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THE ROLE OF NEW YORK IN SHAPING IDENTITY IN JAMES BALDWIN'S *ANOTHER  
COUNTRY*

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Vera Kaplická Yakimova, Ph.D.

Konzultantka: Mgr. Kateřina Kovářová

Autor práce: Tereza Žatkovičová

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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**Tereza Žatkovičová**

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## Anotace

Bakalářská práce se zabývá vlivem New Yorku na identitu v románu Jamese Baldwina *Jiná země* (*Another Country*, 1962). Její hlavní náplní bude zkoumání identity jakožto komplexního konceptu v souvislosti s provázaností s prostředím románu. První část stručně nastíní historický a kulturní kontext New Yorku 50. let 20. století s přihlédnutím na pozadí minorit. Druhá část vysvětlí pojem identita a představí jeho tři obecně uznávané typy – osobní, kategorickou a společensky přisuzovanou identitu. Ty budou využity v analýze textu, která bude rozdělena na dvě části. Nejdříve se analýza zaměří na zobrazení New Yorku v rámci románu, jeho atmosféru, denní rytmy a jejich působení na postavy Vivalda a Rufuse. Druhá část analýzy prozkoumá provázanost místa s identitou Idy v rámci sociální složky města a jeho vlivy a dopad na utváření vlastní identity. Práce bude napsána v anglickém jazyce.

Klíčová slova: identita, New York, město, prostředí, provázanost

## Abstract

This thesis examines the influence of New York on the identity in James Baldwin's novel *Another Country* (1962). Its main focus will be an examination of identity as a complex concept in relation to its interconnectedness with the novel's setting. The first section will briefly introduce the historical and cultural context of 1950s New York, considering the background of minorities. The second section will explain the concept of identity and introduce its three generally accepted types – personal, categorical, and socially attributed identity. These will be used in the analysis of the text, which will be divided into two parts. First, the analysis will focus on the depiction of New York within the novel, its atmosphere, daily rhythms, and their effect on the characters of Vivaldo and Rufus. The next part of the analysis will then explore the connections between the place and Ida's identity within the social sphere of the city and its influence and impact on the formation of her identity. The thesis will be written in English language.

Key words: identity, New York, city, environment, interconnectedness

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## Introduction

The importance of the city in literature has long been a long-discussed question, especially in American settings. The contemporary narrative of the literary city starts with an idealised or perhaps even mythical concept of urban life where the city is a place of specific discourse and it brings up the deepest social, and cultural matters (McNamara 4). These create an environment not only of physical qualities, but also a space of strong inner forces, in which political, economic, and mainly social processes are involved. The role of the individual who lives within the system is crucial, and it is the urban literature that excels at examining the relationship between human behaviour and the urbanistic environment. This exploration can include mapping social spaces and interactions, which can retrospectively reflect the inhabitants' identities.

The most prominent shift urban literature has experienced in the avantgarde times, when cities were seen as basically “cities of feeling” and represented human experience not just of individuals but rather of society as a whole. They encouraged readers to understand and empathise with this experience (McNamara 11). It was the urban literature at this time that innovated and expanded “the reader’s fields of vision,” and it offered multiple and diverse ways of approaching the space they lived in (Balasopoulos 25). The city’s purpose went beyond its standard framework, and today, the new urban studies shift towards cultural studies among literary critics and go along with the semiotics and narratology of historical and social scientists (Bentley 184).

This is close to Baldwin’s vision of a city while he creates atmospheres rather than spaces close to reality. These speak to the characters and accompany them through the novel. The main link between the characters and space appears to be social relations and forces, which inspire James Baldwin and serve as the key to understanding identity. For this thesis, the main goal is to

answer the question of the role of New York in shaping identity in Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) and to prove the relationship and impact between the space and the characters. Its aim is to prove that space serves more than just a backdrop; it becomes a crucial force that forms the identities and behaviours of the characters and eventually mirrors their inner states and clashes. Through a close examination of the text, the thesis will explore how Baldwin uses the concept of city as an entity of dual qualities to rob characters of their sense of themselves, taking into account the previously mentioned social perspective.

First, the thesis will examine the historical context of 1950s New York from the perspective of its political, social, cultural, and economic situation. This will be a necessary step to understand the background of the three chosen characters for analysis. In the second section, the thesis will discuss identity as a term, explaining it from several angles and depicting three main types, such as personal identity, categorical identity, and socially attributed identity, which will be used in the further analysis and examined in the context of a complex character, Ida. Her role will consist mainly in linking identity with the social sphere of place and its influence on her conflicted self-development.

In the third section, the thesis will introduce Baldwin's perspective on identity and how he conceptualises it. Then it will survey the environment of the novel on a full scale, focusing on the daily rhythms of the city, the contrast in the effect of light during the day and darkness during the night, and eventually private and open space. In this section, the main focus of interest will be two male characters, Vivaldo and Rufus, as supportive elements to define the environment and its atmosphere. In the last section, the centre of attention will be previously mentioned, Ida, as a great example of the interconnectedness of the environment, its social components, and their forces. In this part, her character will be discussed, as will the influences of the environment, her



Harlem background, collective consciousness, racial issues, isolation, and subsequent self-denial. The thesis will be overall structured around spatial and social contexts and their influence on the identity of chosen characters, considering the atmosphere of the city.

As Diane Wolfe Levy argues, the city is the most influential ecological aspect of modern Western society, making it reasonable to seek its expression and reflection in literature (Wolfe Levy 65). It offers a wide range of possibilities for exploration of its functions and scales. The urban environment in literature deserves proper attention, and its analysis can lead to valuable social insights. It is in the twentieth century when there has been the rise of the great city, with the tendency to reshape how people form their identities, experience space and time, and integrate themselves according to the society, history, and culture they live in (Bentley 183). In this case, answering the thesis question is useful in terms of its contribution not only to the urbanistic genre, but also to the social sphere that relates to identity and their interconnectedness as such.

## **1. New York in the 1950s**

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, New York, as a city of global significance, undergoes an abrupt metamorphosis. This period contains changes in the social, cultural, and economic spheres, and for New York, it means a new chapter. It soon becomes an epicentre for artists, authors, politically engaged figures, and those who yearn for a taste of the American dream. Although this chapter does not fully meet James Baldwin's vision of New York in *Another Country* and is more realistic than atmospheric, it is essential for a deeper understanding of the backgrounds of the characters. This chapter provides a springboard for understanding the social, political, cultural, and economic situation of New York in the 1950s, as Baldwin's novel emphasises these aspects. The focus is mainly on the circumstances of minorities, who often face prejudice, marginalisation, and injustice.

