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Page 81-98

Manhood in Jeopardy: Masculinity and Shame in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

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Abstract

Masculinity has been a source of confusion and rather problematic in the representations of Queer culture. Masculinity is essentially a construct that not only informs a person's sexual habits but also how that person behaves in society. Thus being, it does not necessarily inform the sexual orientation of a person. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, is natural. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are closely related to the concept of heteronormativity which normalizes and thus, legitimizes, heterosexual tendencies and practices, thereby, marginalizing homosexuality, among others. Attached to the concept of masculinity is a sense of shame and repellence in being or acting effeminate. This shame, along with an all-encompassing sense of Homophobia are two of the main reasons that normalized Heteronormativity in contemporary society. This essay will explore toxic masculine behaviour and its relationship with shame and Heteronormativity in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). We will also briefly look at Gore Vidal's 1948 novel *The City and the Pillar* by way of establishing this point.

In this essay, we will see how the characters in the novel are repeatedly weighed down by the powerful heterosexual ideals pervasive in their society. Finding his homosexual desires stifled in an aggressively masculine environment, the protagonist give in to heteronormativity, becoming increasingly manly, sacrificing his love, in his bid to be assimilated into the heterosexually dominant society. A brief study of the Baudrillardian theory of Sign Value with respect to David's relationships could shed some light on the protagonist's behaviour. I have also observed that in trying to conform to the heterosexual society, the characters fail to embrace traits of toxic masculinity while despising fairies at the same time.

Keywords: Gender, masculinity, femininity, queer, race

Introduction

“For many people, the antiquity of sexual norms is a reason to obey them.” (Warner 6) Heteronormativity is a practice or an idea that normalizes and prioritizes heterosexual behaviour while treating homosexuality as an aberration or abnormality. According to Stevi Jackson, “Heteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life.” (Jackson 107) Throughout history, Heteronormativity has mustered force through marginalizing homosexuality as the other, the strange and potentially harmful. While the quality of masculinity can be ascribed to any individual, such as a woman or a gay man, it is Heteronormativity, amongst other things, which devised power relations between man and woman into the masculine and the feminine. Historian George Chauncey says that “the hetero-homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture” is a “stunningly recent creation” that came around mid-twentieth century while earlier a “man’s sexual normality or abnormality” was not judged by the “gender of his sexual partner(s), but by his gender performance.” (Thomas 596-597) This previous system allowed men to have sex with other men and remain completely “normal” as long as they “conformed to the masculine codes of dress, styling, and bodily component, and were careful to take only the ostensibly ‘active’ (penetrative) role.” (597) This directly links to the toxic masculinity we will look at in this essay. All the protagonists exhibit masculinity, which, in most cases, can be argued to be toxic. But most importantly, their codes of conduct are unmistakably deemed as masculine or manly by traditional definitions. This essay will look at how these texts and films expose such “straight-acting” protagonists and thus, help break down their toxic, often misogynistic masculinity.

David: A Masculine Homosexual

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* revolves around a young American man, David, and his relationships with various males. David, on the one hand, is gay while on the other hand, he is a character deeply entrenched in the archaic American notion of masculinity. David is unmistakably gay, and that he is made to think that he might be bisexual (there's a lot of craving on his part throughout the novel to marry a woman) is the work of the dominant heterosexual norms. However, David's recounting of his first sexual experience, makes it quite evident that he is not bisexual at all, but a homosexual person. The first realization that he is sexually attracted to Joey comes when the two of them are boyishly playing in the bathroom "I know that I felt something ... which I had not felt before." (Baldwin 6-8) However, he subtly assumes the role of the dominant male in this relationship, conferring to Joey the status of the fairy: walking back to Joey's home from the movies, David takes pride in his taller stature - "I was proud, I think, because his head came just below my ear."(7) In fact, physicality plays a big role in the appropriation of gender roles. Physically unimpressive men are mocked as "sissies" while the one assuming a feminine role is called a "fairy." That night as he becomes intimate with Joey he feels, "... something happened in him and in me which made this touch different from any touch either of us had ever known"(7-8) and "... for the first time in my life, I was aware of another person's body, of another person's smell."(8)

