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Bulldog in the Backyard

Noir Paths of Tragic Deviation Between *Giovanni's Room*
and its Adaptation

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When they say repent...I wonder what they mean.

Leonard Cohen, "The Future"

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Acknowledgments

My thesis projects, both for my B.A. and my M.A., have been characterized by the same path. My first impulse was always to cultivate an academic identity through ambitious designs. I built them carefully, structured my argumentations with attentive research and detailed bibliographies, placed myself under the guidance of professors I highly esteemed and, above all, conceived them in strategic terms. I lived with the idea that a thesis should stand, retrospectively, as a milestone that testifies to one's vision, and accordingly my projects were sophisticated academic expressions of my obsessions and convictions. All these first attempts invariably ran aground at the moment of writing and died with heartfelt explanations to my supervisors.

The second attempts, on the contrary, were born almost accidentally in the margins of the academic frame. They stayed relatively academic, and developed in full autonomy through generous conversation with unexpected interlocutors. Also, while working on them, I found myself deeply questioning my belonging to academia — a question which, probably not being ready to bloom, I did not confront after my B.A. I was bound to confront it before this project could take shape, and in fact it is in honoring that resolution that this project was, and ultimately could be, born. Now that it is complete, I can proudly observe that it does testify to my vision — not because I set out to prove it, but because I finally followed what I felt.

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Methodology

The methodological approach of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it relies on close reading, narratological analysis, and critical contextualization; on the other, it applies these findings to the practice of adaptation through the production of an original screenplay. The research phase was conducted through the study of primary and secondary sources, with particular attention to James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*, scholarship on Noir and Neo-Noir narrative structures, dramaturgy and philosophy of tragedy, and adaptation theory. Secondary sources were selected through the cross-examination of bibliographies, academic databases, and search tools, including Google Scholar, Google Scholar Labs, and ChatGPT. The writing of the critical component was carried out using Pages, while the screenplay was developed using the screenwriting software Beat.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned Davide Nardella, student ID number 975181, enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Master's Degree Programme in European, American and Postcolonial Languages and Literatures, author of the final degree thesis "Bulldog in the Backyard: Noir Paths of Tragic Deviation Between *Giovanni's Room* and its Adaptation", thesis supervisor Pia Masiero, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under his own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

DECLARES

- ☐ that he has **NOT** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of the final degree thesis;

- ☐ that he **HAS** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of his final degree thesis, in particular:
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 - ☐ support for the automatic drafting of sentences;
 - ☐ production of illustrative images to complement the methodological section;
 - ☐ other (bibliographical research support and brainstorming tool);
 - Throughout the work;
 - The accuracy, quality, and reliability of all information generated by artificial intelligence tools were verified through cross-checking bibliographies and through the author's own knowledge and critical judgment.

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that all material generated by AI has been carefully checked, reviewed and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy and scientific integrity of the work.

Vicenza, June 23, 2026

Introduction

In 1936, the philosopher Walter Benjamin expressed concern that the art of storytelling was coming to an end. Partly this was due to the rupture represented by the First World War. Men had returned from the front “not richer but poorer in communicable experience,” having witnessed events for which inherited forms of narration appeared no longer adequate (144). To Benjamin, this marked an impoverishment of human communication itself: the inability of human beings to transmit their experience to one another. Yet, as early as 1923, following Joyce’s example, T. S. Eliot had already recognized in the use of ancient mythologies a method to “giv[e] a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy” of their present — a seed from which works such as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were born (177). Similarly, across the second half of the 20th century and beyond, Akira Kurosawa drew on Shakespearean drama to narrate his epic tales of feudal Japan, Paul Schrader combined Bergman, Dreyer and Noir sensibility to shape his vision of America, and Baz Luhrmann blended *La Traviata*, *La Bohème*, and pop culture to revitalize the musical film in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001).

In each of these cases, cross-narrative contamination proved key to the persistence of storytelling. The perceived inadequacy of inherited forms of narration never prevented new experiences and perspectives from being shared among human beings: stories were appropriated and transformed – in a word, adapted – in order to keep the human monologue uninterrupted. As Benjamin himself observes, after all, “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories” (149). Storytelling is the art of adaptation.

As deeply as the narrative impulse is rooted in the human mind, adaptation is central to human culture. As Peter Brooks observes, the competence to tell stories occupies a central place in our lives because of its “potential for [the] summary and retransmission” of human experience (4). But what else is adaptation if not “repetition with variation”, as Linda Hutcheon famously argues (4)? From time immemorial,

stories have surfaced through a perennial process of creation by contamination, whether from inherited forms, assimilated plots, or sedimented memories. Deriving from preexisting material did not make Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* or Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) secondary to Homer's *Odyssey* and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in any way. To paraphrase the British poet and scholar Michael J. Alexander, adaptation as much as storytelling are inherently "palimpsestuous" activities: what varies is only the degree of visible assimilation (qt. in Hutcheon 6).

Yet, as adaptive practice has become increasingly visible in contemporary culture, adapted works have often been looked at disdainfully. According to a misplaced logic of "faithfulness and equivalence", adaptations have been treated as derivative works, to be judged and even evaluated in much the same way translations can be (Hutcheon 16). Deeply affected by the influence of source-oriented approaches to translation studies, this orthodoxy of fidelity criticism has spread the misconceived idea that adaptation is merely the reproduction of a well-defined content in a different form, as though it were only a matter of repotting a plant from one vase to another. However, to adapt is always primarily to tell a story, and, as Benjamin vividly puts it, "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (149). In other words, rather than a movement of mere replication, adaptation is instead a productive space, in which stories are chewed, tasted and spat out again for one more ride on the narrative wheel.

As Linda Hutcheon brilliantly puts it, adaptation is an act of "interpretive creation" (18). Adapters are first of all interpreters of a source, insofar as that object is meaningful to them, but they subsequently turn into its (re-)creators through a process of appropriation and restitution. Accordingly, the adapted work will always be original in relation to its primary source, since its re-creation necessarily emerges from a different set of intertexts through which the source material is filtered (Hutcheon 84). The primary source certainly belongs to that set, but it can never exhaust it, since every intertextual constellation is specific to its creator. In this sense, adaptation perhaps comes closest to what Benjamin describes as the true task of translation in his seminal

1921 essay: to mark the “stage of continued life” of the source, not by covering it, but by allowing the source material to “shine upon [its original form] all the more fully” (“Task” 254; 260).

Adaptation is an encounter with a source object that sheds new light on its material. Every reading of the source can generate an infinite plurality of different readings, not only because different adapters tend to bring different elements to the fore, but also because every interpretation always implies taking a position on the original material (Hutcheon 92). In this sense, as Robert Stam aptly suggests, a reading “can also be a critique” of its source, that is, it can illuminate aspects of the original material that were not fully legible at the time of its creation or, conversely, recover the significance of elements already present through careful contextualization (63). Still, adaptation can also radicalize the original into contemporary sensibility. It may bring latent dimensions of a text into sharper focus and actualize narrative potentials not fully explored on the page, as though extracting a still-working mechanism, cleaning away the incrustations of time, and putting it back in motion in a contemporary form capable of casting new light on human experience.

Moving from this framework, the present thesis turns to the case of James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956). Although the novel has widely been discussed in relation to its thematic concerns – above all, its representation of homosexuality – its narrative architecture has not been fully explored in structural terms. This study argues that *Giovanni’s Room* may be understood as a latent Noir tragedy: a narrative whose ethical and formal configuration reveals a deep affinity with Noir sensibility and tragic structure, even if Baldwin’s handling of the material keeps the novel from becoming properly Noir. On this basis, the thesis develops an original screenplay that seeks to illuminate the novel’s form as Noir tragedy and to radicalize its mechanism within the sensibility of the present.

To develop this argument, the thesis is divided into three chapters. The first establishes the theoretical framework of Noir tragedy by defining the architecture of Noir and the dramaturgical structure of tragic plot. The second turns to *Giovanni’s*

Room, reading David's trajectory as a failed coming-of-age, uncovering its broader commentary on the failure of White America, and finally examining its deep contamination with Noir sensibility. The third presents *Bulldog in the Backyard* as an original adaptation that actualizes David's trajectory in a contemporary form, broadens its historical resonance, and fully realizes the latent Noir potential of Baldwin's novel as a tragically inflected Neo-Noir.

CHAPTER ONE

Noir Tragedy

Giovanni's Room opens on a scene of self-reflection. A solitary first-person narrator watches his image in the windowpane with a bottle beside him. Night is falling, the window's gleam is "darkening" — ahead is just "the most terrible morning" of the protagonist's life (GR 1). His reflection stares back at him with the familiar countenance of an ordinary white young man, and the memory of his ancestry comes back to him as a haunting thought: they crossed the ocean into the promise of America only to find themselves looking back into "a darker past", just as he himself did on the other side of the ocean (1). The seed is planted. The protagonist's physical reflection will be the starting point of his inward reflection unfolding throughout the novel: the sustained scrutiny of the path that has led him to this moment.

From its opening lines, Baldwin's novel brings into view a remarkable convergence of elements. Its retrospective first-person narration, its atmosphere of solitude and desperation, and above all its fixation on a past that burdens any possible horizon of futurity all evoke a recognizably Noir configuration. Yet, as the protagonist's extended self-reflection makes clear, this is also essentially the story of a fall, brought about by the protagonist's own actions over the course of a lifetime and marked by tragic consequences for those who happened to attach to him. At the same time, the protagonist's tragic parable is linked back to the larger story of his ancestry, accordingly turning the protagonist's reflection into a meditation on the White American character.

This convergence offers the point of departure for the present chapter. The argument developed in the following sections is that Noir and tragedy are not distinct critical categories but rather profoundly connected formal logics. To establish this claim, the first section traces the genealogy of Noir and defines the architecture relevant to this study, while the second clarifies the dramaturgical structure of tragic

plot. Together, these sections establish the category of Noir tragedy that will guide the reading of *Giovanni's Room* in the next chapter.