### **1.1 Ethnical and social stratification**

In terms of social structure, the city goes through a great number of changes. New York has always maintained the aura of a welcoming melting pot for people of different ethnicities, races, and religious beliefs. Their coexistence, however, is not always harmonious, and it is often met with challenges. What unifies these various groups of people is a vision of a better future. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though the influx of immigrants is weaker due to the critical circumstances of the past years (the Great Depression, World War II), the city is still accepting new residents (Wendt 1). These include mostly Afro-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Italians, or Irish, of which Afro-Americans and Puerto Ricans are the most represented minorities (Glazer vii). While these are two very distinctive groups, their position in society is similar in many aspects.

They are both relatively new migrants to the city (a huge wave of blacks after World War I and a large number of Puerto Ricans after World War II); their backgrounds and education are often poor, meaning they both have to “take the worst jobs and the worst housing” (Glazer xxiv) and feel constantly rejected by the system of protection and care. Moreover, these groups often fight with one another to win their own respect and space, as well as the privilege of being heard. On the one hand, Puerto Ricans recognise the possibility of being one of many minorities and are willing to accept the traditional way of integration (Glazer xxiv). However, on the other side, the “radical elements among blacks” appear to be stronger (Glazer xxiv). As Glazer says, “Puerto Ricans do not express as much resentment and anger and are not as convinced that measures proposed by black activists should be given such high priority” (Glazer xxiv). Nevertheless, such behaviour has its justification in the face of racial intolerance.

Each minority naturally resorts to the territory where most of their community lives. As well as the general inflow and outflow of migrants, the inner structure of such territories has also evolved rapidly. Harlem, for instance, was predominantly Puerto Rican in the 1930s and was called by the nickname “Spanish Harlem” (Eisenstadt 695). In the next two decades, despite its lasting “heterogeneity” (Eisenstadt 694), the name Harlem comes to be understood as a symbol of the black population (Eisenstadt 694). Around the middle of the 20th century, a huge part of the black population flows to the Bronx, sharing space with Puerto Ricans (Eisenstadt 216). In the case of Italians, their position is probably the most stable, as they live in Little Italy (Eisenstadt 801). Compared to the position of, for example, Jews, the options of the Italians are rather limited since they do not have such great financial resources and education (Glazer 207). While the first generation of Italian arrivals rely on manual labour in factories, others are already more experienced with the matters of small shops and businesses (Glazer 206). Italians have

soon become largely a symbol of steadfast diligence and determined spirit. The last of the most represented minorities would be the Irish people. The Irish are present all over the city, namely in Kingsbridge, Highbridge, Mott Haven, and Norwood (Eisenstadt 215). Throughout the previous decade, they went from the most represented to one of the least represented minority groups (Eisenstadt 316). The rest of the population then consists of Czechoslovaks, Ukrainians, Russians, or Germans (Eisenstadt 316).

## **1.2 Inner politics and clashes**

From the perspective of inner politics and structure, the city at this time has to face many issues and clashes between its inhabitants, especially between minorities and whites. The conditions of minorities are not always easy, and they are often facing misunderstanding and oppression. As Glazer implies in *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1970), “their feelings have been ignored” and “have received little from the government in recent years” (Glazer xxvi). Obviously, as Glazer points out, money and higher social status would make the whole process of assimilation much smoother (8). However, that is not the case for the majority of immigrants since they are moving right for the purpose of getting better jobs and at least a slight hint of the American dream. Discrimination and racism are more than widespread in America at this time, and under the influence of the lasting impact of the past repression of Afro-Americans in the South, the situation in New York does not seem promising in that matter despite considerable efforts to change it (Glazer xiii). Glazer elaborates that “[r]ace has exploded to swallow up all other distinctions, or so it would appear at the moment” (viii), while the false prejudices of earlier times persist (x).

Racism and discrimination are persisting problems, and their impact on the population, especially the black population, is immense. Blacks face a high degree of segregation, being intentionally separated from whites. This has particularly been applied in the residential, educational, and professional spheres. They are restricted not only financially, so they are unable to move into new houses and areas, but also from a human perspective, while they are not allowed to potentially integrate into these areas as equals (Glazer 44). Black children are generally forced to attend schools with “inferior teachers,” and worse standards (Glazer 49), and their conditions are nowhere near those of the children of white parents. It has to be said, however, that it is segregation that brings blacks to Harlem, unifies them, and makes it “alive,” including “everyone in the Negro community” (Glazer 27). This includes not just white-collar workers but also upper class, professionals, artists, and mainly political leaders and activists who later become involved in improving the living conditions of the black community as a whole.

The 1950s represent the turning point for a freer and more equal future, especially in terms of African Americans who feel the need to hear their voices from the side of whites who, for many years, did not seem to listen. Their needs as a community have not met with success for a long time, and tension between the black community and white liberals is accumulating. Since liberals represent their voices and “the battle over civil rights is a regular occasion” for them, “Negroes cannot help feeling that liberals do not quite do enough” (Glazer 77). In this sense, liberals “fight just hard enough to get Negro votes” (Glazer 77). This eventually shapes the black mentality of trusting only themselves rather than others.

Despite the challenges from the political sphere, the Civil Rights Movement is still one of the most significant movers in New York at this time, advocating for racial equality and justice. Its early phases can be characterised by difficulties with racism and the previously mentioned

segregation. The very first organisations like the NAACP begin to form, and a big hope becomes the figure of Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who in 1944 emerges as the first-ever black congressman of Harlem (Eisenstadt 695). In the later phases of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, people find some comfort in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “a peaceful advocate,” and Malcolm X, “a pastor of the Harlem Mosque of the Nation of Islam” (Eisenstadt 695). The whole situation with the Civil Rights Movement escalates to the point of aggression against its leaders on the one hand, and victories in the legislature in terms of voting and housing on the other. Protests are growing, and the voices of the black population continue to spread across the country.

