were allowed into the establishment was commonplace. The tacit goal of the Miss Rheingold competition seemed to be a search for a male vision of immaculate womanhood.

This vision stands in stark contrast to David's desperate attempt to preserve his so-called "immaculate manhood" (*Giovanni's Room* 30). Despite his homosexual and perhaps wifely inclinations, David vehemently tries to assert his tough, American masculinity in his rejection of all things feminine: feminine women, effeminate men, his own forbidden desires to nurture and be nurtured. Baldwin later critiques such approaches to masculine denial: "In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected; whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust" ("Preservation" 597).

In "Into the Room and Out of the Closet," Luminita Dragulescu writes, "David's position towards women is not less complicated than it is towards men. The narrator, admittedly, is intent on a stable, 'normal' relationship with a woman, but only as a result

1 *Giovanni's Room* was first published in 1956.

of social pressure" (Dragulescu 40). Further, Dragulescu observes that whenever David's masculinity is undermined he can turn to Hella or "casual heterosexual sex to reestablish a traditionally masculine identity..." (Dragulescu 40). Evocatively, Marianne Sørbøen asserts, "David's strong belief in manhood as something which needs to be proven, eventually asserts itself in a complex image of manly identity as based on heterosexual sex acts" (Sørbøen 31). For David, femininity is essential in demarcating his masculinity. Paradoxically, femininity becomes a concept which men define, but they are then subject to the ways that definition limits the possibilities of masculinity.

Hillie Merritt, all the Miss Rheingolds who preceded and followed her, and Sue embody the tension between masculinity and femininity. James Bloom explores the connections that readers in 1956 would have made when Baldwin describes Sue and these popularly elected spokeswomen. Bloom furthers this observation about the gendered relationship with Sue by saying, "David's encounter with Sue should confirm his power as a gazer, since Miss Rheingold begins as a two-dimensional image widely available to millions of men but may become incarnate, immediately available for only a select few" (34). David's successful performance threatens to trap him. The access to such a woman reveals the contested border between gender performance and individual sexual impulses. As with any competition in which men anonymously rank women with the goal of choosing a single representative woman, the objectification becomes acute. However, an element that Bloom does not take into consideration is the role that Miss Rheingold plays in a post-Prohibition media narrative about women. Contemporary beer advertisements often depict women as seductive beer-wielding temptresses, as is the case with the St. Pauli Girl and Budweiser Girl. This is in contrast to post-Prohibition alcohol advertisements, which intentionally eschew depictions of the temptress. Instead, these advertisements position women as a stolid bulwark against masculine excess, where the image of wholesome women regulates the assumed inherent base instincts of men. David forces Sue into taking on a regulatory role.

Gender relations in beer post-Prohibition advertisement were often in keeping with those that Baldwin explores in his novel. In his article "Right at Home," Nathan M. Corzine explains that men were allowed to drink for fun, but women were forced into the role of "preservers of morality and societal values" who had to "insure the triumph of moderation and the defeat of intemperance" (844). Miss Rheingold's steady figure and her wholesomeness represent just this sort of authority. In *Giovanni's Room*, the women in David's life—his aunt Ellen, his fiancée Hella, the dim memory and nightmare of his mother—attempt to regulate masculine behavior. On returning to Paris from Spain, Hella's commitment to becoming a wife, and potentially domesticated, can be seen as being analogous to the "symphony of complications and contradictions" (Corzine 844)

that women present in the post-Prohibition beer ads faced. She could enjoy the party, but only if she accepted her obligations to be the agent of moderation.

