

Sex and power: the sun also rises and giovanni's room



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The relationship between sex and power within literature is incredibly complex. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway features the main character Jake, who faces the relationship between sex and power via his impotence, as well as his love for a woman. In comparison, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, highlights the main character David as confronting the relationship between sex and power through his closeted homosexuality along with his infatuation with forcing himself to conform to heterosexual ideals. Both Jake and David portray diverse sexual situations within *The Sun Also Rises* and *Giovanni's Room*. With these situations, the overlying theme of sex rendering one powerless, and contrarily, sex rendering one powerful, is exemplified between the characters and their texts.

Jake, the main character within *The Sun Also Rises*, bears the debilitating trait of impotence due to the loss of his penis in war. With his impotence comes a non-existent and utterly impossible sex life. This makes Jake an interesting character, as his failure to be able to have sexual relations due to his lack of the proper organ leaves him powerless. Jake's lack of power due to his impotence is initially seen in an encounter with a prostitute named Georgette where, " She looked up to be kissed. She touched me with one hand and I put her hand away... ' What's the matter? You sick?' ' Yes'" (Hemingway 23). Ever so quickly we see Jake's desire for sex, yet when the situation arises, he is forced to stop, by telling Georgette he is sick. In a way Jake is sick, not in health but in mind. His mental infatuation with intercourse has to be secretly subdued by excuses, rather than the truth, ultimately rendering Jake powerless to fulfill his desire for sexual intercourse. Jake's impotence is further elucidated in an encounter with his best friend Bill. Bill

depicts Jake's relationship between sex and power perfectly, stating, "You've lost touch with the soil... You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex" (Hemingway 120). As Bill describes, Jake has given in to his impotence. Due to the fact that he cannot have sex, he has become powerless, losing touch with normal life and drinking himself into an alarming state. Nonetheless, it is Jake's memory of hospitalization that truly shows his loss of power, as he remembers a colonel explaining to him, "'You, a foreigner, an Englishman'... ' have given more than your life'" (Hemingway 39). This instance shows just how important the penis is to Jake, let alone any man. The penis signifies manhood and sexual freedom, and without it Jake has, as the colonel explained, lost more than his life, leaving him sexually isolated and thus powerless.

Sex and rendering one powerless is further seen within *The Sun Also Rises* between Jake and the woman he loves, Brett. Due to his impotence, Jake is unable to have sex with Brett, in many instances giving her a great deal of power over Jake as he cannot produce love through a sexual aspect. Jake's lack of power constantly agitates him, for instance one night alone he discloses, "... I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry" (Hemingway 39). Jake is overtaken by the loneliness he feels at night without Brett by his side. He cannot sexually please her, thus she cannot be with him, establishing Jake as powerless and out of control with his emotions. The lack of ability to have an intimate and sexual relationship with Brett, forcing Jake powerless, is further seen in instances in which Jake helps Brett with

other men. These instances severely disturb Jake, as he claims just after penning a telegram to Brett, “ That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right” (Hemingway 243). After a repetitive cycle of introducing Brett to men she can have sex with, he has become disgusted by not only his actions, but by the fact that he cannot satisfy her himself. With impotence, and without the ability to please Brett, Jake is utterly powerless to the aura of sex within his life.

Throughout Giovanni's Room the main character David confronts the relationship between sex and power as a result of his determination to be sexually attracted to women while truthfully being a homosexual man. David is often left powerless by ceding to his homosexual desires. David's first homosexual encounter with a boy named Joey brought upon many eye-opening feelings, as David describes, “... we gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love” (Baldwin 8). From this it is clear that David is a homosexual, yet merely the morning after David becomes ashamed, claiming, “... my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: But Joey is a boy” (Baldwin 9). This sexual encounter has frightened David, as he essentially refuses to openly recognize his homosexuality. Ultimately, David realizes that upon his first time having sex with a male, “ The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in

which I would lose my manhood” (Baldwin 9). Homosexual intercourse has forced David into a plethora of mixed emotions. David realizes that he is a homosexual, yet the literal act of sex has led him to conclude that by conceding to his homosexual desires he has lost his manhood, and in turn is left entirely powerless.