### **1.3 Culture and art**

Another way to define New York at this time is through its culture. From the most general approach, for America, it is “a decade of rising expectations” involving an interest in cultural products and their immediate consumption (Halliwell 2). American culture soon becomes a mass culture, stressing the extreme demand for comfort and entertainment (Halliwell 2). The American mentality is changing. On the one hand, there is an omnipresent optimism flowing mainly from media like television and radio. On the other hand, this era can also be characterised, among other things, by a great deal of conservatism (Halliwell 3). This is closely related to so-called “Cold War culture,” a culture connected to strained post-war relationships between the USA and Soviet Union (Halliwell 3), that stagnate at the freezing point. Fear of possible communist threats persists, and people remain distrustful. Still, even though this attitude can be seen as justified, the understanding of Cold War culture as a unifying culture seems to be

one-dimensional and highly restrictive (Halliwell 4). Within the attitudes of American society, there will always be talk of a multifaceted issue.

1950s culture is, in Halliwell's words, "a site of dualities, tensions, and contradictions" (3). There are both fear and optimism, threads and hope, racism, and equality. It is a time promising so much but still fulfilling too little (Halliwell 4), and this especially applies in the case of minorities. Their position in society is uneasy, and a common form of escape and expression of repressed interests and opinions is art. This applies especially to the black community, which tries to find its voice through music, dance, literature, art, and theatre. Their efforts to expand their pride and heritage can be characterised as the Harlem Renaissance, which starts to resonate, while the black artists and intellectual movement accumulate around the environment of Harlem (Smith 26). The black community soon enriches the music tradition, especially in the sense of jazz and blues (Smith 23). These creative steps soon bring a new perception of a shared African American identity as a community with great reach and dignity, that ties back to the past of slavery and oppression. Its story is soon thematized in literature, resulting in deeper exploration and understanding of its roots, the formation of a positive view of self and self-worth as a whole, and a growing need for self-expression in terms of its rights and persistent ostracization in society. As Langston Hughes expresses in his poem "I, Too", it is time now for the black community to take its rightful place in the cultural, and therefore social sphere to finally integrate as an equal part of the American story.

## 1.4 Economic side

From an economic perspective, New York experiences unequal prosperity in the 1950s. While the real estate market grows in the suburbs, ethnic minorities concentrate in the heart of New York, and the stable population is “disproportionately impoverished” (Wendt 1). As Matthias Wendt further explains, the Great Migration, which brings thousands of African Americans and Puerto Ricans to the city, leads to great internal tension and imbalance in areas of life such as education, housing, and work. As Glazer adds, this tension is conditioned by strengthening inter-racial conflicts and motives, which in turn lead to increased criminality (lxxvi). This results in a fear of potentially increasing aggression, and the government needs to step forward with a solution. The solution seems to be the adjustment of residential districts and their arrangements in connection with the changing structure of the New York’s population. The city administration is eventually tearing down entire blocks, leaving room for high-rises. Although this has not proved to be a good idea in the past and has only brought another wave of luxury housing and subsequent poverty for the lower social classes, it has become a breakthrough now, and the city gains a new purpose and meaning (1-3).

New York changes not only physically but, more importantly, as a place with different internal dynamics. It becomes a space that truly brings together people of different minorities yet forms an environment with fragmented social forces. There is a contradiction between society and communities, as well as between the communities and their members who seek their place within the system. New York as a seemingly coherent whole at first glance is disintegrating, and it is up to the individual to adapt within these conflicting forces in order to survive. Their lives change significantly in the context of the community they live in, and looking at New York as a place, so does the atmosphere. This is conditioned by the minority and especially the specific



social pressure that is put on it. It is the place and its inner social structure that predetermines who the individual will become or not, or eventually who they may become under certain conditions such as resignation of self, submission, or self-denial and self-sexualization. Identity is formed right in this moment, in a moment of social forces and spatial pressures that challenge the individual.

## 2. Identity

Given the nature of this bachelor thesis, it is necessary to explain how identity can be understood and viewed in general terms. Over decades of strengthening scientific, philosophical, and literary research, identity has become both a complex term and a multifaceted concept. Its importance has been addressed countless times and has received significant attention. As it is defined by the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2008), identity can be understood as “who a person is” or “the qualities of a person or group that make them different from each other” (“Identity” 713). According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), identity represents “who or what somebody or something is,” eventually, “the characteristics, feelings, or beliefs that distinguish people from others: a sense of national, cultural, personal, or group identity” (“Identity” 770). The definitions slightly vary not only in comparison to one another but also in relation to the context of our reality, psychology, and literature. In this case, it is difficult to decide which of the concepts is the most precise, and identities can be examined from a large number of angles.

For the purposes of this thesis, identity is discussed in terms of commonly used concepts that are interwoven across the scientific field. These are personal identity, categorical identity, and socially attributed identity, all of which contribute to the formation of the self of an individual. All three will be used in the thesis for research purposes in order to demonstrate their interdependence with the environment.

First, personal identity represents “what defines one as a particular self rather than someone else” or “sense of oneself as an individual entity,” connected with a “complex process of self-other differentiation” (Musholt xviii). This type of identity can be understood as the most

basic one, describing an individual as an independently functioning unit with its own distinctive features that make them unique.

Categorical identity means belonging to a society in the context of behaving according to its norms and rules. This determines one's possibilities for what they can and cannot do. In this sense, a person chooses certain things over others according to the position they are in. This position is often influenced by nation, race, religion, sexual preferences, sex, and family background (Hogan "Chapter 1") and may eventually predispose that individual to discrimination, prejudice, or categorization.

Lastly, socially attributed identity can be understood as a process of identifying with our surroundings through social interactions. These function as forces that shape a vision of oneself according to the behaviour that is applied to them. The way in which society treats an individual shapes their knowledge of their own place and where they belong (Hogan "Chapter 1"). The view of oneself and the surrounding world is highly conditioned by the society in which the individual grows up and subsequently lives. It can be said that socially attributed identity eventually becomes habitual and so a part of daily practice (also understood as routines), repeatedly reaffirming the visions of oneself as long as an individual interacts with the society around them. In this respect, socially attributed identity can be seen as a very strong type of identity that contributes significantly to the individual's behaviour.