The shame and fear he feels each time he has had a homosexual encounter also can also be attributed to the idea of manliness embedded in him. When whistling at girls with Joey on the beach, he feels the same when they ignore them: "I am sure that if any of the girls we whistled at that day had shown any signs of responding, the ocean would not have been deep enough to drown our shame and terror."(6) He

feels a two-pronged shame and terror. His trepidation springs from the fear that if any of the girls played along forcing him to engage in a sexual activity, he might give away his sexual orientation. The “shame and terror” a gay man must feel in a heterosexual society is palpable in these lines. He fears the girls must have seen through them, judging by their body language, and found at their heart, not “manhood,” but the very absence of it. Seeing Joey’s naked body, as he lay sleeping after their eventful night, David again becomes terrified by the connotations it carries – “It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy*. I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. That body suddenly the black opening of a cavern ... in which I would lose my manhood.”(Baldwin 9) David perceives in Joey’s naked body the physical power of a man and the power a man can hold in society. Joey’s body is compared to a cave, a domain of the unknown, of immense possibilities for sexual exploration which both attracts and terrifies David. Ironically, he was previously priding himself on appearing bigger and hence, manlier than Joey, yet the latter’s slender structure, like a cave, threatens to engulf his “manhood.” In a similar vein, Jeffrey Johan Cohen’s idea of a “monstrous body” is ascribed by Danijela Petkovic to any identity that threatens the heteronormative system.(Petković) In Stephen Dunn’s *Closest Monster*, the gay protagonist witnesses a gay boy brutally impaled with a rod and left paralyzed by men acting as defenders of heteronormativity by crushing the monster.

Aggressive Masculinity gives way to shame, which in turn, develops homophobia and misogyny. Michael Warner says,

So the difficult question is not: how do we get rid of sexual shame? The answer to that one will inevitably be: get rid of the sex. The question, rather, is this: what will we do with our shame? And the usual response is: pin it on someone

else. Sexual shame is not just a fact of life; it is also political. Although nearly everyone can be easily embarrassed about sex, some people stand at greater risk than others. They might be beaten, murdered, jailed, or merely humiliated ... they might simply be rendered inarticulate, or frustrated, since shame makes some pleasures tacitly inadmissible, unthinkable. (Warner 3)

This shame is felt by David after having sex with Joey. He is afraid that even though he identifies as masculine and conforms to gender roles, he is not safe if his sexual orientation is revealed. Hence, he had to drop every erotic desire toward a man to save himself from "the power of alien norms."(3) Hence, he recalls: "The incident with Joey had shaken me profoundly and its effect was to make me secretive and cruel."(Baldwin 15-16) Him becoming "secretive" and "cruel" as he will have to stifle his love for someone and just use them for gratifying his sexual pleasures. He will never be able to shed the disgust he has formed for men who have sex with other men, even though he is one himself. Hence, he takes the "decision, made long ago in Joey's bed" (20) that he "... had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me."(20) He goes on, "Even constant motion, of course, does not prevent an occasional mysterious drag, a drop like an airplane hitting an air pocket ... one very frightening such drop while I was in the Army which involved a fairy who was later court-martialed out."(20) The derogatory way he talks about sexual activities between two men is evident; gay sex is a "drop," giving way to one's instincts: a "mysterious drag." The sharp contrast in the punishment meted out to the people involved is also revealed: the "fairy" or the passive and effeminate partner is the one to be court-martialed. Also exposing the limitations of heteronormativity is the fact that in the Army, deemed to be a

very “manly” profession, two men should be found engaging in homosexual activity.

Similar masculine traits are also exhibited by the protagonist in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, Jim Willard. Vidal wanted to break down the tradition of “American novels of ‘inversion’” that “dealt with transvestites or lonely bookish boys who married unhappily and pined for marines. I broke the mold. My two lovers in this novel were athletes ...” (Thomas 599) The text “asserts that gay men are not women in disguise.” (600) This had its effects on the readers as Stephen Adams said: “Vidal committed the heresy of choosing a clean-cut all-American boy as his protagonist,” at which “the public were shocked by the projection of the sheer ordinariness of homosexuality.”(599) Jim Willard is a tennis champion in his high school and is extremely popular. He is fiercely masculine, narcissistic, and condescends to effeminate gay men and women. Just like David uses both Joey and Giovanni to satisfy his sexual pleasures, Jim uses Bob. He is careful to dissociate himself and his sexual activities with that from the other gay people: he “made no connection between he and Bob had done and what his new acquaintances did. Too many of them behaved like women.”(600) He sees effeminate gay men as something exotic and unnatural: “... he found himself fascinated by the stories they told of their affairs with one another ... he wanted to know about them if only out of a morbid desire to discover what had been so natural and complete for him could be so perfectly corrupted by these strange womanish creatures.” (600) The sex, which is primal and instinctive and to him serves a purpose just like a machine, is “natural” for him whereas, he is insensitive to the various other acts of love involved in a relationship. We find similar homophobic resonances in David as he describes the scene in a gay bar in Paris:

There were, of course, les folles, always dressed in the most improbable combinations, screaming

like parrots the details of their latest love-affairs – their love affairs always seemed to be hilarious. Occasionally, one would swoop in, ... to convey the news that he – but they always called each other ‘she’ – had just spent time with a celebrated movie star, or boxer. Then all the others closed in on this newcomer and they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard. I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of them. (Baldwin 26-27)

As such they are reduced to mere entertainers, who are, though disgusting, serve the purpose of providing petty entertainment. Invocation of animal imageries such as “*les folles*,” “screaming like parrots,” “peacock garden,” and “barnyard” dehumanize them. Like Jim’s “womanish creatures,” David is repulsed by fairies, who make him “uneasy; ... in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings.” (Thomas 597) Again, the shame he associates with homosexual relationships is palpable. Moreover, he is also disgusted, because like one’s own excrement, one’s homosexuality comes from within, being inherent. He goes on:

And I had been in this bar, too, two or three times; once very drunk, I had been accused of causing a minor sensation by flirting with a soldier. My memory of the night was, happily, very dim, and I took the attitude that no matter how drunk I may have been, I could not possibly have done such a thing. (Baldwin 27)

This results in a denial, a repression of such memories just as when he unsuccessfully tried to repress his involvement with Joey which bears testament to the blemish in him. His masculinity makes him believe:

I have not thought of that boy – Joey – for many years; but I see him quite clearly tonight. ... the idea that such a person could have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me. So I forgot him. (6)

Masculinity and the Fear of the Feminine

Along with the heterosexual society he lives in, David inherits his “manhood” primarily from his father. His masculinity has always been a source of confusion for him. The clash between his natural instincts and the unnatural masculinity thrust upon himself drives him restless to leave the country for a more liberal France. He recalls, “My flight may, indeed, have begun that summer – which does not tell me where to find the germ of the dilemma ... it is somewhere before me, locked in the reflection I am watching in the window as the night comes down outside.” (Baldwin 10) He vaguely feels, but does not yet locate the “germ of the dilemma” as something in the “reflection” of himself. The “germ” or the source of confusion is his masculinity that his father had passed on to him. At the same time, it is also suggested that the lack of a mother in his life led to both the development of his toxic “manhood” as well as a revulsion for the female body as revealed in his nightmares about her:

I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and

cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive.” (10-11)

This, as discussed earlier, is the fear of the monster his masculine self perceives in the female body. The fear and disgust for the other are evoked through words like “putrescent,” “dry,” “sickening,” and “enormous”. Just like the “black opening of a cavern” he fears being engulfed by the female. His yet unidentified homosexual instincts reject the female body as sterile and “dry as metal.” He does not remember his mother at all, who died when he was only five, yet she appears in his nightmares, suggesting the disastrous consequences to come of his relationships with women.

David’s father is a man with features that in a heterosexual society would be deemed as masculine; a man with a “square, ruddy face” with a nature, though not easily, but when angered, is “like a fire which will bring the whole house down.” (11) David remembers how, in his formative years, his father became the model on whom he started to mould himself. He recounts when guests came to their home, his father was at his flamboyant best: “Then my father was at his best, boyish and expansive, moving through the crowded room with a glass in his hand, refilling people’s drinks, laughing a lot, handling all the men as though they were his brothers, and flirting with the women.” (12)