1.1 Noir Architecture

When four American crime thriller films reached France in the summer of 1946 after the five-year embargo of the Nazi Occupation, film critic Nino Frank immediately recognized them as the representatives of a new kind of crime film (Spicer 2). What impressed critics like Frank was the degree of subjective involvement that these films offered to the viewer, until then accustomed to the heavy exposition of the detective formula. Through the techniques of subjective camerawork and first-person voice over narration, the spectator was drawn into “the dynamics of violent death and dark mysteries” in a vicarious first-hand way, so that the traditional whodunit was transformed into what Frank called a “criminal adventure” (15). Since these films evoked the atmospheres – and were, in most cases, adaptations – of the hard-boiled fiction that in France circulated under the *série noire*, they came to be identified as *film Noir*. They were John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Edward Dmytryk’s *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944): the seminal films of Noir sensibility.

Rather than a production category, *film Noir* was born as a critical concept. It designated a group of American films released in the 1940s and early 1950s, emerging at the crossroads of the influences of German Expressionism, hard-boiled fiction and the disillusioned mood of war and post-war years in America. As Robert Arnett points out, the filmmakers themselves did not know they were producing *film Noir* at the time; however, the recurrence of certain formal and thematic features over time made possible the recognition of a distinct Noir sensibility (5). As a result, following Paul Schrader, *film Noir* came to identify retrospectively a specific period of Hollywood production, conventionally framed between *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958) (8–9).

Noir sensibility is not time-bound, though. As new generations of filmmakers came to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s, personalities such as William Friedkin, Paul Schrader himself, David Lynch, and Michael Mann among many others, projected the films of their youth onto contemporary forms. At the same time, the technical advancements achieved with color film stock, together with the progressive liberalization of screen violence in American cinema, opened the way to new possibilities for Noir representation. Thus, even though the production of Noir films was never really interrupted after 1958, Noir gradually ceased to denote only a historical cycle and came to inform later works self-consciously. As Todd Erickson puts it, the *film Noir* movement became the Neo-Noir genre (323).

Throughout its history, Noir has never been a homogeneous form, though. On the contrary, it has always comprised a plurality of cycles, which proliferated both in the *film Noir* period and under the Neo-Noir genre umbrella. In his seminal 1972 essay, Raymond Durnat identified ten broad types of *film Noir*, ranging from the private-eye cycle to gangster films to what he called “middle-class murderers,” a prolific category including works such as *Double Indemnity* and Fritz Lang’s *Scarlet Street* (1945) (46). More recently, Robert Arnett has extended this cyclical model in order to map Noir from the 1940s to the present, identifying time-related and theme-related cycles. All the same, this internal variety does not dissolve Noir into pure heterogeneity either. Across its cycles, there remains visible a recurrent configuration of formal and thematic features that constitutes the essence of what may be called a Noir architecture. It is this architecture that the following paragraphs will examine, feature by feature.

First of all, from a dramaturgical perspective, Noir is typically structured around what may be called a dangerous liaison. At the center of the story is a relationship between the main character and another character or force which, after initially promising some form of life improvement, ultimately leads to catastrophe. In its most classical formulation, this scheme takes the form of the *femme fatale* pattern, which Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush identify as the defining configuration of *film Noir*: a typically male protagonist living on the edge sees in a sexually charged relationship with a

woman his last chance at a better life, only to be betrayed and drawn into violence and death, culminating in self-destruction (109-110). Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) offers the canonical example of this structure. The protagonist Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) falls in love with Mrs. Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) and plots to remake his life with her by killing her husband and collecting his insurance money; instead, he ends up betrayed and shot to death by the woman he believed to be his lover, who manipulated him to get rid of her husband and take his money.

The nature of this destructive relationship is not fixed, though. As Arnett observes, the *femme fatale* configuration is a foundational Noir element not because it is immutable, but because it needs to be negotiated case by case in a range of variations (13). One alternative is the *homme fatale*, already visible in a *film Noir* such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), where tennis player Guy Haines (Farley Granger) is drawn into a spiral of violence by his encounter with the psychotic Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker). However, an even more revealing case is Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945), which shows that the destructive bond at the center of Noir stories may also take the form of an object or force rather than a person. Here, writer Don Birnam (Ray Milland) is driven to the verge of self-destruction by his attachment to the bottle – that is, by alcoholism – from which the love of his fiancée appears, at least provisionally, to rescue him. What emerges, then, is a variable pattern in which, however, the trajectory of deviation into which the protagonist is drawn remains constant.

Noir is fundamentally a story of violations, and this has both thematic and formal implications. Thematically, violation typically takes the form of crime, which is why Noir is commonly associated with crime cinema; yet, crime is only one possible expression of Noir violation. Indeed, there are significant Noir works like Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945) and Alexander Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) in which the central violation is not a breach of the law, but rather a moral transgression. In *The Lost Weekend*, as noted above, the protagonist yields to alcoholism and undergoes a moral descent into dissolution. In *Sweet Smell of Success*, by contrast,

ambitious press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) submits himself to the corrupt and pitiless logic of journalist J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster), tracing his moral descent in the pursuit of professional advancement. In any case, whether legal or moral, Noir violation tends to designate what J. P. Telotte calls a “field of deviation”, mirroring “the problems of modern America in particular and modern man in general” (12). In this sense, Noir may be understood as a mode of storytelling whose vocation is to explore the darker elements of the culture and society contemporary to the tellers (Arnett 9).

Beyond its thematic dimension, Noir deviation also affects the formal patterns of order through which stories – and especially films – are conventionally told. As noted above, Nino Frank already remarked the different experience that *film Noir* offered to spectators through devices such as voice-over narration and subjective camerawork; however, the impact of these techniques goes beyond immediacy of perception. What they register is a significant departure from the classical mode of Hollywood storytelling described by David Bordwell. Following the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel, this model privileges linear narratives governed by tight causality, unfolding within definite time-frames, set in intelligible worlds apparently presented from an objective perspective, and culminating in a strong final resolution in which order is restored and ambiguity dissipated (Bordwell 156-204). Noir unsettles this model. Not only does subjective camerawork undermine the effect of objectivity cultivated by classical Hollywood self-effacing form, but the opacity of the Noir world also contaminates narrative structure itself, crucially problematizing any easy or conventional resolution. In Noir, harmony is not truly recovered at the end and, even when some form of order appears to be re-established, it is often exposed as temporary, illusory, or already compromised.

With few exceptions, this tendency found fuller expression only in Neo-Noir. During the classical *film Noir* period, production constraints frequently required endings that gestured toward moral restoration in compliance with the corrective

pressure of the Hays Code¹. Yet, even within those constraints, Noir often left visible traces of unresolved disorder. For instance, in Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* – awarded Best Picture in 1946 – as Don Birnam appears at the end to seal his resolution to renounce alcohol by kissing his fiancée, the camera lingers on a bottle hanging from the window, still present though partially concealed from view. Only with the decline of the Production Code and the progressive liberalization of violence and pessimism on American screens after the 1950s did this formal attitude find fuller expression in Neo-Noir works such as Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014), among many others.

All these violations are crucial to the sense of anguish that typically characterizes Noir. In their seminal work on *film Noir*, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton describe Noir as a narrative device whose vocation is to create “a specific sense of malaise” (12). As they observe, this effect partly depends on the unusual unfolding of the action as a somewhat nightmarish brutality marked by a whole “panoply of cruelties and sufferings”, leaving behind a sense of opacity about motives (10-11). Nonetheless, this mixture of cruel violence and opaque behavior is inseparable from what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Noir architecture: the pervasive “air of moral crisis” that saturates its world (Booker 13).

The moral ambivalence of characters is the key feature of Noir sensibility. In Noir stories, good and evil “rub shoulders to the point of merging into one another”, resulting in a world deprived of the moral framework necessary for the emergence of the traditional hero (Borde and Chaumeton 12; Porfirio 83). As a result, the word

¹ The Motion Picture Production Code, popularly known as the Hays Code after its chief architect Will H. Hays, was a set of film censorship guidelines in force from 1930 to 1968. Strictly enforced from 1934 onward, it required films produced and exhibited in the United States to comply with its morally prescriptive standards. After gradually weakening in the 1950s and 1960s, it was replaced in 1968 by the film rating system still in use today.

“hero” seems hardly appropriate to describe Noir protagonists, who appear instead as unredeemed, unheroic characters, vulnerable to pressures beyond their control, whose losses and defeats accumulate as they “wearily [go] on living” (Porfirio 85). As noted above, this condition becomes fully apparent when they commit themselves to the Noir pattern by making what Arnett aptly calls a “noir decision”, that is, a choice to act by yielding to darker impulses, fully aware they are irreversibly crossing a line, though often not fully conscious of what that crossing will entail (10). What follows is invariably suffering not only for others, but for the protagonists themselves. Thus, as Borde and Chaumeton put it, the Noir heroes are essentially “[their] own executioner[s]”: figures driven into catastrophe by their own choices, made under the pressure of a morbid curiosity or an irresistible drive that leads them to touch the dark side of both their world and themselves (9).

Consequence and expression of this same irresistible curiosity is the typical mode of Noir narration — namely, the voice-over flashback narrative. The same morbid drive that leads characters to cross into the dark side of their world and of themselves later takes the form of what Andrew Spicer calls a “compulsive need to understand” the path that has brought them to the nadir of their existences (76). As a result, Noir protagonists often reconstruct the course of their own damnation, or that of others, in a retrospective effort both to justify to themselves their vulnerabilities and to appeal for some measure of sympathy or understanding from those who listen. As Maureen Turim observes, this is true of both the two basic forms that Noir narration tends to assume: the investigative and the confessional (172). In the former, it is the investigating character who drives the flashback structure through a desire to decipher reality and understand others, as in Robert Siodmak’s *The Killers* (1946). In the latter, instead, it is the compromised protagonists who drive the narration as a retrospective and introspective examination of the ways in which they were seduced and destroyed by their *liaison fatale*, as in *Double Indemnity* or Joel and Ethan Coen’s *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001).