The interdependence between society, space, individuals, and their own inner beliefs and practices is immensely powerful, and the individual is practically constantly dealing with their surroundings, "gaining control, and adapting where they must" (Burke 93). This adaptation process is often so strong that the individual loses their sense of self in favour of survival in the environment. This is mainly related to so-called impression management and self-concept, which

are often in contradiction to one's moral values. On one hand, self-concept influences how individuals act in certain situations since they are determined to maintain a certain position in society, for instance, to be perceived as successful or empathetic. As Oyserman et al. claim (73), "people may organise and structure their self-concepts around some domains that others commonly use to make sense of them – their race or ethnicity, their gender, and so on." These self-schemes can then be several at once in relation to how much a given individual moves through society and in which communities they can gain what benefits through the right behavioural choices. Additionally, it is the self-concept that causes a chronic tendency to discover their true selves (Dunning 490). Self-concept may be both strong and problematic, and it may address the deepest insecurities and desires at the same time. On the other hand, with impression management, the individual is trying to control the notions "formed by an audience" (Schlenker 542) and therefore to control the perception of the self for their own benefit or to obtain certain goals. As Finnis argues, the individual always chooses its character and the opportunities that go along with it (281). Burke adds that identity in this sense is something like a fluid entity, contributing to the environment the individual is rooted in (92). This can mean specific situations, self-understanding, and questions the individual asks themselves.

No approach in this sense is then exclusively incorrect, and identity can be understood as the sum of all these approaches. Moreover, every understanding of the term changes slightly with the context (Hogan "Introduction"). It has to be highlighted, however, that "not all contexts are equally important all the time" (Hogan "Introduction"). Some aspects of identity are of higher importance under certain circumstances, while others take on significance in atypical situations (Hogan "Introduction"). For this thesis, the emphasis will be particularly on the social aspect in the context of the environment and its impact.

### **3. Identity and space in *Another Country***

#### **3.1 Identity from Baldwin's perspective**

Regarding James Baldwin's approach to identity, his conception straddles the line between social and spatial spheres. While not explicitly mirroring the precise historical narrative of 1950s New York, Baldwin's work remains immensely convincing in capturing the essence of the space, and it is more about the atmosphere than about representativeness (Martínez 794). Yet, the environment forms the identity of the characters and shapes it according to social norms. For Baldwin, cities are a result of "white heterosexual spatial-hierarchical ordering" (Salenius 897), challenging the self-understanding of the characters through the pressure of society. This often means rejecting expressions of their individuality and putting them before a difficult decision of staying true to themselves, or, most frequently, denying their inner desires and values to get higher among the social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the more they deny who they truly are without social norms and constructions, the more they crave the feeling of belonging. That is why identity in James Baldwin's novels becomes an achievement (Klein 19). Still, it is never actually achievable, not only due to social imbalance, prejudice, and marginalisation, but also due to the characters themselves, held by a fear of ostracization. Just as the characters move through endless cycles of uncertainty, feelings of rejection, and false acceptance, so the city goes through cycles of change in relation to the time of day. These cycles have a huge impact on the expression of identity of the characters, especially on the character of Ida.

For the analysis, three main characters of the novel were selected: Vivaldo, Rufus, and Ida. Vivaldo and Rufus are analysed in relation to the spatial sphere, as are their experiences within the environment and their connection to it. Ida is then analysed from the perspective

mainly of the social sphere and its influences on her behaviour, inner identification, and self-denial processes. In the third chapter, the atmosphere of the two male characters will be described and compared. The analysis in the fourth chapter will then discuss the connection between the standard understanding of personal, categorical, and socially attributed identity and Ida's unstable character, taking into account the influence of her environment.

### **3.2 Daily rhythms and New York**

To discern the influence of the city on the characters' identities, it is first essential to become familiar with its daily rituals and ways of communication with the reader, since the city in *Another Country* and its conception are much more poetic than realistic. The city speaks its own language using strong communication tools and, as Scherpe and Roetzel claim, "reading these signs in this context provides a specific silhouette of the city" (141). The city speaks to the reader by revealing its distinctive daily rhythms (Nesci 71), and according to the time of the day, the dynamics of the city change. In the daytime, the city is characterised especially by emptiness and a high degree of anonymity or complete denial of external expression. Characters find themselves in the challenging position of being unmasked by the light and must submit to the city's flow to avoid being exposed. This is contrasted with the night, which, with its shadows and darkness, helps the characters hide their shortcomings and reveal their authentic, often animal, selves.

### 3.3 City at day

The characters are subject to the atmosphere, and their position within the city is determined by the daily cycles that are changing the character of the space. This encloses in relation to the day and offers shelter within the walls of characters' apartments, or it opens and transforms beyond recognition at night. In both cases, the light is involved, making the characters exposed, restricting their ability to act their free mind, or hiding them under the cloak of nightlight and darkness, revealing their innermost selves. The contrast between these elements is striking and is most evident in the characters of Vivaldo and Rufus, while Vivaldo is mostly indoors during the day and Rufus wanders the streets during the night. Their mutual dynamics as the characters of the white writer in a closed apartment and the black outlaw moving across the night city are in contrast.

As it can be seen in the excerpt with Vivaldo in his flat, the day indeed guarantees a certain amount of closure. For Vivaldo, the night city is not tempting to be explored, and he'd rather hide himself in his apartment during that time to finish the only thing he knows – his book. The next morning, he looks out on a city full of lonely echoes, echoes of something unfulfilled in the night that awaits him outside:

On a Saturday in early March, Vivaldo stood at his window and watched the morning rise. The wind blew through the empty streets with a kind of dispirited moan; it had been blowing all night long, while Vivaldo sat at his worktable, struggling with a chapter which was not going well. (Baldwin 130)

As the passage reveals, during the daylight hours, the streets of New York are serene and desolate, evoking a haunting atmosphere. The wind intensifies this feeling of loneliness while moaning persistently, giving the impression of omnipresent sorrow and something lost. But now

the dawn is breaking through, and New York suddenly brings daily worries and burdens.

Vivaldo struggles with getting deeper into his work and solving a puzzle with his characters.

Their difficulties as characters are mirrored backwards at Vivaldo and it is actually him, who is unable to move freely throughout New York.

