

"can't buy me love":
money and
masculinity in
giovanni's room



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In James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*, references to wealth are juxtaposed with moments of sexuality in order to comment on how economic standing influences gender identity construction, while making a larger critical statement about the fragility of traditional American notions of masculinity. Following tropes of the expatriate genre, the protagonist David is seen sending away to his father for money, soliciting money from friends, staying in hotels, and constantly eating or drinking at restaurants and bars. Told through the first person point of view, each of these conventional 'American in Paris' scenes unveils David's relationship with money, as it relates to his own masculinity. He struggles to maintain his self image as an American man in Paris, as he does not have the structure of a job or a marriage to create his identity against. Similarly, in the absence of these two aspects of life, David lacks power. The result is a physical and emotional displacement, as he is left on his own in a city of men who he believes are completely unlike himself—most notably, Jacques, Giovanni, and Guillaume. The four men interact with each other throughout and it is the ways in which they use their money that distinguishes them. The male characters in the novel act as foils of each other, and David's perception of his own masculine identity is made clear through his anxieties regarding wealth and sexuality; the two intersect in this novel, showing how David perceives money as being analogous with male power and can be used either to maintain or degrade one's manhood.

The contempt with which David views Jacques—man who is secure both financially and sexually—is a projection of his own insecurities about his identity; David worries constantly about Jacques's loudness and brash

honesty, which both threaten his private fears and desires becoming public. However, David also encourages a relationship with Jacques out of a need for money, calling him up to meet for supper despite thinking him “ a fool and a coward” (Baldwin 23). Although he expresses reluctance towards a relationship with Jacques—he mentions that he only calls him out of desperation, after already writing to friends and receiving no response—David allows Jacques to emasculate him by spending money on him. His hypocrisy is evident in an early interaction between the two: at a “ rather nice restaurant,” David narrates that he had “ arranged to borrow ten thousand francs from [Jacques] before we had finished our apertifs,” (26) even though he later says, “ I don’t spend money on men” (30). This cognitive dissonance indicates the value David places on money—both for what it can get him, and for what it represents to the world. He compromises his desire to assert masculinity by supporting himself financially during a time of need, while simultaneously judging Jacques harshly for succumbing to his request. This is an instance where he fears the side of himself that Jacques coaxes out of him. David rejects this idea of himself as vulnerable and unmasculine by insulting Jacques: “ There was, in this tolerance of mine, a fund, by no means meagre, of malicious knowledge—I had drawn on it when I called him up to borrow money. I knew that Jacques could only hope to conquer the boy before us if the boy was, in effect, for sale; and if he stood with such arrogance on an auction block he could certainly find bidders richer and more attractive than Jacques.” (28) He does this in order to maintain his own image, rather than to tarnish Jacques’s. He even admits his own overwhelming insecurities when he says, “ I understand now that the contempt I felt for him involved my self-contempt” (23). The tension created

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by Jacques's wealth and his openness about his homosexuality destabilizes David's conception of manhood, specifically as it relates to himself, and he must rectify this disconnect through contemptuous behavior.

David's power dynamic with Jacques parallels that of his relationship with Giovanni, except their roles are reversed. When they meet for the first time, David realizes that he has to pay for their drinks because "it was impossible to tug Jacques' sleeve for the money as though [David] were his ward" (32). He refrains from asking Jacques for money as a way of avoiding emasculation in front of Giovanni—another instance in which the lack of money is associated with the lack of power. The parallel between the two relationships is emphasized even further by the fact that David uses the ten thousand franc note that Jacques gave him moments before in order to pay for his and Giovanni's round of drinks. This scene is also another example of David benefiting from the power dynamic that comes from wealth, while also attempting to outwardly reject it. This can be seen in their dialogue, as Giovanni tells him, "You are rich," to which David replies, "But no. No. I simply have no change," (32). He does not wish to fully fill the role that Jacques typically plays of the wealthy, older man in a relationship, but he also gains pleasure from the interaction because it gives him a sense of power. This pleasure can be seen in his growing relationship with Giovanni, as he continues to spend time with him in various bars and cafes across the city. However, their relationship becomes tumultuous because the balance in power is quickly lost. Unlike with Jacques, there is no clear gap between David and Giovanni financially. Each is seen paying for the other at various moments. The same night that David buys drinks, Giovanni returns the favor

by paying the bill for their oysters and wine. At points, Giovanni supports David—especially after David moves in with him and remains unemployed. This peace does not last for long, though, and after losing his job, Giovanni is once again asking David to send away for more money.

