It could be argued that “American writing is particularly interested in the relationship between, on the one hand, sexuality, violence and irrationality, and on the other, communal and individual identities.” This essay aims to investigate this statement, drawing examples from John Berendt’s novel, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The novel and film explore such issues as small town bigotry, repressed sexuality, individuals in the community, and the idea of old and new money.

Berendt’s novel centres around the trial of Jim Williams for the murder of his young lover, Danny Hansford. Sexuality has become an increasingly important issue in modern society where individuals grapple with who they are and who they think they should be, and Berendt attempts to capture this struggle within the pages of the text. On the one hand, homosexuality in Savannah seems to be tolerated, though kept well hidden, or even repressed. Jim Williams, as a wealthy antique salesman, is seen to hold a great deal of power in Savannah, as evidenced by the “exclusive” parties held at his house. Subsequently, the fact that he has a gay lover seems important for him to keep a secret, and for those who know, it appears better to tolerate it, whilst at the same time ignoring it or pretending that it’s not happening. On the other hand, however, through the character of Lady Chablis, Berendt depicts two distinct levels of homosexuality. In contrast to Jim Williams, who prefers to keep his sexuality repressed, Lady Chablis is unashamedly open with her sexuality. This seems to mirror homosexual identities in society, where there is a stark contrast between those open and accepting of their sexuality and those who keep it repressed. It does appear to be very stereotypical that the more open one is with their sexuality, the more “flamboyant” they are. However, this may or may not be an intentional decision made by the author, as much of “Midnight” is based on the facts surrounding the 1981 murder of Danny and the subsequent trials of Jim Williams. Therefore, the characters in the novel and film are depicted, as they would be in real life, as they were involved in the true story of the trial.

It is interesting to note the way in which Berendt’s characters act with regard to sexuality. Danny’s friend, Greg Kerr, is at one time put on the stand as a witness, and questioned in relation to his friend’s murderer. When he is asked if he is a homosexual, he answers no. However, it is soon coaxed out of him that he was a homosexual, but recently “converted” and had been straight for three weeks. It seems that Greg believes that with all the ideas that homosexuality must be kept hidden or repressed, that it is a bad thing and that in “becoming” straight, he is a much better person. This is illustrated in the following passage:

“...And when did you say you extracted yourself from the homosexual scene, as you put it?”

“Well, I’ve been trying for three or four years. I did have one homosexual experience, the last one was three weeks ago, which I barely remember, but up until that point it had been a month and a half. I am doing good, and I will never go back to that type of life again, ‘cause it’s wrong, it’s in the Bible that it’s wrong, and I urge all homosexuals to please get out while they can, because they’re going to end up just an old fuddy-duddy, and nobody’s going to want them. I’m lucky, I’m just a young man, and I’m out of it.” (Berendt, 1995, p.229)

The relationship between sexuality, violence and irrationality can be seen to be consecutive, where the emergence or appearance of one, leads to the others, and where perhaps the violence is a result of the repression. It most often begins with sexuality, followed by violence as a result of pent up anger (due to confusion and the repression of sexuality) by the homosexual, or violence towards the homosexual, due to arrogance or threat bought upon by a perceived difference. Irrationality then follows, where through desperation or self-defence, sound judgement is cast aside, and actions are carried out which are illogical and would never occur under other circumstances.

It seems that a combination of Jim’s repressed sexuality and irrationality leads to his violent act, which results in Danny’s death. In a moment where his drunken lover, who turns violent on him (attempting to kill him) confronts Jim, he makes his decision (in self-defence) which is to kill Danny. Once the facts are revealed, it appears that Jim may have acted less in self-defence and more lacking in sound judgement. As it turned out, Danny’s gun without the power of reason, that was ultimately a very violent one. These two characters clearly exemplify the relationship between sexuality, violence and irrationality. Firstly, we have two individuals with homosexual tendencies, Jim the repressed homosexual and Danny, his bisexual lover. Danny appears to be a somewhat violent person right from the start. This is demonstrated in the following passage:

“Anybody tries to break in here, man, they’re gonna get the shit kicked out of ‘em. I hope I’m here when somebody tries it. Yeahhhhh! Cause nobody fuckin’ cleans and gets away with it.” Danny cuts the air with a karate chop and then quick-kicked the imaginary intruder. (Berendt, 1995, p.131)

Furthermore, He turns up drunk on the night of one of Jim’s parties and becomes violent towards Jim. His violence appears to stem from a combination of his drunken state, his need for money (which Jim won’t give him), which in turn leads to desperation, further anger, and a manifestation of irrationality, as he attempts to kill Jim. Jim on the other hand, is faced with Danny’s violent outbreak, and through self-defense, makes an irrational decision, which inevitably leads to Danny’s death.