One way or the other, this mode of narration perfectly reflects what Paul Schrader identifies as the overriding Noir theme: fixation on the past. As Schrader writes, “[t]he *noir* hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past” (11). To borrow Fitzgerald’s famous expression, many Noir characters are essentially “borne back ceaselessly into the past”, whether by haunting mistakes, unresolved losses, or a deeper inability to conceive a viable future. In this sense, Noir protagonists are fundamentally people with no future. Whatever haunts them, they appear increasingly prey to their ghosts, hostage to a perennial sense of loss and trapped in a pathological loneliness often shaded with despair — a condition that reveals Noir’s deep affinity with existentialist sensibility, as Robert Porfirio perceptively observed in his pioneering 1976 essay.

To sum up, then, Noir architecture is composed of a recurrent set of formal and thematic features. It is a story structured around a dangerous liaison and a path of violation, involving morally ambiguous characters and often marked by fixation with the past, significant violence, and uncertain resolution. Formally, it is articulated through a typically retrospective narration and a pervasive atmosphere of malaise. Across its many cycles and variations, these features constitute the enduring pattern of Noir sensibility.

1.2 Tragic Plot

As the former discussion has already suggested, Noir appears intrinsically as a tragic structure. Certainly, Noir can be called tragic in the loose sense that it tells lamentable stories; however, the crucial point is stronger than that. Noir tends to approximate tragedy in its structural architecture, while at the same time significantly darkening its traditional logic through moral ambiguity. In this sense, Noir may be understood as one of the characteristic tragic forms of contemporaneity. As Raymond Williams claims, in fact, “tragic experience...commonly attracts the fundamental beliefs and tensions of a period”, so that each historical age realizes its particular culture through the development of specific tragic forms (45). Following Telotte’s

insight on Noir as a “field of deviation”, Noir may be therefore considered as a distinctly modern way of reactivating tragic structure (12).

Tragic plot far exceeds the boundaries of dramatic representation, after all. As Northrop Frye argues, although tragedy was first theorized by Aristotle in the *Poetics* as a dramatic genre, it may also be recognized as one of the four fundamental *mythoi* or plots through which storytelling organizes experience: romance, comedy, satire and, precisely, tragedy (162). As these pregeneric categories inform narratives across media, tragedy is not confined to Greek drama or to later stage reinterpretations, but recurs as a structural logic across narrative forms of serious subject. From Choderlos de Laclos’s *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) to Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008), much modern drama, fiction, and cinema may be accordingly read as shaped by a tragic logic insofar as they reproduce the same essential pattern.

What matters for the present study, then, is not tragedy as a strictly historical genre, but tragedy as a recurring dramaturgical pattern. As Frye notes, following Aristotle, plot structure is the primary source of tragic effect (207). Likewise, in his genealogy of modern tragedy, Raymond Williams shows that, although tragedy is really “a series of experiences” shaped by its different authors and periods rather than a single monolithic fact, the essential dramaturgical features of tragic experience remain constant (46). The following pages therefore do not attempt a full history of tragedy, but rather isolate the structural architecture relevant to the present study, drawing on Aristotle and later critics such as Frye, Bradley, and Williams.

First and foremost, tragedy is the experience of a fall. In his study, Williams is extremely clear in identifying the “change from prosperity to affliction” as the essential feature of tragedy, traceable back to Aristotle’s account and constant across its later reinterpretations (Aristotle 45). As he shows, understandings of tragedy across the ages differ chiefly in relation to two variables: the ideal subject of the fall and its causal agent. In the context of Greek society, Aristotle conceived tragedy as the public representation (*mimesis*) of the downfall of mythic ruling families under the sign of a fateful Necessity, as exemplified by Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which recurs

throughout the *Poetics* as the model of tragic form (Aristotle 47-8; Williams 18). All the same, over time this exemplary character of the drama progressively shifted in favor of ordinary subjects and secularized dynamics. Shakespearian tragedy still largely centers on rulers, as in *Othello* or *Hamlet*, but the rise of bourgeois society increasingly displaced attention onto common individuals, culminating in Arthur Miller's energetic defense of the common man as a proper tragic subject, such as in his *Death of a Salesman* (Williams 18-84).

The question of the causal agent is worth dwelling on in detail, since it closely depends on the interpretation of Aristotle's concept of *hamartía*. According to Aristotle, "it is imperative that a fine plot-structure...involve a change from prosperity to affliction...caused not by wickedness but by a great [*hamartía*] on the part of the sort of agent stipulated" (45). However, the interpretation of *hamartía* has been highly controversial. While the root *hamart-* unequivocally suggests failure, critics have long diverged on the moral implications of that error, resulting in two major traditions of interpretation: moral fault and error committed in ignorance (Young 35).

Hamartía as moral fault basically entails a direct responsibility. In this view, the fate of the tragic protagonist is determined by what is commonly known as a tragic flaw: an excessive quality that enables the character to rise, but that, once carried beyond a moral line, also leads to destruction (Young 37-38; Dancyger and Rush 233). Shakespeare's *Macbeth* offers one of the canonical examples. His ambition first secures distinction and honor in the service of the king, but it will later drive him to murder in the attempt to seize the crown for himself. As Williams aptly points out, however, this interpretation bears the mark of the Christian tradition, since it reads failure as sin and accordingly construes suffering as the price for the violation of a moral law (30-32). In this sense, *hamartía* as moral fault tends to transform tragic plot into the demonstration of a moral scheme of poetic justice, governed by the reassuring logic that the wicked will pay and the good will be rewarded — a logic only partially compatible with tragic experience.

The broader interpretation of *hamartía* as a blind action that fatefully determines the hero's fall better aligns with the whole architecture of tragic experience. As Frye observes, in fact, every theory of tragedy that supposes a moral explanation must confront the problem of innocent sufferers (211). From Sophocles's *Antigone* to Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the tragic repertoire offers many examples of figures of exemplary virtue who nonetheless fall into adversity; yet, if *hamartía* is understood solely as moral fault, such cases get difficult to account for. *Antigone*, for instance, violates King Creon's law, but only because she clings to her duty to give her brother Polynices's corpse decent burial. Even more clearly, Cordelia simply refuses to flatter her father as both her elder sisters have done, and is repaid instead with disowning and banishment. None of these characters commits an act that is morally wrong in any absolute terms; however, both perform actions that unleash chains of events leading both themselves and others into death and suffering following a distinctly tragic logic whereby consequences emerge as causally inevitable and proportionally incongruous (55). What matters, then, is not moral guilt in any narrow sense, but the fatal blindness constitutive of human action itself: the fact that a choice may be subjectively justified and yet objectively disastrous in its consequences. Therefore, it is in this broader sense that *hamartía* will be understood here: not as sin, but as fatal error.

Hamartía as fatal error also helps illuminate the particular logic of tragic suffering, which is the other fundamental component of tragic experience along with reversal of fortune. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle initially describes suffering simply as a "destructive or painful action" (43); however, later in the text, he specifies that tragedy specifically entails the kind of suffering that "befalls bonded relations" (46). This was, in fact, the form best suited to arouse the particular combination of pity and fear (*eleos kai phobos*) that every aspect of his theory of tragedy was designed to produce — pity for characters suffering an undeserved destiny, and fear that the same might happen to us (Jarvie 165). Nonetheless, this feature has remained remarkably constant across the history of tragic experience (Williams 44-55). No tragic plot of misfortune affects only

the protagonist: suffering always radiates outward, striking those bound to the hero by kinship, loyalty, or love. What's more, as A. C. Bradley observes, suffering becomes properly tragic only when it arises "in great part from human agency, and in some degree from the agency of the sufferer" himself (81). Thus, tragic plot evidently gives shape to one of the deepest conditions of human existence: that actions undertaken from a limited and subjective point of view may generate destructive consequences not only for the agents themselves but also for those around them, in a process at once causally inevitable and yet only gradually revealed.

Tragic suffering culminates in the destruction of the hero. Oedipus blinds himself and submits to exile, Shakespeare's tragic protagonists invariably die, Miller's Willy Loman commits suicide. Across its historical forms, as Williams notes, tragedy remains quintessentially "an action in which the hero is irreversibly destroyed" (54). Yet, it would be reductive to think of tragic heroes as undergoing a process of mere annihilation. Tragic protagonists, indeed, cannot reach the nadir of their fall without passing through a moment of belated recognition (*anagnorisis*), that is, the painful apprehension of the circumstances that have determined their reversal of fortune (Aristotle 43). As Frye observes, the force of this moment lies not simply in the hero's realization of what has happened to them and the others, but in seeing too late the life that their own choices have made impossible (212). In other words, recognition is the irreversible awareness of the price generated by their actions.

The consequence and culmination of this awareness is the hero's destruction, which comes as the ultimate restoration of order in the tragic world. Tragic experience would be incomplete, in fact, unless life returned at the end to reaffirm its imperturbable pace. Although commonly interpreted as mere resolution, according to Williams, this is perhaps the deepest tragic experience: not just the fact that life goes on even after so much suffering and death, but rather that it goes on *through* them and, in a way, *because* of them (56). The hero's destruction can thus be understood not just as annihilation, but as part of a broader regenerative movement through which an old order yields to a new one, releasing energy through an action marked by death and suffering (44). In

this sense, tragic destruction is less an ending than an irreversible transformation within the ongoing flow of life.

