

Giovanni's Room



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the grandson of a slave and the eldest of nine children. Though his biological father was absent, a Baptist minister named David Baldwin soon became the young author's stepfather. Over the years, Baldwin's relationship with David would prove tenuous yet formative, since his eventual experience as a Youth Minister in an opposing church was both a result and a defiance of his stepfather's example as a Baptist preacher. In retrospect, Baldwin identified his time in the church—preparing and delivering several sermons per week—as an important step in his development as a writer, since in this role he was forced to closely consider a wide range of human emotions. He calls upon this experience in his most celebrated novel, [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#), as well as in the play *The Amen Corner*. Upon graduating high school, Baldwin spent the majority of his time in Greenwich Village—at that time a hotbed of creativity and progressive thinking—working as a book reviewer. Around this time, the famous novelist Richard Wright identified Baldwin's talent and helped him earn a grant in order to work on a novel and sustain himself while doing so. Baldwin moved to Paris in 1948 with the hopes of both physically and psychologically distancing himself from America so that he could write about his country more clearly. The result came in 1953, when he published [Go Tell It on the Mountain](#). Baldwin returned to America in 1957, at which point he became involved with the Civil Rights Movement. This was the beginning of his celebrated career as an outspoken activist and socially-conscious public thinker, advocating for peaceful resolutions of America's racial tensions. Baldwin worked for the last 10 years of his life in France, penning a number of essential works about American identity in the wake of the assassinations of civil rights activists Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr. Baldwin died of stomach cancer in 1987 in Saint Paul de Vence, France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although Paris is generally recognized and celebrated as one of Europe's LGBT hubs, the city wasn't always such an inclusive place. During World War II, the Nazis occupying France raised the age of consent for homosexuals to 21, whereas the age of consent for heterosexuals was set at 15. Even after the war ended, this consent law remained in place, staying the same until it was finally lowered in 1974. This indicates that Paris wasn't a completely welcoming and equal city in the mid-20th century, though it's also true that the Parisian arts scene was

quite inclusive, with gay writers like Jean Genet earning praise from famous figures like Pablo Picasso and Jean-Paul Sartre. It is around this time in the 1950s that Baldwin himself lived in Paris, having moved out of the United States to escape the country's intense racism. As a black artist living in France, he wasn't alone in Paris, since other black writers like Richard Wright, William Gardner Smith, Chester Himes, and Richard Gibson also immigrated to Paris. Together, these figures made up a small but culturally significant scene of creative Americans seeking freedom and equality outside of the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Baldwin established himself as a literary star with his debut novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. Based on the success of this book, critics, readers, and publishers alike expected him to continue writing about black Americans and religion, which is why people were so surprised that his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* is about a white man struggling to come to terms with his sexual identity. Nevertheless, *Giovanni's Room* was quite popular, and Baldwin continued his exploration of sexuality in his third novel, *Another Country*, which revisits the topics of infidelity and bisexuality. Furthermore, *Giovanni's Room* paved the way for later LGBT novels, such as André Aciman's [Call Me By Your Name](#), a book that also follows a young man's attempt to make sense of his sexual orientation. As a modernist novel, *Giovanni's Room* features characteristically pared-down language, an alienated narrator, and a focus on internal struggles with identity and sexuality. In this way, it's similar to other books in this movement, such as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and J.D. Salinger's [The Catcher in the Rye](#). David, the book's protagonist, is an American living in Paris (like Baldwin himself), aligning the book with the earlier modernist works of the Lost Generation—such as Ernest Hemingway's [The Sun Also Rises](#)—which tend to feature American expatriates living abroad in Europe.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Giovanni's Room
- **When Published:** 1956
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** 1950s Paris
- **Climax:** After sleeping with Guillaume in order to get his job back, Giovanni learns that the older man has no intention of hiring him. Furious, Giovanni strangles him to death with the belt of his dressing gown.
- **Antagonist:** Guillaume

EXTRA CREDIT

Rocky Relationships. Baldwin didn't believe it was necessary to assign labels to sexual orientation, but he was a strong LGBT advocate long before such advocacy was socially accepted. Although he wasn't fully out of the closet himself, he didn't hide the fact that he'd had romantic relationships with men, and he was one of only two well-known and open non-heterosexual men in the Civil Rights Movement. This put a strain on his relationship with Martin Luther King Jr., who harbored certain homophobic beliefs.