Without access to these agents of control, David must find another, when his masculinity is undermined. In "Femininity, Abjection, and (Black) Masculinity," Keith Mitchell notes that David's performance of heterosexual masculinity is viable only when he is not around those who sense his deception but "...when a sailor catches [David] cruising him at the American Express Office and guesses his sexual orientation, David panics and picks up a girl to prove to himself that he is heterosexual" (266). In as much as David is looking for a woman to have sex with to reaffirm his masculinity when he has an encounter with Sue, he is also looking for someone to regulate his passions, particularly his sexual and emotional passion for Giovanni. His contempt for her is matched by his longing for someone to temper his desire. The sexual act they share resembles Baldwin's observations of couplings in roman noir works by Raymond Chandler or James M. Cain since what these characters "...bring to each other is not even passion or sexuality but an unbelievably barren and wrathful grinding" ("Preservation" 597-598.) The encounter between David and Sue operates in a way similar to the encounter in these other works. Still, David believes himself to be innocent while framing Sue as somehow duplicitous yet simple ("Preservation" 597-598). There is perhaps an inscrutable discomfort that David faces in engaging with Sue. Baldwin felt his own analogous discomfort when having sexual relations with white women whose motives he could never fully discern. As both a black man and a gay man, he feared white women might want "to civilize [him] into becoming an appendage..." ("Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood" 824). David's callous approach to the women in his life is a strategy to prevent himself from becoming that appendage. However, he also fears that he will become Giovanni's appendage (or worse yet, housewife.) At the root of this fear is David's anxiety, not just about appearing feminine to the outside world, but more so his terror that by loving a man his innate femininity will be concretized.

David is repulsed by Sue's innate, yet fragile femininity. He uses her to bolster his fears about his own manhood, yet this encounter falls short for both David and Sue. Instead of leaving them both more confident in their gender performance, both are left feeling more unstable than at the outset of their encounter. The Miss Rheingold advertisement carries with it secondary signs that overlay Sue's presentation of femininity, which Baldwin references. The precise nature of these Miss Rheingold contests and their desirability offered a place for interrogation in contemporary media outside of *Giovanni's Room*. In a 1963 *The Saturday Evening Post* article "Will the Real Miss Rheingold Standout?," reporter David L. Goodrich describes the candidates: "As always, there was nothing chic, glamorous or sexy about them. Their published 'vital statistics' made no mention of bust, waist or hips. The girls make you think of country air,

cod-liver oil, marshmallow fluff, apple cider—almost everything except beer” (48). Goodrich’s observation resonates with Bloom’s observation of David in “Queering, Gazing and Containment in *Giovanni’s Room*.” Bloom observes, “Both syntactically and lexically, he commandeers the entire discourse of women’s attractiveness. The phrase ‘in spite of the fact she was not pretty’ awkwardly disrupts, literally intervenes in, David’s move to pinpoint and provide a context for the ‘quality’ of Sue’s appearance” (33). For both Goodrich and David, the appeal of these women is not sexual. Their appeal is sanitary, devoid of sexuality, appealing to American mid-century focus on conformity, consumerism, and the nuclear family. This helps to explain why women and religious figures participated in the election according to the brewery’s president Philip Liebmann. Goodrich and Liebmann’s assessment of the attractiveness of these women focuses on their desexualized embodiment. Wholesomeness is a wedge between domestic interest and erotic impulse. Baldwin likewise senses this in his assessment and use of the comparison between Sue and Miss Rheingold.

Baldwin writes, “[Sue] wore her curly blond hair cut very short, she had small breasts and a big behind, and in order, no doubt, to indicate to the world how little she cared for her appearance or sensuality, she almost always wore tight blue jeans” (95). Here Baldwin clearly tells us that Sue is trying, with mixed results, to desexualize herself and rebuff the erotic expectations placed on the other American woman in the story, Hella, whose solitary trip to Spain brings gossipy insinuations of sexual libertinism from Giovanni. Sue is uncomfortable in the roles that she has been assigned by men. She wears jeans to place herself in a liminal space between the role of other-woman in which she has been cast by David, and the broader societal role expected from a white, upper-class, American woman. Yet this intentional distancing only underscores how deeply ingrained the American cisfeminine ideal is, situating Sue within an uncomfortable opposition to the sexually attractive woman.