In sum, tragic plot gives form to the fundamental experience of human frailty. A fatal error sets in motion a fall from prosperity to affliction, which unfolds into a causal chain of suffering extending beyond the protagonist, culminates in belated recognition and destruction, and finally yields to the reconstitution of a larger order. It is precisely this movement – from blindness to suffering, from suffering to recognition, and from recognition to irreversible transformation – that characterizes tragic plot as a recurring logic across forms. At this point, its affinity with Noir should be evident: the protagonist's arc as a blind self-execution, the noir decision as fatal error, and the radiating consequences of suffering all testify to Noir's intrinsic kinship with the tragic logic. Where these two formal patterns converge, the category of Noir tragedy emerges: a narrative structure in which Noir sensibility and tragic architecture coalesce in the representation of a morally ambiguous fall.

CHAPTER TWO

Giovanni's Room

As this chapter will show, *Giovanni's Room* is a latent Noir tragedy. David's retrospective narration of his lifelong fall into damnation, culminating in his indirect responsibility for Giovanni's death sentence, clearly unfolds according to a tragic logic; however, its relation to Noir is less straightforward. Although the novel exhibits a recognizably Noir ethical architecture and many of its structural features can be understood in Noir terms, Baldwin makes of these formal elements a different kind of story: one that remains adjacent to Noir without being fully containable within its form. To develop this claim, the chapter proceeds in three steps. The first section illuminates the novel's dramaturgical structure by reading David's trajectory as a failed coming-of-age tale. The second shows how that trajectory becomes a broader commentary on the failure of White America. The third investigates the Noir implications of the story, analyzing both the aspects that align it with Noir sensibility and those that keep it from coinciding fully with Noir form.

2.1 A Failed Coming-of-age

Baldwin's novel can be understood as structured around two intertwined storylines. On the one hand, there is the plot line concerning David's relationship with Giovanni and his choice between him and "[his] girl" Hella (GR 4). On the other, there is David's character layer, unfolding as a coming-of-age destined to fail from the outset. On the surface, both lines hinge on David's negotiation of his sexual identity throughout the story; more precisely, however, David's internal conflict between homosexual desire and heterosexual identity is articulated through different conflicts within each layer.

On the plot line, the values in play are Giovanni's love as opposed to the safety represented by David's relationship with Hella. They are first brought explicitly into

focus by Jacques, the half Belgian, half American aging gay man with whom David occasionally idles in the nightlife of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. On the way to Giovanni's room, on the morning after their first meeting at Guillaume's bar, Jacques articulates David's fear both to David himself and to the reader, warning him that he and Giovanni may have the best time of their lives if David will "love [Giovanni] and let him love [him]" and "if [he] will *only* not play it safe" (57; italics in original). As David Leeming notes, love is central to Baldwin's vision as an all-encompassing force, crossing sexual, social, political and even economic barriers (*Biography* 123). However, precisely for this reason, love stands in strict opposition to safety, since it requires the subjects involved to strip themselves of all disguises and social taboos: in a word, it entails "the risk of commitment" (123). By contrast, safety is the shelter of "relationships that do not touch the soul" (124). It belongs to those bonds that are essentially just "something to be moored to", as David himself puts it, and to which he will cling with tragic consequences (*GR* 5).

The plot line is set in motion by David's encounter with Giovanni. Giovanni's attraction to David shakes his relatively calm existence forcing him to confront his own homosexual desire. However, as David comes to recognize his love for Giovanni, he refuses it, thereby setting Giovanni on a path of erasure through his own safe commitment with Hella. By abandoning Giovanni at the nadir of the narrative, David commits the story to its final tragic stretch, which culminates in his losing both Giovanni's love and Hella's promise of safety. On this line, therefore, love aligns with David's homosexual desire, while safety names the heterosexual identity to which he tries to anchor himself. In this sense, as Leeming observes, Giovanni clearly turns out to be the "vehicle of the Baldwin Word", functioning as the primary emissary of love in the narrative (*Biography* 123).

By the same token, the character layer is governed by a different but related conflict — namely, between innocence and freedom. In this case, these are not merely abstract concepts, but the deepest values of the American Dream, and more specifically the opposite poles of what Baldwin refers to as the "American Dilemma" at the heart of

the national character (Leeming, "Interview" 49). Because of the historical presence of Native Americans and Black Americans, in fact, Baldwin argues that White Americans have borne the burden of their own troubles by always finding "someone or something to pay their dues for them" (50). This results in a pathological "inability to perceive the reality of others", which Baldwin identifies as the original sin of the American character (49). This "failure to see" is what Baldwin means by innocence (50). A significant excerpt of the interview that Baldwin gave on the subject is worth quoting extensively to illuminate the relation between innocence and freedom.

DL: So when you now speak of freedom...

JB: I mean the end of innocence. The end of innocence means you've finally entered the picture. And it means you'll accept consequences too.

DL: By innocence, then, you mean the false objectivity that gives you the illusion that you can stand outside of something and describe it accurately without touching it, without paying your dues.

[...]

JB: Of course. It's the "general failure" — the failure to touch, to see. (54)

Freedom and innocence thus emerge as the antithetical poles of American identity. Americans are born into innocence, but risk remaining trapped within it unless they grow beyond it, discover who they are and begin truly to live — that is, unless they embrace freedom. By contrast, the price for clinging to innocence is, in Baldwin's words, "to avoid the Self, to avoid "life"", and thereby to be doomed by that avoidance, as David's story so tragically exemplifies (51). As becomes clear, therefore, innocence mirrors safety in what Leeming calls the "vacuum of noninvolvement", while freedom reflects love as the acceptance of the "risk of commitment" (*Biography* 123). In sum, love and freedom, on the one hand, and safety and innocence, on the other, are the terms through which the conflict between homosexuality and heterosexuality in David's interiority is articulated.

The character layer negotiates this conflict throughout David's life, unfolding as a failed coming-of-age with tragic consequences. David's story begins when he is a boy in Brooklyn and has his first sexual encounter with his then best friend Joey, which opens the conflict that will structure his life thereafter: between the "monstrous" desire he feels and the manhood he is afraid to lose because of it (GR 9). The retrospective account of the episode makes its significance unmistakable. Looking back from the abyss of his later life, David recognizes what occurred with Joey as an "act of love" (8). However, his immediate reaction at the time was terror that he "would lose [his] manhood" (9). Having overheard his father's wish that he should "be a man" and filtering it through a perceived social pressure about homosexuality, David instantly concludes that his identity cannot coexist with his desire (15). His response is therefore a mechanism of inward denial through outward erasure: he denies what Joey awakens in him by expelling Joey from his life, in much the same way Giovanni will be years later.

David's dissociation between desire and identity is the tragic engine of his fall. The point is not simply that he refuses the homosexual desire he experiences, but that he does so in terror that that desire would define his identity for the rest of his life. On the basis of the social and historical categories he has inherited, he associates the manhood his father calls him to embody with heterosexual identity, radically opposing to it a homosexual identity perceived as the antithesis of masculinity. As a result, what structures David's interiority is not merely a refusal of homosexuality, but a perceived fracture between his desire and his own identity — between experience and social classification.

The episode with Joey is the blueprint of David's trajectory. In David's own words, it remained "at the bottom of [his] mind...as a decomposing corpse", affecting – if not altogether blocking – his passage into adulthood (16). In the attempt to avoid both his father's and his own questions about himself, in fact, David flees to Paris, desperately clinging to what Jacques later would call his "immaculate manhood" (30). There, however, he meets the Italian barman Giovanni, whose love comes as David's life

chance to grow beyond innocence and embrace freedom. Again, the scene of their first meeting at Guillaume's bar is worth examining in detail.

Perfectly mirroring the encounter with Joey, attraction gives way to fear, and fear once again seeks release through denial. After behaving spontaneously at first, David feels a "ferocious excitement" growing inside him as he earns Giovanni's attention, and all of a sudden becomes aware that he is "horribly glad" that Hella – whom he nonetheless keeps referring to as his girl – is away (42). Even so, as soon as he realizes that his interaction with Giovanni exists in the world, where it can be watched and judged by others, he turns afraid: his reactions are then that "[he] had better get drunk" and the impulse to walk out and pick up a girl (41).

This pattern shows two things. On the one hand, David's realization that "now [he] was in the zoo, and they were watching" confirms that his discomfort with homosexual desire is bound to a perceived social pressure (38). On the other, even more importantly, his impulse to pick up a girl demonstrates that heterosexuality for him is nothing more than a performance of manhood: an identity to perform in order to erase the "insistent possibilities" materialized by his own desire (42). Later in the story, when he actually picks up an American girl named Sue and begins to enact Giovanni's erasure, he speaks explicitly of his "performance with Sue" as "a job of work...which it [is] necessary to do in an unforgettable manner" (100). This pattern, in other words, confirms that heterosexuality functions for David not as an opposing desire, but as the identity he performs in order to erase his homosexual desire.

Giovanni will become the tragic receptacle for David's existential troubles. As David moves into Giovanni's room after being evicted, he yields to his love for a while, although maintaining a very ambiguous posture to him all the time. Yet the very moment he realizes that he is truly in love with Giovanni, a hatred is born in David that is destined to poison their lives and determine their tragic fall. David's own words are again revealing. His precise realization is that "the beast which Giovanni had awakened in [him] would never go to sleep again", and this thought generates a hatred which is "as powerful as [his] love and...nourished by the same roots" (84). What

emerges, then, is that Giovanni is loved and will be destroyed by David as the bearer of his own possibility of living his homosexual desire. However much he really loves Giovanni, David proves unable to separate the real man from what he represents to him, so that, as Leeming aptly puts it, Giovanni comes to function as “the sacrificial victim of David’s inability to accept the...touch of love”: the horrendous price for the preservation of David’s blind innocence (Leeming, *Biography* 125).