They were all named, more or less, all more or less destined, the pattern he wished them to describe was clear to him. But it did not seem clear to them. He could move them about but they themselves did not move. (Baldwin 130)

Vivaldo has a potential long-term relationship with Ida that may await him, and he may also resurrect his potential as a writer, but as a character, he is lost, and the space consumes him. The outside world is inhospitable, and he turns into one of the many observers rather than going out and really taking his destiny into his own hands. He turns into another one of the many, perishing “within their despised clay tenements, in isolation, passively, or actively together, in mobs, thirting” (Baldwin 303). Vivaldo disappears under the weight of the space that pushes him inside, and he is just like the others, one of the crowd, naked and exposed to the sunlight, hiding his true nature between the walls of the city. It is at that time that one loses most of one’s sense of anchored identity.

### **3.4 City at night**

In the case of the night, the city takes on a whole new look and confirms that the characters are not as lost as they thought. The atmosphere of the city's nightlife pulses with energy, bringing to the surface both allure and danger, as its citizens, and namely Rufus here, flow through New York’s streets. Lights come into play again, now as nightlights, but this time in the form of a paradox. It no longer haunts the characters in their apartments but rather transforms the outer



environment, which used to be incomprehensible to them, into a place where everything is suddenly possible – a place of excitement, a glimpse of freedom, and a promise of belonging. The burden of place is lifted, at least for a while, and fear and uncertainty recede into the background. Space shows its opposite nature.

The Avenue was quiet, too, most of its bright lights out. Here and there a woman passed, here and there a man; rarely a couple. At corners, under the lights, near drugstores, small knots of white, bright, chattering people showed teeth to each other, pawed each other, whistled for taxis, were whirled away in them, vanished through the doors of drugstores or into the blackness of side streets. Newsstands, like small black blocks on a board, held down corners of the pavements and policemen and taxi drivers and others, harder to place, stomped their feet before them and exchanged such words as they both knew with the muffled vendor within. (Baldwin 14)

New York is in an overpowering position as it is surrounding the character, almost like a labyrinth with black alleys, dominating the individual with its massive, almost-sublime architecture. Nature is neglected as much as possible, leaving space for night lights and high-rise buildings. The senses remain alert, registering not only the changing images of the night and the movement of vehicles but also sounds. There is laughter in the air, muffled conversations, and nervousness. People talk, leave, come again, and fall asleep in dark apartments. New York is in constant motion, bringing people together and leaving them as solitaires, disappearing in the shadows of the night. The atmosphere contradicts itself by being alert yet relaxed. As the text follows, there is “tension” which “is subliminally controlled by an advertisement for chewing gum with a promise of reassurance and happiness” (Baldwin 14). The city draws and attracts the character with its two faces, making him feel found yet lost. This is exactly the place from which

Baldwin's characters emerge. A place of urgency, danger, tenseness, promise, and most importantly, ambivalence. Everything seems almost surreal. Rufus is both hidden and finally seen, seen as a part of something dangerous, something with a sublime taste. He is a part of it even though he would eventually not want to, a "part of an unprecedented multitude," later collapsing existentially under the city's "murderous" weight (Baldwin 14). It is New York that crushes the character and offers him a cheap refuge and modest comfort.

In contrast to the Vivaldo's experience, Rufus's portrayal of the city is far more vibrant and intense. The space is noisier, suppressing any expression of nature and enhancing the hustle and bustle of the city. People hide here as well, but it is under artificial light in combination with darkness, and together, they obscure external features that would otherwise be concerning to society. Even though this would normally lead to greater freedom of self-expression, it still pressures its inhabitants, trapping them in an endless cycle of false promises and impressions. This cycle would be otherwise unbreakable if there wasn't music as a possible escape.

### **3.5 The dual role of music**

The night abounds with dualities. For Rufus, it can be both destructive within the immeasurable force with which it presses him, and, simultaneously, a sanctuary for self-exploration. This expression is possible mainly due to the darkness that engulfs the city and consequently allows for a different type of exciting anonymity. Since the character is black and he now moves through the night, he does not have to fear condemnation for the colour of his skin, and he becomes one of the mass of people, eager for a fleeting feeling of belonging. He

finds this especially in the live music that awakens with the night and attracts lonely travellers such as himself.

All kinds of people had been there that night, white and black, high and low, people who came for the music and people who spent their lives in joints for other reasons... They were being assaulted by the saxophonist who perhaps no longer wanted their love and merely hurled his outrage at them with the same contemptuous, pagan pride with which he humped the air. (Baldwin 18-19)

It is the music that unite people of all skin colours, at least for a short amount of time. Its listeners crave company and understanding, and this is what they find by resigning to it. As the saxophonist shows, however, it is not always about love but rather a feeling of temporary understanding. The listeners' attention does not matter to him, he does what he must to get away from the weight of the city. Music functions as a liberating act for him. Still, there is a lot of aggression in his play, suggesting a kind of pathos or pain that remains in him. There is an echo of something lustful and subjugating, perhaps even animalistic, as he dominates the air, which is confirmed by the following excerpt.

And yet the question was terrible and real; the boy was blowing with his lungs and guts out of his own short past; somewhere in the past, in the gutters or gang fights or gang shags; in the acrid room, on the sperm stiffened blanket, behind marijuana or the needle, under the smell of piss in the precinct basement, he had received the blow from which he never would recover and this no one wanted to believe. *Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?* (Baldwin 18-19)

The musician is giving his all, almost like he remembered something so painful it has to come out and free him from his torment. It is something beyond his own age and life, something stuck in New York he lives in, and in society he shares it as a place, a place full of fights, shags, drugs, and filthiness. This dirt cannot be washed away; it is everywhere and on the people themselves, imprinted in them and leaving a trace. It is a place that does not feel like a warm home but rather a cold delirium that accompanies him in the corner of his mind. He wants to get rid of it and blows so fiercely that he can never get back, leaving the city and its mark behind. It is society that marks him and is riddled with ugliness. He and the audience cannot bear it, and the only relief seems to be the act of music, which detaches the spirit over matter. At the end, only the uncertain *Do you love me?* echoes, almost as if he is asking for an old lost love or looking for sympathy in the audience.

As soon as the music stops, people scatter, and Rufus with them. They may be “chained together in time and space,” yet they are still “all in a hurry... in a hurry to get away from each other” (Baldwin 92). The feelings of understanding and belonging are fleeting, and everyone is going their way, looking for a place to lay their heads or get lost in the pleasures of the night.