The key difference between the two relationships mentioned is that money is used as a facilitator of intimacy between Giovanni and David, while having the opposite effect with David and Jacques. When Giovanni asks David if he has ever slept under a bridge, he responds by saying, “ Not yet... but I may. My hotel wants to throw me out,” which he admits is “ out of a desire to put [himself], in terms of an acquaintance with wintry things, on an equal footing with [Giovanni],” (46). In this moment, the equality of their financial power leads into a physical closeness, as Giovanni holds David’s hand during this conversation. However, once again David is repulsed by the idea of emasculating himself; he invalidates this intimate moment immediately after, explaining, “ the fact that I had said it as he held my hand made it sound to me unutterably helpless and soft and coy... I could not say anything to counteract this impression... I pulled my hand away, pretending that I had done so in order to search for a cigarette,” (46). He rejects his vulnerability, out of fear that it makes him appear weak and unlike the image of the traditional American man against which he constructs his identity. He associates his conversation with feminine qualities and is immediately embarrassed of his appearance in the cab. He only gives into his desire for intimacy after it is confirmed that he and Giovanni are equals: the drinks, the cab that Jacques pays for, and the oysters. The imbalanced money-power dynamic between Jacques and Giovanni had previously provided him with a

layer of protection against intimacy, which is stripped away in these scenes leading up to his first sexual experience with Giovanni. David attempts to protest one final time when he tells Giovanni, " I must go home... I must pay my hotel bill," (62), but then easily accepts Giovanni's invitation. David's guarded nature only returns when he is once again placed in the position of power, and expected to fulfill the traditional breadwinner role of the American man. When " the money dwindled" and Giovanni began asking repeatedly if David had gone to the American Express, David becomes " sick" of Paris and wishes to leave (115). The balance in their relationship is once again lost here, and results in an emotional distance that threatens their ability to be vulnerable and intimate with each other and reminds David of his insecurities about his public image. Giovanni's reliance on him brings him an intense discomfort and desire to once again be near a woman—first Miss Rheingold, and then Hella.

When compared to the other relationships in the novel—specifically, that which exists between David and Hella, and between Giovanni and Guillaume—the relationship between David and Giovanni becomes an example of intermediacy in a money-power dynamic, while the other two relationships are examples of extremes. The former is an example of the traditional extreme, with the man taking the position of power over the woman, while the latter is what David views as the perverse extreme. This is one of the reasons that causes David's fixation with and subsequent detest for both relationships. Initially, when David is struggling in his relationship with Giovanni, his relationship with Hella flourishes. He finally agrees to " settle down," a prospect that at first he rejected; when he writes to his father

that he “ won’t keep any secrets” anymore and that he “ found a girl,” he is solidifying his role as a husband (124). He projects this desire for masculine stability on Giovanni in one of their final conversations: “ What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? All this love you talk about–isn’t it just that you want to be made to feel strong? You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little girl.” (142) This argument is made ironic by David’s engagement, which shows his craving for the traditional image of a relationship. Their engagement allows them each to follow the rigid gender roles and expectations that have been laid out for them by their culture, creating a paradoxical space for physical intimacy and emotional distance: “ We stayed in her room, we made love a lot, we went to the movies and had long, frequently rather melancholy dinners in strange restaurants” (146). David feels trapped by his role in his relationship with Hella, which is only intensified by the fact that the couple was “ not rich” but living in a city that is “ a playground for the rich” (158-9). Their sexual relationship also dwindles, as “ all that had once delighted [David] seemed to have turned sour on [his] stomach” (158). When David loses his ability to financially support Hella, he begins to once again feel like a failure as a man. This is seen when he explains, “ When my fingers began, involuntarily, to lose their hold on Hella, I realized that I was dangling from a high place and that I had been clinging to her for my very life” (158). His ability to take care of Hella and play the role of her husband allowed him to feel masculine–the realization that he could not provide for her successfully or connect with her

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physically destructed the identity that he had crafted around these characteristics. He compares this loss of identity with the loss of life, as he feels as if he is preparing for a “ long fall” off a cliff (158). The couple is contemptuous of each other because neither is fulfilling their perceived expected role, making them a dysfunctional match.

A similarly dysfunctional and unbalanced pairing can be seen between Giovanni and Guillaume. In a similar way to David, Guillaume fills the role of financially providing for Giovanni and taking care of him. Furthermore, Guillaume also forces Giovanni into the traditionally feminine role that David projected onto him, as well. He asserts his financial dominance over Giovanni by calling him “ a gangster and a thief and a dirty little street boy” and by taking away his source of income (105). Throughout the text, Guillaume is empowered by his ability to coerce Giovanni into engaging in a relationship with him, while Giovanni is emasculated by his own desperation–this dynamic mirrors that of David’s initial calling of Jacques when he needs money. Another paradox is introduced here, as David can be compared to both Giovanni and Guillaume, since he has filled both roles depending on his level of wealth and power. This is a source of contempt for David, which can be seen in his descriptions of Guillaume, whom he often calls a “ fairy” or a “ silly old queen” (155). David refuses to equate himself with Guillaume, and distances himself by insulting him in a way that is comparable to how he treated Jacques. When describing the murder scene, Guillaume is narrated as being “ precipitate, flabby, and moist,” (155). David resolves the contradictions within his definitions of masculinity by projecting his insecurities about his economic standing and power, and about his physical

appearance onto Guillaume. His attempts to assert a definitive image of his masculinity by maintaining a certain amount of wealth are sabotaged by his hypocrisy, which is only emphasized by his cultural displacement. By positioning David in a setting that disregards his cultural standards, Baldwin exposes his character's reliance on social cues to feel secure in his identity.