The result of David’s innocence is a general catastrophe. Because of his involvement with David, Giovanni loses his job due to Guillaume’s jealousy; yet, despite Giovanni’s being at his most vulnerable, David abandons him as Hella returns to Paris. As a result, Giovanni’s broken heart and destitution lead him to yield to Jacques’s lascivious attentions first and eventually to Guillaume’s himself, whom he ends up killing. David’s indirect responsibility for Giovanni’s fate drives him, in turn, to seal himself to Hella, who eventually leaves him alone in the house in the south of France to which he has fled once again, and from which he recalls the whole path of damnation his own actions have set in motion. In other words, David’s choice to refuse his call to freedom and cling instead to innocence produces a horrendously expensive tragedy: the loving and exposed Giovanni loses his life, the enamored Hella loses her happiness, and David is condemned to lifelong damnation.

David’s coming-of-age ends in failure. David does not fulfill the promise of freedom first offered by Joey and later by Giovanni, but even worse his refusal of love coincides with the somewhat childish erasure of its emissaries. In this sense, David’s final scene of recognition is worth quoting in full.

And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. [...] It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

I long to make this prophecy come true. I long to crack that mirror and be free. (168)

On the threshold of his living hell, what comes to David's mind is the wish to grow up. The reference to the famous passage from Corinthians 13:11 is crucial. Haunted by his identification with Giovanni in his cell, David looks back and realizes that he never truly moved beyond that moment in Joey's bed, when he decided to seal both the world and his true Self out of his life. He finally recognizes himself as trapped in time, trapped in what Baldwin identifies as an all-American "retarded adolescence", and wishes that he could still be free (Leeming, "Interview" 50). The narrative then comes full circle, confirming David's failure to step into adulthood.

2.2 The Failure of White America

David's failed coming-of-age reveals itself as a broader tragedy of the American character. Structurally, David's fatal error of abandoning Giovanni's love in favor of Hella clearly determines the fall of the entire triangle into adversity, with horrible suffering for all and death for the innocent figure of Giovanni. Thematically, though, the values governing David's character layer, together with the European backdrop of the story, establish a direct link to the literature of Henry James and thereby turn David's tragedy into a broader commentary on the failure of White America.

Broadly speaking, the Jamesian contribution is crucial to Baldwin's work. Baldwin's appreciation for, and even indebtedness to, James's work is well documented. As he tells Leeming, when he moved to France in order to discover who he was, James became "the closest thing to a model [he] could find", since the American-turned-British author's expatriate experience offered a valuable example of what it meant to step out of the American trap and look at it from the outside ("Interview" 56). At the same time, Baldwin repeatedly acknowledged the important role that James's literary work played in his formation as a writer. In particular, he recalls that it was only after becoming familiar with James's narrative techniques of a center of consciousness and multiple reflectors that he could envision novels such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Another Country* (1962) (Field 18). Finally, Baldwin and James also share a

striking affinity of subject. In both, indeed, characters often find themselves abroad, at a distance from America that becomes a privileged site of revelation, where the problems of the American Dilemma can be glimpsed and, at times, faced (Leeming, "Interview").

In particular, *Giovanni's Room* is certainly the most Jamesian of Baldwin's novels. As Baldwin himself observes, much as James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) is really about Lambert Strether rather than Chad Newsome, *Giovanni's Room* is about its narrator David rather than its title character Giovanni (Leeming, "Interview" 55). Moreover, in both cases the narrative centers on an American consciousness abroad, exposed to a world that reveals the limits of its original cultural assumptions. In this sense, David's and Strether's trajectories alike hinge on a movement from innocence toward freedom in Baldwin's terms, although with opposite outcomes: Strether ultimately succeeds in relinquishing his innocence, while David fails to do so. Still, for both characters the European stay becomes the site where their Americanness is revealed for what it is.

Significantly, David is repeatedly identified as the American throughout his Parisian stay, and nearly all of his conversations with Giovanni are about Americanness. From their first meeting at Guillaume's bar, where their exchange already gravitates toward American exceptionalism, Giovanni repeatedly insists that "[he doesn't] understand Americans at all" (GR 78). Whenever he is displeased with David, he invokes his Americanness – "*vrai américain*" (89), "*mon cher Américain*" (117), "American politeness" (117); whenever he is not, David is "not American at all" (89). On the other hand, David himself senses that all Americans share some common quality and, although he cannot fully name it, knows that he shares it too (89). After abandoning Giovanni, he tries to use that same mysterious Americanness to explain Giovanni's attraction to him — as he miserably tells Hella, "I am an American...[Giovanni] thinks that I am rich" (135). But Jacques too attributes David's abandonment of Giovanni to his Americanness (127). Finally, most revealing of all, when Hella leaves David at the end of the story, her verdict is that "Americans should never come to Europe...[as] it means they never can be happy again" (165).

Giovanni's Room thus configures itself as a modern parable of White America's failure. As Leeming observes, Baldwin's past as a preacher surfaces in both his fictional and essayistic production as they function as a "vehicle for prophesying and witnessing" his philosophy of life (*Biography* 122). In this sense, his novelistic work was especially dear to Baldwin, in that it allowed him to portray with particular intensity characters as "tortured perpetrators or victims of [the] personal limitations and larger social problems" that concerned him the most (122). Now, the "failure to see" which Baldwin calls innocence was central to him because of its obvious racial inflection (Leeming, "Interview" 50). In *Giovanni's Room*, however, he abstracts that failure from the narrow context of American racism and turns it into a larger parable of the refusal of love through the eyes of a White American character, thereby speaking more broadly of America to America (Leeming, *Biography* 123). The story of David's self-denial through sexual dishonesty with both Giovanni and Hella thus becomes the tragic representation of the wider failure of White America: its incapacity to see the Other within and without itself and bear its existence, remaining accordingly condemned to insincere relationships and bound to tragic failure.

2.3 Noir Contamination

As the convergence of many of its elements suggests, *Giovanni's Room* has a strong Noir potential. It is not just that David's retrospective narration of his fall clearly resonates with the confessional mode of Noir; rather, the novel's very structural configuration and ethical material are deeply attuned to Noir sensibility. Even Baldwin's conception of fiction as a way of exploring social problems through characters who are either "tortured perpetrators or victims" shows a clear affinity with both Telotte's "field of deviation" and the typically tormented Noir character (Leeming, *Biography* 122; Telotte 12). Nonetheless, to define *Giovanni's Room* as Noir tout court would be inexact, since the decisive factor lies in the different emphasis Baldwin gives to his material.

David's story certainly bears a strong affinity to Noir. There is no doubt that David fits the type of the morally ambiguous Noir protagonist haunted by his past, who perpetrates significant violence – cold, in this case, but no less cruel – producing an increasing sense of malaise as the story unfolds. The list of episodes that challenge the reader's sympathy for David is long, and it certainly escalates from the moment he starts moving toward his fatal choice of abandoning Giovanni after learning of Hella's imminent return. All the same, Baldwin's novel resists identification as fully Noir on two major pressure points: the *liaison fatale* pattern, and the noir decision with its consequent trajectory of deviation. It is on these two points that the generic tension of *Giovanni's Room* becomes most visible.

First of all, the dangerous liaison at the heart of the story is not immediately recognizable. At first sight, David's relationship with Giovanni appears to be the obvious candidate, simply because it occupies the center of the narrative; yet, this would be misleading. As noted above, the Noir dangerous liaison is a relationship that, while initially promising some form of life improvement, ultimately leads the main character to catastrophe through a trajectory of deviation. Now, certainly the central triangle of *Giovanni's Room* ends in catastrophe, but the other two elements are more problematic.

If we assume that David is the protagonist, as he clearly must be, then his relationship with Giovanni should be the liaison in question. Yet, as noted above, although in some sense excited by Giovanni's presence, David does resist him from the beginning, and his fear only deepens as the relationship develops. As David himself puts it, during the months they spend together, "another [him] sat in [his] belly cold with terror over the question of [his] life" (GR 83). Therefore, it appears difficult to assert that Giovanni offers David any definite form of life improvement. Rather, the relation appears from the start as a threat to the precarious identity David is trying to preserve.

By contrast, if Giovanni were considered as the central character of the line, the pattern would seem to fit much more closely. From his point of view, David does

indeed promise him a serious improvement in his life conditions. In flight from a tragic marriage in Italy where his newborn child was born dead, Giovanni is essentially drifting at the mercy of Guillaume when David walks into his bar, so that his love for David comes blindly to be his anchor to life. In this light, Giovanni's liaison with David would seem to reproduce almost exactly the *homme fatale* pattern, if it were not for the fact that David does not directly deviate Giovanni's trajectory in a properly Noir sense. Giovanni kills Guillaume, but the event occurs too late in the narrative and too indirectly from David's action to function as the decisive Noir deviation. On top of all, Giovanni is clearly not the protagonist.

The key to the problem lies actually in David's relationship with his Self, which leads us directly to the character layer. In fact, if we shift our attention to David's coming-of-age line, the missing element of life improvement suddenly falls into place. After the episode with Joey, David persuades himself that clinging to his innocence "by not looking at the universe, by not looking at [himself]" will save him; however, it is precisely this idea that deviates his path and leads him to catastrophe (GR 20). Giovanni sees this clearly when, in the scene of the abandonment, he identifies David's true problem as "lov[ing] [his] purity...want[ing] to be *clean*" (141; italics in the text). Even more significantly, in his final recognition before the mirror, David seems at last to admit to himself that it was his own compulsive attachment to innocence that ruined him. After staring at his nakedness, in fact, he starts dressing again driven by the thought that he must "cover that nakedness which [he] must hold sacred, though it be never so vile" (169).