Burn Notice. When Baldwin presented his publishers at Knopf with *Giovanni's Room*, they refused to publish it because of its exploration of bisexuality and homosexuality. Like his publishers, his agent wanted him to continue writing about racism, even telling him to burn the manuscript. In response, Baldwin fired his agent and took *Giovanni's Room* to Dial Press, which published it without hesitation.



PLOT SUMMARY

An American man named David peers out the window of a house he rented with his fiancée, Hella, in the South of France. Alone, he gets drunk and stares out at the darkness, thinking about the demise of his relationship with Hella and realizing that he never truly loved her. This makes him think about Giovanni, an Italian man he fell in love with while living in Paris. David felt (and still feels) strongly for Giovanni, and he laments his inability to embrace these feelings—an inability he believes led to Giovanni's imprisonment and execution.

David remembers his first sexual encounter with another man. In this memory, he is a teenager in Brooklyn spending every summer day with a boy named Joey. At a sleepover one night, he and Joey kiss and become sexually intimate, and though he enjoys this experience, David can't come to terms with what he's done. Consequently, he hurries home in the morning and avoids Joey for the rest of the summer, thinking that his attraction to other men will not only threaten his masculine identity, but also break his father's heart. This is especially important to David because he knows he's the only thing his father has, since David's mother died when he was five. And yet, he starts acting out as a teenager, bullying Joey and spending his time getting drunk with friends. At one point he crashes his car while driving drunk, and this event encourages his father to have a frank talk with him about what he's going to do in life. Hoping to make his father happy, David eventually joins the Army, where he has a secret affair with another soldier who is discharged because everyone discovers that he's gay. After returning from the Army, David travels to Paris with the hopes of escaping the pressure he feels from his father to become a certain kind of man.

In Paris, David meets Hella, whom he asks to marry him. Not yet sure what she wants, Hella decides to travel in Spain while considering David's proposal. As he waits for her, he runs out of money and gets kicked out of his hotel, so he calls Jacques, a wealthy older gay man who often spends money on attractive young men. Jacques takes David to dinner and gives him 10,000 francs. They then go to a bar popular among gay men and trans women, and though David pretends to be detached from this environment, everyone there knows who he is and is waiting for him to stop pretending to be heterosexual. While having drinks, Jacques and David notice that Guillaume, the owner of the bar, has hired a new server—Giovanni. Even David has trouble hiding his attraction to Giovanni, but Jacques is the one who openly flirts with him. When his attempt to entice Giovanni fails, though, Jacques asks David to offer Giovanni a drink, wanting the young server to come sit with them. At first, David refuses, but he eventually relents and asks Giovanni if they can buy him a drink. Just as he asks this, Guillaume appears behind Jacques and laughs heartily, saying that Jacques has finally corrupted David. As the two men fall into conversation, Giovanni reminds David that he has just offered him a drink, and David has no choice but to follow through. In this way, the two men begin a flirtatious conversation, though David is overwhelmingly aware that the entire bar is watching him talk to this handsome new server.

When the bar closes, David and Giovanni agree to go with Jacques and Guillaume to breakfast. Taking a cab to another part of the city, they end up at a small, dirty establishment where Giovanni used to be a regular customer. Inside, Jacques and Guillaume quickly start flirting with several young and very poor boys sitting at the bar. While they are thus engaged, Giovanni and David retire to the dining room, where they drink white wine and eat oysters. Over the meal, Giovanni tells David the story of how he met Guillaume, saying that it was clear right away that Guillaume wanted to have sex with him. Because he had no money and needed a worker's permit to get a job, though, Giovanni did what was necessary to please the old man. This, he says, is how he got his job at the bar, and though he didn't manage to completely avoid Guillaume's advances, nothing has happened between them for several weeks now.