In “Reading Bisexually,” Maiken Solli challenges the notion that Sue was not desirable: “...it is not necessarily that those encounters are described more positively due to the fact that it is sex with men instead of women, as many critics have understood it, but rather that it is positive because it is sex in combination with feelings of love and affection” (23-24). Sex without love is positioned as a psychologically damaging act throughout the novel. David’s old acquaintance, Jacques, warns the young American that if he did not embrace “affection” and “joy” he could lose his ability to love and only be capable of dissolute, meaningless, and disgusting encounters (*Giovanni’s Room* 56-57). In contrast to Solli, Mae G. Henderson asserts in “James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man’s Estate” that “[t]he absence of love is also what perverts the heterosexual relationship, as in the case of David, who uses women like Sue and Hella as objects upon which to test his ‘manhood.’ David betrays himself and makes his female

consorts unknowing co-conspirators in his desperate desire to find refuge within the boundaries of conventional heterosexuality..." (Henderson 322). In "Dividing the Mind," Yasmine Y. DeGout writes, "David's sexual ambivalence is a constant underlying theme of *Giovanni's Room*" (DeGout 427). Dragulescu complicates the notion of David's bisexuality by positing, "If bisexuality has worked for David up to a point, after passing through Giovanni's room and submitting to homoerotic desire, the sexual allure of the female body fades increasingly only to turn into utter disgust" (Dragulescu 40).

Before her sexual encounter with David, Sue describes herself as a brick wall. She tells David that her walls are impenetrable. Her sentiment reflects David's own sense of "immaculate manhood" (*Giovanni's Room* 30). These postures reflect each other in that both of them overstate their invulnerability to masculine sexual attention. The encounter does not perhaps leave them fatally damaged, but it does seem to compromise their defenses. For the most part, Sue is presented only as a foil to David. Without her, David has no mirror. However, it is also important to consider how she relates to the other main female character in the novel, Hella. Hella goes to Spain to see if she wants to be in a relationship with David; or more likely to see if she could remain on her own in a foreign space. Sue unlike Hella may have a sense of loneliness, yet she is a woman who does stand on her own. She may not be impenetrable, but she does not collapse like Hella or David.

When the sex with Sue is complete and they have dressed, David thinks, "When she came back she was wearing a dress and some real shoes, and she had sort of fluffed up her hair. I had to admit she looked better that way, really more like a girl, a schoolgirl" (*Giovanni's Room* 101). Having failed to make David like her, even, or especially after sex, Sue retreats back into the cisfemale trick for which she had spent a lifetime training. She transforms herself into a simulacrum of a traditional, wholesome "girl." She is now less a woman and "more a girl." Even more than that, "a schoolgirl." David likes Sue best when she is humiliatingly disempowered. She is most valuable to him when she has lost her agency and is willing to embody a disempowered femininity in order to be liked. Perhaps this is the consequence of even her modest attempt to reject this image of immaculate womanhood.

The reaction from David reveals something deeper. We read her as a more desperate figure since she has come back more traditionally feminine. The scene is of course read through the eyes of David whose externalized misogyny has the same roots as his internalized homophobia. David hates Sue for the same reason he hates himself; he is lonely and wants to love and be loved. To David, this is perceived as a feminine weakness and is the reason for his deep invalidation of all things feminine. Something he knows he should desire but something that he can never truly respect.

Sue's post-coital fashion makeover likewise would resonate with the 1956 marketing image of Miss Rheingold, and the layers of hetero-cismasculine expectations of American femininity. For Sue, there are few opportunities for alternatives. She has traveled to Europe and, the reader can assume, to find an alternative way to exist in the world, outside the scope of her family and American societal expectations. Like David, Sue maintains a temporary position as an expatriate and an outsider. She is almost queer in her imposed asexuality. Yet, even after her escape to France she finds herself in the arms of another American, David, who sees her only as a Miss Rheingold—an imitation of the hegemonic femininity of consensus. A copy of a copy of a copy. Ultimately both David and Sue fail to live up to mid-century America's collectively-authored cisgender expectations. In their book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith (Jack) Halberstam posits, "From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideas, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures" (4).

To David, his homosexuality means he has failed as a man. To Sue, her failure comes in her unsuccessful ability to regulate David's masculine and sexual excess. In comparison to Miss Rheingold, who has succeeded completely in meeting or exceeding collectively-authored societal expectations, David and Sue have failed epically. They both now reside outside the immaculate cisgendered ideals of manhood and womanhood created collaboratively by both the media and society as whole. Unlike Miss Rheingold, it is through this failure that both David and Sue are offered the potential to become who they truly are. Yet despite this potential freedom, they allow culturally constructed and interlocked narratives of masculinity and femininity to dominate possible self-authored narratives.

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