This perspective also clarifies the problem of the noir decision. If David's attachment to his innocence is the true engine of his path of deviation, then the question becomes what David's violation actually is. Again, at first sight, David's abandonment of Giovanni seems the obvious answer. After all, this scene certainly functions as the fatal error of David's tragedy, as Baldwin himself confirms when he says that "the moment he walks out of that room he is condemned to it forever" (Leeming, "Interview" 55). Nonetheless, the scene occurs too late to be considered as

the proper noir decision. As noted above, in fact, the noir decision typically opens the trajectory of deviation and exposes its consequences, while David's abandonment of Giovanni arrives only at the end of his experience of cohabitation with him.

The stronger candidate is therefore David's decision to move into Giovanni's room. In more than one passage, textual evidence proves that David perceived that moment as a "mistake" (GR 47). As Giovanni locks the door behind them, David is aware that "if [he does] not open the door at once and get out of [there], [he is] lost" (64). Moreover, during his sexual encounter with Sue, long before abandoning Giovanni, David states that "what [he] did with Giovanni could not possibly be more immoral than [betraying Giovanni with Sue]" (99). Moving in with Giovanni therefore seems to function as the decisive violation: a deviation from David's safe morality but also, it must be remembered, from the ordinary social morality of 1956. As David reminds Giovanni, in fact, homosexuality was a crime in the United States at the time, and so it would remain in many states until the 1970s (81). Finally, Giovanni's fall actually begins earlier than David's abandonment, when Guillaume fires him out of jealousy over his relationship with David — an event David seems to register as linked to his own violation as, on being told by Giovanni, he says "the walls of the room were closing in on [him]" (105).

Still, the different emphasis Baldwin lays on these elements prevents *Giovanni's Room* from being a proper Noir. David's moving in with Giovanni certainly commits him to a path of deviation that culminates in catastrophe for all the characters entangled in David's triangle. Yet, the chain of consequences following from David's violation is presented more through narrative mediation than through direct externalization. Until his fatal decision to abandon Giovanni, David passes through the story without any strong sense of external threat looming over him as a direct consequence of his violation. Partly, this is due to the fact that it is Giovanni the most exposed character, and therefore the one who most visibly suffers consequences; nonetheless, this is also because David's destructive engine is essentially internal. Throughout the story he is under constant psychological pressure, but the

retrospective mode of narration partially attenuates that pressure for the reader. As a result, the novel appears less as a tragically inflected Noir than as a tragedy deeply contaminated by Noir sensibility.

One way or the other, *Giovanni's Room* does fulfill one of most peculiar Noir traits: the uncertain resolution. After Hella leaves him, having understood both David's homosexuality and what must have occurred with Giovanni, David is left alone in the house in the south of France, where he recalls the whole path of damnation that has led him there. In the final page of the novel, as he heads toward the bus stop under "the dreadful weight of hope" for his future, he tears Jacques's still-unread message about Giovanni's execution into pieces — but "the wind blows some of them back on [him]" (169). David may walk away from the catastrophe, but the catastrophe will haunt him for the rest of his life. He may hope to be through with his past, but the past will never be through with him.

CHAPTER THREE

Bulldog in the Backyard

The original screenplay analyzed in this chapter is not merely an adaptation of Baldwin's novel, but a substantial reworking of its material in a contemporary context. David is no longer a young American drifter in 1950s Paris who moves into Giovanni's room after being evicted and eventually abandons him in flight from the issue of his sexual identity. Nor is Giovanni still the young Italian emissary of love who falls for David and, out of desperation, murders Guillaume and ends up sentenced to death. Hella is no longer the frivolous American woman who wants David only to "let [her] be a woman" and put an end to her drifting, nor is Jacques the contemptible aging gay man who externalizes David's states of mind (GR 161).

In *Bulldog in the Backyard*, the characters' trajectories are colder, and less clear-cut. The protagonist, David Welland, is an American businessman sent to contemporary Rome to supervise a multimillion dollar joint venture for the redevelopment of a large public area. During his stay, he meets two business-adjacent figures who will shape his path: Hella Moore and, above all, Steve Cohen. Steve – a reinterpretation of Jacques – seduces David into the logic of power through social access and extractive business and, at the climax of David's initiation, catalyzes his meeting with Nicola, the actualized counterpart of Giovanni. Nicola, an Italian barman turned hustler in order to pay his rent, moves into David's apartment after being evicted and catalyzes David's encounter with the other side of power and his own facade of invulnerability. In the end, what Nicola reveals becomes unbearable to David. He therefore rejects both Nicola's truth and Nicola himself, retreating into Hella's sphere, redirecting his investment toward the private acquisition of a decaying historic complex brokered by Steve, and indirectly determining Nicola's death of drug overdose.

If, in Baldwin's terms, *Giovanni's Room* is the tragedy of failed innocence, *Bulldog in the Backyard* is the tragedy of failed responsibility. Baldwin's novel stages the failure of

innocence through the conflict of sexual identity, turning a Noir-inflected story into a modern parable of the failure of the American character — and of White America in particular. This adaptation, by contrast, stages the failure of responsibility through the dimensions of business, public housing, and cohabitation, taking the form of a fully realized Neo-Noir with tragic inflections and offering the portrait of an American failure with specific resonances in the contemporary world.

To develop this claim, the chapter proceeds in three steps. The first section illuminates the adaptation's structure through its updated conflict of values. The second uses that structure to examine the story's broader historical resonance. The third shows how this version overcomes the structural dynamics that kept Baldwin's novel at a distance from proper Noir, thus realizing its material as a tragically inflected Neo-Noir story.

3.1. A Matter of Responsibility

Like Baldwin's novel, *Bulldog in the Backyard* is structured around two intertwined storylines, but with a shift in emphasis. As noted above, *Giovanni's Room* negotiates David's sexual identity through both its plot and character lines, nearly fusing them in the same material. *Bulldog in the Backyard*, by contrast, separates the two lines into distinct narrative strands and rethinks their conflicts, while preserving the reciprocal mirroring of both the values in play and the major structural hinges. On the one hand, there is the plot line following David's business in Rome and his choice between the public redevelopment of the Ostiense old general market complex and the private acquisition of the Nardi-Ruini complex. On the other, there is David's experience of cohabitation with Nicola and his internal negotiation with the ethics of invulnerability inherited from his father.

David's initial scene with his father Thomas is crucial to the seeding of both lines. Thomas Welland is the bearer of the doctrine of responsibility and invulnerability that David absorbs and that the script will test throughout. Although presented as a business-inflected ideology from the outset, Thomas's dogma ultimately reveals itself

to be the emotional synthesis of a trauma buried in his and David's past in San Francisco — presumably the loss of David's mother, as David's dream in scene #77 suggests. Along with this original wound, David inherits also Thomas's lesson, so that by his thirties he has become a split agent of his father's ethic in business as well as in life, with a whiskey bottle frequently by his side.

On the plot line, David's reading of Thomas's doctrine of responsibility translates into procedures and public return as opposed to what Steve calls the "power of world-making" (BB 43)². While David arrives in Rome armored in the orthodoxy of responsible business with which his boss Mr. Roy has entrusted him, Steve embodies its most radical alternative. Not only does he possess the social access and command which David lacks despite his official authority, but he also translates that lifestyle into a reckless form of extractive business that, although never openly disqualifying the Ostiense project, cannot tolerate its procedural slowness and publicly mediated return. Dissatisfied with his actual powerlessness, David is seduced into Steve's world from their first dinner at Pierluigi's, setting himself on a path of initiation to Steve's style. Attracted by Steve's unapologetic appetite and power, David eventually comes to sabotage the joint venture and redirect Mr. Roy's money toward the Nardi-Ruini deal, thereby refusing responsibility both for his previous commitment and for the consequences of his actions.

The refusal of responsibility is already present in embryo in *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin's David repeatedly fails to assume responsibility for his own behavior, and once Hella's letter announces her return to Paris, this pattern becomes especially apparent. Rather than facing his internal questions and taking some kind of action with Giovanni, David feels relieved that "the necessity for decision had been taken from [his] hands" (GR 94). Perversely, the same expression returns shortly afterward, when he learns that Giovanni has been fired because of him and, instead of taking care of Giovanni, resigns himself to the path to ruin on which he has set them both as the sole

² Every quotation from the adaptation's text refers to the version included in the appendix.

possible outcome of events. Even in the following days, when another choice would still be possible, his thought remains “how nice it would be if Jacques [took Giovanni] off [his] hands” (115). Responsibility, in other words, is already the tragic root of David’s fate in Baldwin’s novel.

The theoretical germ of this pattern lies in Baldwin’s essay “A Question of Identity”, published in 1954 in the *Partisan Review*. The piece, which Leeming not by chance describes as “the most Jamesian of Baldwin’s essays”, addresses in essayistic terms what *Giovanni’s Room* explores fictionally: the destructive consequences of American innocence (*Biography* 104). Yet, while, as previously noted, Baldwin identifies innocence and freedom as the broad antithetical poles of American identity, in this essay he reformulates the same tension in the specific context of American experience abroad through the pair power / responsibility. The key passage is worth quoting in full.

The American [traveler] lives here, then, in a kind of social limbo. He is allowed, and he gratefully embraces irresponsibility; and, at the same time, since he is an American, he is invested with power, whether or not he likes it, however he may choose to confirm or deny it. [...] This is the “catch”, for the American, in the Paris freedom: that he becomes here a kind of revenant to Europe, the future of which continent, it may be, is in his hands. (Baldwin, *Essays* 94)

Traveling abroad per se does not equate with stepping out of American innocence. On the contrary, the freedom from the conditioning of American identity that travelers encounter abroad may itself become a temptation into power, placing them in a potentially irresponsible position toward both the foreign country and themselves. This condition can become so unbearable that, as Baldwin remarks, they begin to long once more for “the prison of home...where questions are not asked” (95). In such a case, even though travelers may claim that their stay abroad has “prepared [them]...to

embrace [their] Responsibilities", their experience does not function as a step toward freedom, but merely as a refashioning of innocence (96). In the face of the traveler's "monumental aversion to experience", in fact, responsibility itself shrinks, in Baldwin's words, to the dimensions of a "new, and rather sinister, frivolity" (96).