Another central theme that appears to be used in most novels and films, and which occurs in life itself, is the notion that certain communities will tolerate a difference unless that individual (difference) becomes too much. The difference between individuals is evident in “Midnight” with another two very distinctively different characters, Minerva and Lady Chablis. All three seem to be outcast from the rest of Savannah because of these differences, yet embraced at the same time because of their differences.

In the case of Minerva, she is depicted as the “witch doctor or voodoo priestess” of Beaufort, (just outside Savannah), who accompanies Jim to the cemetery to contact Danny’s spirit. However, it’s not just Jim who seeks the help of the “witch doctor.” Minerva is in demand by a variety of people, who seek her help to put curses on enemies, cast love spells, etc. Although she is clearly different to others, to the extent that she almost appears to be eccentric to the more straight-laced people, the community, who seek her for the unique (yet different) services she has to offer, embraces her.

Minerva is not tolerated by all in Savannah though. For the same reason people embrace her, other people consider her a threat. Her voodoo and witch skills prove that she is tolerated in the community, by those who seek her help, yet there are others who feel threatened by her supernatural powers. This is exemplified in the following passage:

Minerva picked up her shopping bag and headed out the back door. We followed close behind as she made her way down the lane with a slow and ponderous stride. As she approached the next house, an old man got up from a chair on the porch and went inside. A window in another house closed. A door shut somewhere. Two men standing beside an oleander bush parted when they caught sight of Minerva and withdrew into the darkness. (Berendt, 1995, p.247)

Yet another example of this inclusive / exclusive contrast is Lady Chablis, the drag queen who performs regularly at the Pickup. She too appears to be embraced by the community, yet at the same time repulsed. Although she appears to be a beautiful, elegant woman, Chablis is not quite fully male or female, which is partly why the community may see her as a threat (being so different) and not tolerate her. This is evident when Chablis explains how when one of her boyfriends “touched her down there” revealing her secret, and being appalled, pulled a gun to her head. He let it slide, but left her with the caution that she “better not pull that shit with nobody else or you’re gonna get hurt” (p.107).

Chablis is also seen as a threat, and therefore not tolerated, because of her nature to be so up front, which “disturb the peace” and quiet of small town Savannah and it’s prim and proper citizens. This is illustrated when Lady Chablis invites herself to the black debutante ball. Sitting at a table between two matrons, Lady Chablis begins to do what she does best, saying things just the way she sees them, even if it isn’t appropriate or there isn’t a shred of truth in any of what she says. Chablis tells the matrons how her “cousin” La Vella, (who she only meet earlier that evening) was worried she wouldn’t make it as a debutante, proceeding to tell them a made up account of how she attempted to relieve La Vella’s fears.
"Now listen, girl. You got nothin' to worry about. If Vanessa Williams can get Miss America in spite of all the checkin' up they do at the Miss America Pageant, you ought to be able to slide right by that two-bit debutante-screening committee in little ol' Savannah." (Berendt, 1995, pg 329)

Understandably disgusted, the two matrons glance across Chablis at each other. Chablis goes on with her made up story, which leaves the matrons even more disturbed:

The two women stared wordlessly at Chablis, who continued to eat her breakfast daintily while she talked.

One of the women coughed; the other looked away from the table in desperation, as if searching the horizon for a rescue ship. (Berendt, 1995, p.329)

It is evident that the ladies are uncomfortable or feel threatened by Chablis' up-front nature. Although Chablis is happy and comfortable with whom she is, she is aware she doesn't fit in Savannah, and that some people are threatened by her presence in the community:

"If I went out without my drag, honey those rednecks would clock me for the big sissy I am and kick my ass. I am serious. I'd be more paranoid out of my drag than in it. But there's somethin' else that does worry me. Here in Savannah, I mean. Walkin' down the street as a couple with a white boy. That makes me paranoid in Savannah." (Berendt, 1995, p.106)

Chablis stands out in Savannah because of her difference, and this seems to threaten the ideal, quiet lives of those in Savannah. However, there are also those who embrace Lady Chablis for the very same reason. This is seen in her popularity as a showgirl at the local nightclub. She is the headline act at the club, with posters of her adorning the walls, and she receives the highest pay rate of all the showgirls employed there. During her acts, Chablis has the crowd captivated (just the way she likes it): everyone loves her. This is a stark contrast from her position within the community of Savannah when she is "outside" the club, so to speak. It appears, while she is on stage, in a fairly controlled environment the community can tolerate her difference, but when she is outside, in the real world of Savannah, this difference is perceived as a threat and she is not tolerated.

As you can see, by using John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* as an example of American fiction, it is evident that American writing is concerned with the relationship between on the one hand, sexuality, violence and irrationality and on the other, communal and individual identities. This is apparent in the consecutive relationship between sexuality, violence and irrationality, in that one leads to the others. The presence of one of these variables invariably leads to the emergence of the others. The relationship between communal and individual identities is dealt with in the novel, by illustrating that a difference is tolerated until it becomes a threat.

**Works Cited:**