Rufus remains on his own and thinks:

He felt totally estranged from the city in which he had been born: this city for which he sometimes felt a kind of stony affection because it was all he knew of home. Yet he had no home here... Now he began to wonder if anyone could ever put down roots in this rock; or rather, he began to be aware of the shapes acquired by those who had. (Baldwin 67)

New York, all of a sudden, does not represent a liberating oasis anymore, but becomes once again a lonely labyrinth through which Rufus wanders. The moments of freedom and animal-like

self-expression are short, and he falls between the stone walls of the city. He knows them very well, still not finding them home. These are the walls into which he cannot put down his roots. He cannot do it for the mere that fact he would lose his sense of himself, just like those before him. The city is hard on him, but he does not want to change for it. It is the repulsiveness of the city that eventually makes him commit suicide. It is an extreme reaction to the environment that pressures him entirely. In the case of the other characters, it leads to other extreme reactions too. They lose themselves in front of each other, and the effect of the city's never-ending rush takes its toll on them. As will be shown in the case of Ida, they succumb and deny their identity. The relationship between the space and the characters is interdependent, and the characters' identities evolve based on the environment in which they exist, often requiring them to adapt and potentially abandon their values and characteristic features to survive.

## **4. Identity and Environment in *Another Country***

The previous chapters explained New York in the 1950s, identity and its components, the city's nature in the novel, and its interconnectedness with Vivaldo and Rufus. For further analysis, Ida is selected as an examinable subject of interest, not from the perspective of the atmosphere, but rather from the perspective of the social environment she lives in. As a character, she is complex and has a conflicted identity, dealing mainly with the struggles around racial questions and her position in society. Starting as a strong and independent black woman, she often faces discrimination and prejudice, not only outside, but also within her own community. Ida is reacting to it deeply emotionally, which often results into reckless, impulsive decisions and, additionally, swinging from passion and love to coldness and anger. And yet, her artistic and intellectual inclinations are unquestionable. Ida is full of ambition, but her life path is winding, and, as will be discussed, she lacks authenticity. The more she tries to conform to the expectations of society, the further she moves away from who she truly is. This is conditioned by influences that she cannot completely control, such as her background, the colour of her skin, or social pressures.

### **4.1 Harlem as starting point**

In the 1950s, Harlem was one of New York's neighbourhoods that epitomised the city's creative energy and sheltered blacks of all professions. As Eisenstadt explains in *Encyclopedia of New York City* (1995), "Harlem had become the de facto African American capital in the United States" (694), creating a flourishing environment for its mostly Afro-American inhabitants. For Baldwin in general, Harlem represents a culturally and artistically rich environment on the one

hand, accompanied by economic and social struggles on the other. For Ida, Harlem serves mainly as a starting point, not just for its sense of community and cultural heritage, but primarily as a place she once called home. Even though the sense of belonging can be seen as stronger in her than that of her brother, she still wants to get out and make it in the real world, the world of success and popularity. Her efforts to break free from her roots are more complicated than it might seem, as she faces obstacles in the form of prevailing defensive mechanisms and mentality learned within her community and subsequent struggles to fully integrate as a woman of colour. As explained in the first chapter, economic and social challenges make a huge difference for those who are of darker skin and for those who are not. This is the dynamic that affects Ida the most and it influences her career as a potential rising star. Her colour of skin, African heritage, and the way the rest of New York objectifies her make it impossible for her to escape the role society has given her – the role of an exotic good – of which she later takes advantage.

Harlem, in this sense, plays a crucial role in shaping Ida's identity. However, here too, dual standards apply. While Harlem offers her resilience and a gift for music and art, since the Harlem community has contributed to the flourishing of jazz and blues, it also leaves her with a lasting mark that she must carry with her through society. She is black, and although she would like to change her perception of herself, many things are denied to her, or she denies them to herself to eventually adapt and survive. Her inner beauty and talent mean little to society, as she still comes from the ghetto. Harlem remains a significant part of her past and a looming curse that prevents her from being seen as an equal by a society predominantly driven by the white majority, whether she tries to resist it or not. It is a place of both harsh beauty and pain. She, too, was once one of the many "beautiful children in the street, black-blue, brown, and copper, all with a grey ash on their faces and legs from the cold wind" (Baldwin 118), a part of a place of

tough love and unusual charm. And this weight of the past and the promise of similar life conditions in the future burdens her to the point of denying who she ever was. Her self-denial process already begins here.

## **4.2 Collective consciousness and racial issues**

Ida is particularly influenced by the collective consciousness. This is especially true in the passages that deal with racial issues and shared pasts. The people of New York are “chained by time and history” (Baldwin 92), and this applies mainly to white and black individuals. The racial issue and tension between the previously mentioned white majority and the black minority are indeed strong, and they regularly break the ties between Ida and other characters, especially in the romantic sense and interracial relationships. This is rooted in past wrongs that persist within her, not only due to the general oppression of the black population but also for the personal reasons of her brother’s death. There is this distrustful attitude towards whites so strong, it makes her tear herself and Vivaldo apart.

“...wouldn’t you hate all white people if they kept you in prison here? ... Kept you here, and stunted you and starved you, and made you watch your mother and father and sister and lover and brother and son and daughter die or go mad or go under, before your very eyes? And not in a hurry, like from one day to the next, but, every day, every day, for years, for generations? ... my brother would still be alive if he hadn’t been born black.”

(Baldwin 344)

From Ida’s perspective, blacks are still “starved” and “kept in prison” within their own country, which they want to call home. Yet they never feel at home and are reminded of their unwelcome



presence every day. Ida is acutely aware of this, and even though she might not want to, she unknowingly penalises the other characters and isolates herself. It is like an old grievance that she cannot forgive, and it later strengthens her aversion to the white race as a whole, which leads to many other conflicts of cross-racial character, especially with Vivaldo, her white lover.