This is precisely what lies at the heart of *Bulldog in the Backyard*. Steve's influence on David is the temptation into power that makes him irresponsible in his business as much as in his private life, only for him later to retreat into a concept of responsibility that is really just a sinister frivolity. When David finds himself forced to choose between the two deals, in fact, David calls his father and confesses that he has "betrayed [his] responsibilities" to Mr. Roy's mandate; however, Thomas clarifies that, in business, responsibility ultimately coincides with predation, thereby determining David's final abandonment of the public redevelopment project (BB 91). In this sense, while in *Giovanni's Room* responsibilities are not assumed because David is too busy clinging to innocence, *Bulldog in the Backyard* radicalizes the pattern: here David ultimately embraces responsibility, but only after the concept has been emptied of any ethical substance.

Responsibility has also a private declination in David's story, though. As a gift earned by David's rash commitment to the Nardi-Ruini deal, Steve introduces him to the infra-world of Rome's night hustlers, where David comes in touch with Nicola and, through him, with the other side of Steve's world. Nicola is the exposed element of the equation — the character in whom plot and character lines converge. Unlike Giovanni in Baldwin's novel, he is not primarily the receptacle of a sexual-identity conflict that David is given his last chance to face, but rather the emissary of the cost of Thomas's doctrine, both in terms of David's business and emotional life. Nicola is what David's and Steve's worlds produce: the accidental casualty of an irresponsible housing market who, in trying to attain a better life, is crushed by the very conditions of his attempt.

Nicola's appearance on the scene sets David's character line in motion, bringing into the story the other pair of values at stake: invulnerability and exposure. Once again, it is David's father who establishes the underlying equivalence between emotional

attachment and a business-inflected concept of exposure, thereby dictating David's conflicted retreat from both in his work as well as in his private life. However, David's meeting with Nicola, together with the recklessness breathed into him by Steve, catalyzes his decision to bypass Thomas's rule and – literally – make room for the human element when he offers Nicola a place in his apartment after learning that he has been evicted. Despite being initially convinced that he can treat Nicola as the luxury commodity Steve has presented him to be, David is rapidly seduced by the aura of boyishness that Nicola's presence brings into his apartment — at least until Nicola's firing dramatically reveals what lies beneath it.

The revelation of Nicola's precarious existence proves unbearable to David. The charming aura of boyishness that had contaminated David's apartment and life is suddenly disclosed as the fragile surface of a life structurally exposed, dependent on the unstable opportunities provided by a world shaped by Thomas's and Steve's logic. Faced with this truth, David's own posture of invulnerability begins to crack, giving way to a desperate sexual encounter with Nicola. Yet the revelation demands something more than this desperate refuge: it requires David to take responsibility, both for the human cost of the world to which he belongs and for the unresolved emotional life he has kept at bay under his pretense of invulnerability. It is precisely this demand that David refuses, thereby setting Nicola on a path of progressive erasure.

David's act of erasing Nicola comes primarily through his engagement with Hella Moore, a corporate lawyer whom he meets in the first days of his Roman stay. Their relationship appears from the outset as the shelter of two Americans meeting abroad; yet, when Hella returns later in the story, her proposal that they remain together in order to "preserve some sense of home" makes that function explicit (*BB* 86). David's acceptance paves the way for Nicola's erasure, which he eventually seals personally in the elevator scene at the Hassler and figuratively in the abandonment of the public redevelopment project. Even more significantly, however, David's engagement

provides him with a form of deferred management of his troubles that ultimately reveals itself as a refuge of moral absolution, bringing him full circle back to America.

From the moment of her return in scene #97, Hella increasingly functions as the facilitator of David's movement through the world. She arranges an alternative to his apartment when Nicola is still inside, speaks with waiters at every dinner they share, and, in the elevator scene, it is she who presses the button. Finally, at David's late climax of desperation, she absolves him of his actions even though his explanation remains highly ambiguous. Whether she reads the truth or not, she renders it irrelevant when she tells David that the strength "for surviving" is all that matters, thus coming full-circle with Thomas's rule of always "protect[ing] yourself" (107; 3). As a result, in the end David is able to remain impassive before the probable news of Nicola's death and to leave with Hella as though nothing had happened.

Really, nothing has happened in the end. The only achievement of David's growth is a more adult version of Thomas's ethic, now shielded by the emotional protection of an American refuge that manages his return to safety without requiring him to confront the price of his stay abroad. David's entire trajectory macroscopically reproduces his movement through Villa Ada in the bulldog scene: he wanders through side paths only to be driven back and finally find himself where he began. He experiments with Steve's lifestyle and business, but in the end he returns to the origin, as his father's ethic reveals to him as the best distilled solution for navigating the world.

The combination of the two lines thus produces a reversed – indeed perverse – coming-of-age plot. David moves through the story across successive orbits of influence. He is born under Thomas's doctrine, then encounters Steve's recklessness and appetite, through him he is led to Nicola's world of exposure and vulnerability, and from Nicola he retreats into Hella's emotional shelter under the renewed authorization of his father. While *Giovanni's Room* offered a failed coming-of-age in which David learned the price of his failure through damnation in life, *Bulldog in the Backyard* builds, as it were, a zero-sum coming-of-age plot: at the end of his European

stay, David goes back without having learned anything, except that the world appears to him to be functioning exactly as it should.

3.2. Know Thyself, Prey Better

As the adaptation updates and radicalizes Baldwin's material, his commentary on the American character undergoes the same operation. As noted above, David's trajectory outlines a refusal of responsibility that is in fact a reframing of the concept in the service of his world's predatory interests. Yet, troubling as it is in itself, this is not the ultimate point made by the adaptation. Indeed, David's Roman experience does not unfold on a blank page, but at the center of a web of returns that reactivate earlier stories in his life. These returns not only confirm his choices, but broaden their significance by revealing the existence of a pattern which was already well established in his identity. Specifically, they are the origin story of Thomas's fortune and the precedent of David's homoerotic experience in the initial prologue.

David's precedent with the unnamed boy at seventeen reprises David's episode with Joey in *Giovanni's Room*. As noted above, David's sexual encounter with Joey incites the character line in the novel, making Joey the original scene of which Giovanni is the continuation — or rather the duplication, since David responds to both through the same mechanism of internal denial of his desire and external erasure of its bearer. Already in the novel, this double is reinforced by figurative echoes in the physical appearance of the two boys. Joey is described as "very quick and dark" (GR 6), and his figure in bed is directly likened to "a baby" with "curly hair darkening the pillow" (8). Giovanni, for his part, is first described as "insolent and dark and leonine" (28), and later endowed with feelings at once "childlike and ancient" (61). Even their names echo each other.

This design is preserved between Nicola and the boy at seventeen. On the physical plane, the recurrence of dark hair preserves a continuity between the two figures. Even more significantly, however, David explicitly frames the reason for his late desperation as the return of a boy from his past, fifteen years earlier. Although it remains

ambiguous how much the original boy and Nicola actually share, David's admission that he "left him alone" makes one thing clear: the pattern of evasion and abandonment enacted with Nicola is not an isolated episode in David's life (*BB* 107). Rather, it emerges as a recurrent behavioral pattern in which David first receives another person's emotional exposure and then withdraws from the responsibility such exposure entails.

The adaptation amplifies this design by constructing a symmetrical counterpart in the plot line. While David initially believes that his involvement in Steve's deal constitutes a betrayal of Mr. Roy's mandate that his father would condemn, Thomas's backstory ultimately reveals itself to mirror and confirm David's trajectory. As Steve remarks, David's position – and, in a way, his whole story – is founded on an original act of predation: in 2008, Thomas, then an insurance man, was among the first to short the housing market, making his fortune from the collapse. David's scruples are thus misplaced, resting only on a misunderstanding of Thomas's doctrine, which ultimately authorizes predation as a form of self-protection.

David's perverse relation to responsibility thus emerges as a precise pattern. At first sight, his Roman trajectory seems to lead toward a new form of knowledge and behavior; however, the web of echoes it reactivates suggests otherwise. What David learns abroad is not a new way of evading responsibility, but the fact that such evasion is already deeply rooted in both his character and his history. The real outcome of his journey is therefore not transformation, but a more lucid awareness of what he has always been — an insight that Hella would aptly remark as "all-American" (87).

The United States indeed have a long tradition of ambiguously claiming responsibility in universal terms while practicing it in exceptionalist ones. As Lynn Hunt notes, ever since the Declaration of Independence, appeals to universal principles repeatedly revealed themselves to be "something much less all-inclusive" in their actual application (18). Notoriously, the assertion of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness as the inalienable rights of all men was sufficient to justify independence from an oppressive mother country, but not enough to recognize

enslaved people as fully human rather than as property. Likewise, the enfranchisement of the newly formed republic excluded large portions of the population, namely “women, African-Americans, Native Americans, and the propertyless” (148). From the beginning, in other words, the universal language of responsibility coexisted with a constitutive refusal to bear responsibility toward many of those over whom power was ultimately wielded.

Outwardly, this origin imposed on American culture a presumptive responsibility as the leader of progress that repeatedly translated into acts of predation. The nation that John O’Sullivan famously celebrated as manifestly “destined for better deeds” in the name of freedom and universal enfranchisement used that sense of mission to legitimate the destruction of Native populations in its westward expansion (427). Likewise, as David Harvey argues, the same pattern would later reappear whenever the fight against Communism under the Truman Doctrine or the rhetoric of exporting democracy served to mask a logic of resource extraction and geopolitical imperialism (1-25). U.S. regime-change politics in both Latin America and the Middle East offers a clear expression of this trend.