Overtly Masculine characters, apart from often being playboys, also tend to seek fraternity with men with similar mindsets. This is highlighted in Jim’s frequenting of bars where he would find men like himself, who are equally repulsed at the sight of “womanish creatures.” This is also reflected in David’s father’s attempt to treat him more like a friend than an offspring, resulting in David’s discomfiture – “I did not want to be his buddy; I wanted to be his son. What passed between us as masculine candour exhausted and appalled me.” (Baldwin 16-17) One night, David overhears a

quarrel between his father and his aunt, Ellen when he returns home late. Ellen confronts him, accusing him of being a bad example to his son by masquerading with women: "Do you really think," she asks "that you're the kind of man he ought to be when he grows up?" (14) to which he replies, stammering with anger: "If you think - if you *think* - that I'm going to stand - stand - stand here - and argue with *you* about my private life - *my* private life! ... you're out of your mind."(14) The misogyny can be clearly felt in these words as he denies his sister the right to talk about the "private life" of a male. The female being eliminated as unworthy of interfering or dictating a man's life is a tacitly accepted rule in a heterosexual society, a toxic trait that David inherits.

Throughout the novel, women serve only to pose as symbols of normalcy in David's life. His masculine ideals denied them the status of friend and lover, rendering them as mechanical entities in his life. However, it's this ideal that makes the importance of a woman indispensable to him. It's only natural that a privileged, white, middle-class American man should be with a woman in a heterosexual society. This stabilizing power of the woman is first felt by David when he remembers how his mother's picture made him feel in his childhood:

I remember when I was very young how, in the big living room of the house in San Francisco, my mother's photograph, which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed to rule the room. It was as though her photograph proved how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all. (11)

His masculinity, so accustomed to seeing his father wield power in the house, is terrified of the possibility of a matriarch ruling over the house.

The Lure of Normalcy

While the image of his mother is associated with nightmares, the figure of Hella promises David the appropriation of his ideals and the dream they inform. Marrying or at least being with an elegant, beautiful woman is a common desire and is considered as a success in a patriarchal community. David's treatment of Hella is a classic example of Jean Baudrillard's concept of sign value where a value is conferred upon an object (here, people) that reflects the social status of the possessor (McWhinney). David recalls how Hella has this air of glamour about her, the sign value of which David's masculinity perceives:

I can see her, very elegant, tense, and glittering, ... drinking rather too fast, and laughing, and watching the men. That was how I met her, in a bar ... she was drinking and watching, and that was why I liked her, I thought she would be fun to have fun with. ... I am not sure now, in spite of everything, that it ever really meant more than that to me. (Baldwin 4)

Being only moderately attracted to her, David isn't jealous that she was "watching the men." He eventually asks her to marry him, before she leaves for Spain, the callousness of his proposal stands out all the more as he earlier acknowledges that his relationship with Hella would not be a romantic one. Conforming to his masculinity he sleeps with her but never loves her. His masculinity forces him to play his gender role by convincing himself that he loves Hella – "... I told her that I had loved her once and I made myself believe it. But I wonder if I had." (5) His insistence that she should marry him is his way of securing his identity as a masculine person. He seeks to gratify his masculinity at the cost of sacrificing his love - "I had asked her to marry me ... she laughed and I laughed but

that, somehow, all the same, made it more serious for me, and I persisted ..." (4-5) David envisions a life with Hella and their kids "inside" the safety of his heterosexual community – a dream or a refuge a white, affluent, gay man can afford: "I wanted to be inside again, with the light and the safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed." (104) The possessiveness evoked by the words "my woman" and "my children" suggests how he sees them only as means to his secure passage to the "safety" of his heteronormative society. He acknowledges: "I suppose that's why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to." (5)

At the bar where he met Giovanni, David exploits Jacques' desperation. David, then a destitute, accompanies Jacques, an elderly, wealthy gay man, into the bar. He knows too well that Jacques knows David doesn't love him, yet, the ageing Jacques fears visiting the bar without a partner, sending a wrong message to the possible suitors. David wilfully exploits Jacques' handicap: "I was Jacques' protection. As long as I was there the world could see ... that he was out with me ... he was not there out of desperation." (Baldwin 28) When Jacques asks him to buy Giovanni a drink, disgusted by Jacques' effeminate ways, David jeers: "If that was his sister looking so good, I'd invite her to drink with us. I don't spend money on men." (30) The last sentence is obviously aimed at humiliating Jacques for being a fairy. Jacques correctly locates the source of this jibe as he replies, "I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment that ... *immaculate* manhood that is your pride and joy." (30)