David’s infatuation with forcing himself to be sexually attracted to women furthers the relationship of sex rendering one powerless within Giovanni’s Room. In one instance David, “... wanted to find a girl, any girl at all” (Baldwin 95). David is yearning to prove to himself that he is not a homosexual, leading to his desire to find a woman to have relations with. Eventually, David finds what he was looking for with a woman named Sue, and with their arrival at her house, he grimly conveys, “ I felt a hardness and a constriction in her... What we were about to do would not be pretty” (Baldwin 99). David knows that this is not what he truly wants, yet he is going to force himself to do it just for a glimmer of the potential power he associates with heterosexual intercourse. Nonetheless, while having sex David realizes, “... somewhere at the bottom of me... my fears had been excessive and groundless and, in effect, a lie: it became clearer every instant that what I had been afraid of had nothing to do with my body” (Baldwin 100). While having sex, David has realized that he cannot change who he truly is. It is not his body that can be molded into a straight man. Thus, David is constrained to the fact that his mind desires the power of being heterosexual. Therefore, his hope that sex with a woman would allow him to feel the power he associates with heterosexual intercourse has come to a screeching halt. Rather, David is bound to the trepidation that, “ Sue was not

Hella and she did not lessen my terror... she increased it, she made it more real than it had been before" (Baldwin, 100). This encounter is monumental for David, as it has struck a great fear of the truth within him. More importantly, David's relations with Sue have forced him to distinguish that the relationship between his obsession with being heterosexual, specifically the intercourse, and the power he associates with this ideal, has left him powerless.

Although both *The Sun Also Rises* and *Giovanni's Room* often portray the relationship between sex and power as forcing both Jake and David powerless, through the two characters it is clear that sex can also render one powerful. Due to the fact that Jake, on occasion, attempts to convince himself that even without sex he holds power, this notion of power within *The Sun Also Rises* is subtle. This instance occurs with the conclusion of the book, as Jake and Brett are taking a taxi ride together, when Brett suggests, "' Oh, Jake... we could have had such a damned good time together'" (Hemingway 251). Typically, Jake would plea for love and exclusivity, or even let his emotions overtake him and break down. However, Jake does quite the opposite, asserting, "' Yes... Isn't it pretty to think so?'" (Hemingway 251). Jake's response is brutally honest, portraying a lack of emotional ties that was not seen throughout the whole text. That simple statement speaks volumes to the power Jake has obtained by relinquishing sex, specifically with Brett, as his obsession. With his newfound outlook, it is clear that Jake no longer yearns for an intimate relationship with Brett, as he is finally refusing to let his impotency and sexual desire for her to define his life, bestowing a significant amount of power upon him.

The notion of the relationship between sex and power as allowing one to be powerful is propelled further within Giovanni's Room. One form of this is evident when David and Giovanni settle down together, as David reflects that, "Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning. In the beginning, our life together held a joy and amazement which was newborn every day" (Baldwin 75). With newfound love and unity alongside Giovanni, David is at ease with his intimate homosexual relationship. As ease and happiness are rare concerning David, this shows a great level of power that the sexual relationship has given him at this point. David lives without fear of Hella, societal norms, and his preoccupation with heterosexuality. Even if just for a brief moment in time, David clearly portrays sex as allowing himself to feel powerful. David's power is further exemplified in a moment of honesty, much like Jake had with Brett. Blinded by Hella's return David finds himself a slave to his sexuality, as he chronicles, "... blind with alcohol and grim with lust, I climbed the stairs of a dark hotel in company with a sailor... We spent the next day together, and the next... we stood drinking together in a crowded bar" (Baldwin 162). It is in this gay bar that Hella uncovers the truth, but rather than pleading for forgiveness, David simply states, "' Well... now you know'" (Baldwin 162). David is careless in saying this, realizing that who he truly is outweighs his now former infatuation with heterosexual intimacy. After the subsequent fallout from the truth David narrates, " And at last I step out into the morning... where a few people stand... They are vivid beneath the awakening sky... The morning weighs on my shoulders with the dreadful weight of hope" (Baldwin 169). David has finally found a glimmer of hope. He is no longer powerless to sexual confusion, rather he is inevitably powerful

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with liberation from a life obsessed with forcing upon himself society's idea of sex while shunning his desired form of sex.

Jake and David hold their respective differences, yet share many similarities pertaining to the relationship between sex and power. Varying degrees of sex define both Jake and David's lives, as each text revolves around a notion of sex, often portraying such as a medium for each characters actions. When considering each character's relationship with sex and power it is clear that within both texts sex defines power, allowing sex to render one powerless, as well as sex containing the ability to yield one powerful.