“What I’ve never understood,” he said, finally, “is that you always accuse me of making a thing about your colour, of penalising you. But you do the same thing. You always make me feel white. Don’t you think that hurts me? You lock me out. And all I want is for you to be a part of me, for me to be a part of you. I wouldn’t give a damn if you were striped like a zebra.” (Baldwin 404-405)

Ida, too, puts other characters in boxes with labels, just as the rest of New York does with her. She makes Vivaldo and others aware of their racial differences, although it does not have to be that way. She excludes herself, suffers, and hurts others to make the bare fact of the colour of her skin less hurtful. Unknowingly, she navigates her own pain and the collective pain of her community towards others. It is like an unhealed wound that makes her lack introspection about her own actions. There are huge differences between her perception of cross-racial relationships and that of Vivaldo. A different race is an unthinkable obstacle she cannot overcome. According to Vivaldo, however, it is nothing that cannot be overcome. As Vivaldo says, “Sweetheart, suffering doesn’t have a colour. Does it?” (Baldwin 408). In Ida’s eyes, it will always be this way, and it will eventually put her in a certain contradictory position with her own identity. There will always be the pressure of the collective consciousness of her being black and them being white, and, as the following subchapters will show, she tries to make her true identity both hidden entirely or seen in a different light to grasp at least something she craves. Nevertheless, she still remains isolated and, thus, often socially excluded.

### 4.3 Isolation and social exclusion

According to the previously mentioned influence of collective consciousness and persisting racial issues, Ida is often socially excluded and puts herself in deliberate isolation rather than showing her true self. Her abilities as a singer and a talented young artist are faced with strong resistance from the side of society, and in terms of relationships, it is almost impossible for her to find stable emotional connections. For the colour of her skin and a constant reminder of her being different, she makes herself inaccessible to others and rather recreates the assumptions about her from the outer world. In as big a city as New York is, she finds herself unseen, and this drives her to the decision of choosing between the identity she holds dear and the identity she cultivates to climb the social and career ladder. As it was previously mentioned, she “organises and structures her self-concept” so she can “maintain a certain position in society” (Oyserman 73). So it happens that Ida reshapes herself in the role of an exotic prey to get higher in her career, becoming a part of the stereotype of black women being seen as objects of forbidden sexual pleasure. The more Ida puts her idealised image to the fore and makes her true self invisible, the more she is forced to deal with loneliness. As Klein claims

It is the loneliness in invisibility that is the effective basis of this constant story.

Baldwin’s heroes are projected as having an original, unique identity, which society does not so much corrupt as obscure. (18)

Ida is yearning for recognition, and it is her choice of character that gives off the torn. She may fight for her place, yet still remains lonely; “left alone in New York, one had, still, to fight very hard in order not to perish of loneliness” (Baldwin 228). It does not matter how expanded the city is or how many people live there; she still remains abandoned and without the right to live however she longs. In Baldwin’s novel, “there is something to impress loneliness even in the

melancholy past tense in which the observation is cast,” leaving Ida “robbed of her identity” (Klein “A Question of Identity” 20). The environment gives her no choice in this regard and pushes her to the edge of her possibilities.

It was a city without oases, run entirely, insofar, at least, as human perception could tell, for money; and its citizens seemed to have lost entirely any sense of their right to renew themselves. Whoever, in New York, attempted to cling to this right, lived in New York in exile. (Baldwin 311)

It is due to the place that the character experiences alienation. It robs her of free expression and overshadows aspects of human life in general in favour of money. The space puts her in a difficult position as a solitaire. To fit in with a society that does not approve of her uniqueness, she denies both herself and her deepest desires. This denying process works as a strong moving force and exposes the character to the most contradictory decisions based on her own wishes and desires. The more she adapts to the environment, the more she loses her sense of herself in return. The pace of the city is enormous, and once she wants to keep up with it, she must adapt, since she has no chance to flourish under these conditions.

#### **4.4 Self-denial**

As the previous chapter suggested, Ida goes through a strong process of self-denial. This process is destructive, and the more Ida is forced “into modes of behaviour that are not in natural accordance” with her needs, the less connection she finds to other characters (Meadow 191). She experiences a profound inner conflict, and this struggle eventually leads to the suppression of her true inclinations and needs. As it was addressed in previous passages, Ida’s main problem is the lack of authenticity, especially in the face of the external pressures of society (Halliwell 10). She

starts to identify with different moral values and acts according to the environment, which lusts for her as a sexual object. She applies the previously mentioned “impression management” to control the notions “formed by an audience” (Schlenker 542). Her main purpose is to find her place, and finding her place to a certain extent involves fitting in. Ida’s world oscillates between her desired lover Vivaldo and her music career, and since Vivaldo’s presence reminds her of her inadequacy as a black person and the music industry promises a rise within the social hierarchy, she chooses career over love. Additionally, choosing to hate Vivaldo over their deep connection is easier for her than facing the exposure of her true self – the self that wants a partner of a different skin colour, the self that is actually proud of her African heritage and distinctive traits. As Vivaldo addresses, “You want to protect yourself. You want to hate me because I’m white, because it’s easier for you that way” (Baldwin 405). And indeed, it is true. Ida would rather climb higher on the social ladder without much commitment than face herself.

Ida’s potential within the art world is immeasurable, yet her uncertainty of who she is is holding her back. As previously mentioned, identity from Baldwin’s perspective would always be an achievement, even though this promise of finding it may be insufficient. As Klein discusses in Baldwin’s fiction, “the search for identity is, however, everywhere engaged in and nowhere actually achieved” (27) and the “heroes are forever on their way to being something, or to being somebodies,” even though they always somewhat end up confused with who they are (27). In the case of Ida, she can be a big star in doing what she knows best, putting forward her African heritage, music gift, and presenting herself with her true personal identity as a young, proud woman of black skin with a great temperament. Yet, she chooses not to and prefers to dehumanise herself for inclusion in society. She will never really get to honestly find herself. This is due to the fact that the character is constantly pushed into a defensive position rather than

allowed to flourish as she is. It is the environment that pushes her to the edge and to the clash of her inner moral values. It is the society that lives there and establishes the values they believe she must meet.