The most hazardous aspects of his toxic masculinity become evident in his treatment and opinions about Giovanni when he leaves him for Hella. When Hella talks about how coldly he treated Giovanni when the couple met him earlier, he casually replies: "I just can't – do all that" (134) as his excuse for failing to show any affection for him which might threaten his

manhood. David's exploitation of Giovanni as a sexual commodity is manifested in words: "... for what he *can* do, there's terrific competition ... That's why so many of them ... turn into gigolos and gangsters and God knows what." (134) David can afford the luxury of falling back on the luxury of a heterosexual relationship, unlike Giovanni. When that night, the guild-ridden David, visits him, Giovanni's vitriolic accusations expose him completely. Giovanni accuses him of not loving him while utilising his body – "... do you think I did not know when you made love to me, you were making love to no one?" (137), and breaks down – "If you cannot love me, I will die ... It is cruel to have made me want to live only to make my death more bloody." (137) Giovanni, like Jacques, unearths David's ambivalence: "You have never loved anyone ... You love your purity" (141) and that "You are not leaving me for her, ... You are leaving me for some other reason." (141) He continues, "You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap – and you do not want to *stink*." (141) Giovanni rightly points out the disgust and shame David attaches to a homosexual relationship; he is willing to have the sex without committing himself to a man – violating his masculinity. Being called a fairy and having suffered a hefty blow to his "*immaculate* manhood," David retaliates by pointing out the futility of their relationship: "What kind of life can two men have together, anyway?" (142) He then counter-accuses Giovanni of treating him as his "housewife":

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 come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little girl. (Baldwin 142)

These are obviously David's excuses for abandoning Giovanni, whom he really loved. Being the fairy would never have worked with his masculinity but he knows deep down that these aren't the reasons he leaves Giovanni for: it's the lure of the heteronormative life that he has come to idealize. Just as Giovanni's life is destroyed after he leaves him, David too is doomed to be forever unhappy because he has sacrificed the love of his life for his "little moralities," (141) as he reflects back on these events the night before Giovanni's execution for the supposed murder of Guillaume.

Conclusion

Raewyn Connell's theory of Hegemonic Masculinity foregrounds physical strength, independence, daring, and a disdain for homosexuality and homosexual practices, among other things, as the key aspects of masculinity. The character of David exhibits these traits. Masculinity is a trait essentially characterized by assertiveness, a toxic habit that is not only imposed on women, or homosexual men who resemble "womanish creatures," but also on heterosexual men who aren't assertive enough themselves. In Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*, Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch) body-shames his mild-natured brother George (Jesse Plemons) by calling him "fatso," (*The Power of the Dog* 02:20-02:40) and is also hostile towards his lover, Rose (Kirsten Dunst) and her son. Similarly, this assertiveness is exercised by the protagonist in some form or the other. Mostly informed by a homophobic mind-set. Masculinity, being an ideal and a construct hinders the natural flow of a healthy relationship. The characters try to conform to masculine ideals in order to play their supposed gender roles. Masculinity dissociates the act of sex with love, and hence, aggressively masculine people end up hurting everyone involved.

We have observed how the ambivalence in David, created by his masculine ideals on the one and his inherent homosexuality on the other, repeatedly weighs him down, rendering him incapable of finding fulfilment in love. It is not so much the fear of social chastisement that turned David materialistic but the shame and disgust he has learned to attach homosexuality with. It would be acceptable to him to engage in sexual activities with a man but not be identified as a homosexual. As a result, he used his partners for the sex while shirking any responsibility as a lover. At the end of the novel, a dejected and drunk David hallucinates Giovanni's terrifying countenance in the mirror out of guilt as it dawns on him that "the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh." (Baldwin 168) Baldwin ends it with David finally accepting the taint of homosexuality might be his only redemption for running away from it all his life. It is his identity that cannot be washed away by heteronormativity, although it may cost his life. Although David might try running away from this fate in his attempt to seek refuge in society, it is hinted that redemption might come to him just as the pieces of the torn envelop containing the details of Giovanni's execution is blown towards him by the wind.

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