In its latest form, this pattern reappears in what Stephen Walt has aptly called the “predatory hegemony” of Trump’s second-term foreign policy. As Walt argues, after the decline of the USSR, the United States had already developed an hegemonic posture inclined to wield power in open disregard of international constraints, as in the case of the Iraq War. Under Trump’s second term, however, that logic has turned more overtly and unilaterally extractive, as American power is framed merely as a means of securing “asymmetric benefits from...allies and adversaries alike” (Walt). The White House’s 2025 National Security Strategy makes this particularly clear when it states that “the protection of core national interests...is the sole focus of this strategy” (White House 1).

The sole morality of the predatory hegemon is maximum advantage, and no limit is regarded as legitimate if it obstructs that end. Preexisting alliances and agreements are disposable whereas they fail to produce sufficient benefit, and even former

partners become expendable. In other words, as Walt observes, the predatory hegemon can tolerate only one vision of the world, best summarized by Thucydides's formulation that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must". What emerges, then, is not the abandonment of a long-standing pattern, but its unapologetic radicalization: responsibility is no longer even rhetorically universalized, but openly reduced to the protection and advantage of one's own position.

Walt's description closely fits the moral ethos that emerges from David's story. Thomas's backstory plants the seed of predatory exploitation of systemic vulnerability, to which David lives up when he unwinds Mr. Roy's investment from the Ostiense project for not being lucrative enough. Steve's ideology is predatory in business as well as in private life, to the point that his remark that Nicola "was born on the wrong side of the glass" gives obscene substance to the same Thucydidean formulation, from which even Hella's moral absolution is not that distant (*BB* 77). The layered effect of Thomas's, Steve's, and Hella's influences is thus to naturalize predation as maturity and erasure of responsibility as necessity, even when responsibility is most urgently called for.

Bulldog in the Backyard then sketches the trajectory of the predatory hegemon who comes to know himself only to prey better. The point is not just that David evades responsibility, but that he rediscovers such evasion and carries it on under his mask of invulnerability no matter how many victims it claims, himself included. By the same token, the adaptation does not simply suggest that America fails to assume responsibility, but that this failure belongs to a long and deeply sedimented tradition: one that disguises lack of accountability as the invulnerable myth of American exceptionalism.

3.3. A Fully-Realized Neo-Noir

David's story is delivered through a Neo-Noir form that fully realizes the generic premises latent in Baldwin's novel. As argued in Chapter Two, because of David's internalization of his story, *Giovanni's Room* resists identification as properly Noir,

appearing instead as a tragedy deeply contaminated by Noir sensibility. The adaptation, by contrast, inverts the relation between the two modes. Here Noir becomes the dominant formal logic, while tragedy survives chiefly as an inflection carried by the character line. This formal design depends on the differentiation between plot and character lines, which allows the former to function as fully Neo-Noir while the latter, generated by the plot line, remains only tragically inflected.

David's plot line behaves much like a classic Noir. David fits very well the figure of the unredeemed, unheroic protagonist, sleeplessly haunted by his past, and committed to a path of violation that leads him to moral ruin through a display of cold – yet no less cruel – violence, verbal as much as practical. From Steve's charming dissoluteness to Hella's moral callousness coated in emotional proximity, his companions are no less unheroic and morally disturbing, feeding the atmosphere of pervasive "moral crisis" that Booker identifies as characteristic of the genre (13).

From a structural perspective, David's relationship with Steve is a clear instance of *homme fatale* pattern. As Steve seduces David into his lifestyle, David is drawn by the prospect of improving his hollow position in Rome. Steve's initiation then leads to the noir decision of the story, that is, David's commitment to the Nardi-Ruini deal brokered by Steve. Driven by a "predatory gleam" in his eyes, David's betrayal of responsibility in scene #35 clearly functions as the violation that inaugurates his slide toward moral ruin (*BB* 43). Not by chance, this breach of his initial moral position is immediately rewarded by Steve's introduction of David to the hustlers, which seals Steve's shadow over him.

Placed in the first third of the script, David's noir decision also inaugurates the direct fallout of consequences on him. Whereas in Baldwin's novel the flashback structure and the internalization of David's guilt attenuated the effects of his violation, the adaptation renounces to the retrospective narrative. Accordingly, the viewer is placed on the same ground as David, exposed to the consequences of his behavior as he encounters them.

Nicola is the main consequence. It is Nicola who presents David with the bill of his commitment to Steve's world and business. Again, it is he – or better, the unbearable revelation David receives through him – that leads David back to Steve for help, only to be asked in return for formal commitment to the Nardi-Ruini deal. As the narrative progresses, David is thus placed under both external and internal pressure across both plot and character lines.

If the adaptation reproduces many features of classic Noir, its resolution moves it decisively into Neo-Noir territory. Aside from the obvious fact that it belongs to a different historical period, the story's ambiguous and nihilistic conclusion can only belong to Neo-Noir. If David had already slid toward the betrayal of responsibility before his father's call, Thomas's revelation that responsibility ultimately entails betrayal merely strips away the last impediments to that descent. At the end, when the claims of responsibility re-emerge through Steve's news about Nicola, Hella recasts once again the category, dismissing any residual sense of David's guilt for the consequences of his actions. From the viewer's perspective, this is thus the most unresolved of the resolutions, since the only way to read the ending as resolute of the story tensions is to accept the dissolution of standard morality.

Yet, however perfectly Noir the plot line may be, it does not fit a tragic logic. Whereas David's commitment to the Nardi-Ruini deal works as noir decision, it really does not as the fatal error of a tragic plot. Although it marks a moral fall, in fact, David's choice does not lead him into existential adversity, nor does it generate a properly tragic chain of suffering culminating in his disgrace. Likewise, also David's belated recognition is problematic, since Thomas's call works more as a final moral authorization than the painful apprehension of David's mistake – of which he has actually been well aware until that point. We might consider Thomas's revelation about his origin as a businessman as the belated recognition; yet, even in that case, the trajectory would betray our intention, since Thomas's shorting the housing market led to immoral prosperity but certainly not to affliction.

In a way, David's tragedy is more private than public. The tragic logic of the story lies better in the character line, which in this respect reproduces quite faithfully the structure designed by Baldwin. If in the novel David's fatal error is the abandonment of Giovanni, in the adaptation it is his taking the apartment's second key with him when he leaves to meet Hella. This choice generates a causal chain of consequences that determines a fall into affliction for both David and Nicola, culminating in David's belated recognition before Hella and Nicola's destruction.

Like Giovanni, Nicola may be regarded as the story's true tragic figure, yet with an even more bitter trajectory. Whereas Giovanni's fatal error lies in staking everything on David and the perspective of a future made possible by his love, Nicola's error may be actually identified with his very move to Rome in the hope of a better life. After all, his fall has already begun before he meets David: what follows is only the unfolding of adverse consequences to which David is attached less as cause than as fatal catalyst.

Nicola's tragic trajectory and the tragic consequences of David's abandonment are not sufficient to turn David's whole story into a tragedy, though. Since the character line is itself a product of the plot line, the formal primacy of the latter ultimately governs the whole. David's whole story is only partially a fall, only partially recognized by him as such and, above all, it does not end in destruction. In the end, David falls only to realize he has always been standing, which is enough to make the story a fully realized Neo-Noir, but not enough to make it a tragedy. Rather, *Bulldog in the Backyard* stands as a tragically-inflected Neo-Noir of the American character.

Conclusions

As Stanley Kubrick supposedly used to say, “Everything has already been done, every story has been told, every scene has been shot. It’s our job to do it one better.” No formulation better captures the spirit of the operation undertaken by this study. Over the course of these pages, adaptation has not been treated as the reproduction of a literary source in cinematic form, but as a creative and critical procedure: a way of taking apart a narrative mechanism in order to look inside it, understand how it functions, and how it might keep working in different historical and dramatic conditions.

With this in mind, *Giovanni’s Room* has been examined through the double lens of Noir and tragedy. We dug beneath the generic label of Noir to uncover a precise moral architecture: a mode organized by moral opacity, returns of the past, violent paths of deviation, and uncertain resolutions. By the same logic, we examined tragedy not as a mere structure of death and suffering, but as a logic of irreversible transformation — from blindness to suffering, from suffering to recognition, and final destruction. Read together, these two frameworks allowed Baldwin’s novel to emerge as a latent Noir tragedy: the story of an American subject condemned to fall by his refusal to recognize the Other both before and within himself.

The adaptation developed alongside this argument, *Bulldog in the Backyard*, has been the practical test of this method. Its purpose was not to reproduce Baldwin’s plot, but to preserve and reactivate its dramatic mechanism. Thus, the novel’s central conflict has been displaced into a contemporary setting in which the addition of a business plot line and the transformation of the protagonist’s internal conflict extend and radicalize the original discourse on the American character. David’s crisis is no longer organized around the denial of sexual identity, but around a broader and more contemporary American refusal: the transformation of responsibility into predation.

Apart from the author’s inclination, these changes have been prompted by the preservation of the dramatic mechanism itself. The 2008 housing-market backstory

and the Trumpian present do not turn the screenplay into a political allegory imposed upon Baldwin. Rather, they provide the cultural pressure under which the same tragic mechanism can operate again. While Baldwin's David could perform a heterosexual identity with others but remain unable to simply accept Giovanni's love, David Welland redirects investments and fires former partners, but he cannot respond to Nicola in a way that would compromise his image of himself. As this study has shown, the American failure at the center of Baldwin's novel has not disappeared — it has just changed language. It has moved from Giovanni's room to the global market.

In conclusion, *Giovanni's Room* has been dismantled and reassembled. Through this operation, adaptation has functioned as a form of criticism, forcing latent structures to emerge in transposition. As a practical test, *Bulldog in the Backyard* has finally paid off. The mechanism has been opened, examined, and set back to work. The clock is ticking again, and it does not lose a beat.

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Appendix

Bulldog in the Backyard: an Original Adaptation