The process of adaptation is extremely important here, and Ida is very well aware of it. She has to be constantly aware of her surroundings, especially whites, and she is compelled to use tactics when interacting with them. Ida's colour of skin is used as both "a shield" (Allen 30) and a weapon for awakening sexual desire from the side of her music producer. Ida practices tricks and uses her newfound false identity as a "forbidden" exotic fruit (Klein 30) in a sexual sense to fit in a politically and business-driven society. However, it does not make her a trickster, but it strips her of her personal identity. She began as a strong and independent black woman, yet ended up as a submissive one, possibly pursuing a singing career while retaining her dark skin just to attract attention and achieve success. In terms of categorical identity, she is in conflict with herself as well. She would like to behave in the context of her own beliefs, however, she is subject to society, as her black, independent stance is no longer unacceptable. In this respect, society and the environment also rob Ida of her identity when they take away her ability to behave freely within the system. Lastly, in the sense of socially attributed identity, nor does it fulfil, since her social interactions are fraud and lack authenticity and truthfulness not only towards others, but mainly towards herself. Her vision of herself and her intentions are incorrect, she only tries to profit and survive and practices patterns of repetitive behaviour to gain what she must. This becomes fatal for her because she loses what little she has left. The only moment she gets a short glimpse of her true self is in the moments of intense hatred and intense love, although it does not have an exact form. Ida and the other characters too act on a limpid impulse, and "they can neither hate nor love because their world – the world itself – is complicated and

imposes limitations” (Klein 35). The limitations are, as previously mentioned, the lack of authenticity and fear of being exposed, accompanied by limited opportunities as a person of colour and self-doubt based on them. Her reactions to everyday situations are then sudden, explosive, and often extreme, and further reinforce the previously mentioned cycle.

Extreme impulses lead the characters to self-destructive decisions, often involving leaving relationships and choosing instant gratification in terms of temporary romances. They become outsiders in their city, oscillating between two worlds of false and true selves (Salenius 887). The same applies to Ida. The whole fact is mainly determined by the place where the character is situated. It is the territory of “white man’s norms” that predetermines the character’s ability to remain in self-denial situations (Salenius 888). She never reaches and will never have the possibility of reaching the state of finding her true self, except she would choose her true desires with Vivaldo over ambition and the hectic drive to live at the same pace as the city. As said before, the city has its own qualities, and Ida’s efforts to match them are fatal in this case. It will always put her back in her place. A place for a black individual without a right to fully express herself. She may try her best to break away from social norms, but it will be impossible for her in New York at this time. The exotic image she has built up will eventually remain a mark of her never-found identity, and she will remain lost within who she is and what society wants her to be. She will never reach the state of knowing herself because she remains in an environment with social pressures that will never approve of her uniqueness. A space so stigmatised and restricting that the discovering of identity is impossible.

## Conclusion

The city as a space serves both as a catalyst for self-discovery and a mirror reflecting the complexities of human nature and deepest desires. It functions both as a refuge and a potential threat within its internal structures and forces. Its influence on the characters and their identities is undeniable and presents itself particularly in social interactions, relationships, and patterns of behaviour. Through the experiences of Vivaldo, Rufus, and Ida, Baldwin illustrates how the spatial and social spheres intervene in the lives of the characters and shape themselves according to their inner rules and scales. In all three cases, the impact of the environment is overbearing, and the characters always react extremely – they either kill themselves (Rufus), isolate themselves (Vivaldo), or deny themselves (Ida). The city exceeds them both physically and in imaginary size, and they always surrender. Their relationship with the environment is mutual, and as in the passages with Vivaldo looking from a window or Rufus watching the night street show, the city represents the characters' current feelings and inner states. Just as the wind moans at the moment Vivaldo struggles with his book, or as the saxophonist makes his final cry for love. It is the environment that is being written into them and leaving a mark. They are all connected to the place, and based on the impulses and stimuli, they all overreact to get away from the heaviness of it.

From the perspective of the spatial sphere, the atmosphere surrounding Vivaldo and Rufus changes significantly depending on the time of day and enclosed or open space. Their dynamics significantly vary, and the city offers them a different perception of themselves within the space in each case. For Vivaldo, his options of expression are limited, and he resigns the process of self-exploration in order to stay in the safe surroundings of his own apartment. He turns into one of the many observers rather than the main actor of his own destiny. For Rufus, on

the other hand, the outside world of New York is more tempting, and he takes the chance to at least try finding out who he is. He wanders through the open space of the city and finds both the city's exciting beauty and its destructive side. In both instances, they are both trapped within the walls of the city, and their identities are never actually found – in Vivaldo's case for the surrender and comfort of the little he has, and in Rufus's case for the final act of suicide under the pressure of the space.

For Ida, the act of finding identity is also not complete. She becomes subject to strong spatial influences such as the background of Harlem, collective consciousness and inner racial clashes, and subsequently isolation and loneliness. She remains in conflict of her distinctive features that make her unique, her beliefs, and her desires. In order to maintain at least a semblance of control, she surrenders to the social force and decides to fulfil social expectations in order to gain the desired popularity and success. This is the moment she adopts a false identity to get what she craves and therefore loses not just personal identity and the most basic sense of herself, but also categorical identity and socially attributed identity. Since she is unable to be truthful to herself and others and she lacks authenticity, the option of rediscovery of herself closes for her.

For this thesis, the dual qualities of identity and New York were a recurring theme since they put the characters in contradictory positions. In the end, the setting offered both freedom and barriers for the character, acting as a dominant force that shaped their sense of self and pushed them to their limits. Identity, however, does not have the potential to be achieved in an environment with such restrictive norms. Even though it may look promising at first and the characters are seemingly on their way to finding themselves, their identity is obscured. They will always reflect themselves based on society's standards, mirroring the actions and behaviour of it



on themselves, so they will be able to maintain at least some place within society. The characters don't get a chance to flourish, and they just adapt where they have to in order to survive. From Baldwin's point of view, place represents more than just a physical setting. It is something of a great importance in shaping identities, serving as a dynamic force oscillating between the characters' denied ideas of themselves and society's ideal vision the characters' have to fulfil.

The goal of the thesis was to examine the role of New York in shaping identities in Baldwin's *Another Country*. Even though the novel does not represent an example of purely urban literature and rather presents a mixture of atmospheres, light descriptions of New York, and a strong social subtext, it gives an undoubtedly enriching insight into the problematic perception of the environment in literature and its influence on the characters who live in it. It analyses the background of New York in 1950s, identity as a term, and its role in conjunction with space. It proves that space leaves an indelible mark on characters' self-understanding and behaviour towards the outer world. Their relationship is intertwined and widely complex, and even though the discussion in such a direction is limited, it is no less important and deserves proper attention. In *Another Country*, the city represents something that shapes its inhabitants, rather than something that has been created. It is a space of immense power and may offer multiple options from which to explore.

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