Finally, David and Giovanni leave the restaurant. David says he must go back to his hotel to pay his outstanding bill, but Giovanni convinces him to come back to his **room**, saying that David will have to see it at some point anyway. Once inside the room, David is petrified as Giovanni pulls him toward the mattress, though he can't deny his excitement. They have sex, and from this point on David and Giovanni develop a routine, as David starts living in the small room with his new lover. Each day they wake up late and walk through Paris until Giovanni's shift at the bar, at which point David spends some time on his own before meeting up with Giovanni as the bar closes. Together, they have a drink, go to breakfast, and return to the

room to have sex and sleep. Guillaume, for his part, comes to hate David because of his relationship with Giovanni, but neither David nor Giovanni care.

Despite his happiness, though, David has complicated feelings about his new relationship, blaming Giovanni for giving life to his otherwise secret sexual cravings. As a result, he both loves and hates Giovanni, and is unable to admit that he wants to have a long-term relationship with him. He makes this insinuation when he tells Giovanni that Hella will likely be returning to Paris soon. At first, Giovanni doesn't see why this should matter, but he soon sees that David thinks Hella's return will mean the end of their relationship.

Just as he predicted, David receives a letter from Hella one day explaining that she'll soon be returning from Spain and wants to commit herself once again to their relationship. On this very same day, he receives a letter from his father, in which his father tells him that he won't send any money because he doesn't want David to waste it. Although he wants to help David, he doesn't understand why his son is leading such a secretive life in Paris. What he really wants to ask, David knows, is if his son has met a woman, though both he and his father seem to understand that he can't ask this because he wouldn't be able to withstand the truth.

After reading his letters, David meets up with a woman named Sue and has sex with her. He does this because he thinks making love to a woman will help calm his nerves about Hella's imminent return, but it only makes him feel sorry for Sue. Late that night, he comes home to learn that Guillaume has fired Giovanni from the bar. Frantic and drunk, Giovanni tells him that Guillaume publicly accused him of stealing because he has been refusing to sleep with Guillaume. Furious, Giovanni punched Guillaume and ran away. Still reeling, he tells David that he would be in a very dark place if he were on his own, and he makes David promise not to leave him.

On the day that Hella returns to Paris, David meets her at the train station without telling Giovanni where he's going. Right away, he feels a sense of relief upon hugging her, though he can't quite hide his reservations. Still, though, he decides not to worry about Giovanni, determined to spend the night with Hella without thinking about anything but his relationship with her. When she makes it clear that she's ready to get married, he falters for a moment, clearly hoping that she will change her mind so that he doesn't need to leave Giovanni. However, she tells David that she came back to Paris because she realized that all she wants to do is get married and start a family with him, and he tells her that this is exactly what he wants.

For three full days, David doesn't return to Giovanni. On the third day, though, he and Hella encounter Jacques in a bookstore, and Jacques tells David that Giovanni called him asking for financial help, since he was left with no money. Just then, Giovanni enters the store and yells at David, saying that he thought he had died. Without skipping a beat, David

smoothly introduces Giovanni to Hella. Right away, Giovanni understands what has happened but doesn't keep himself from hiding his anger for the rest of the conversation. Meanwhile, Jacques takes delight in this awkward dynamic, proposing that they should all get a drink, though Hella insists that she's too tired. On the way back to her hotel, she asks David about his relationship with Giovanni, and though he manages to come up with convincing answers by saying that Giovanni is simply an intense Italian man he lived with as a roommate, Hella senses that there's something odd about their connection. All the same, she drops the matter.

In the coming weeks, David sees Giovanni with Jacques quite often. Even though he's always dressed in Jacques's fancy clothes, he looks unwell, and David can hardly stand it when he learns that Giovanni and Jacques have had sex. Before long, Giovanni stops spending time with Jacques and instead hangs around younger men who lead rougher lives. Because he's no longer dating David, though, he decides to try to get his job back at Guillaume's bar, since Guillaume is pleased about Giovanni and David's breakup. To do this, Giovanni goes to the bar one night and speaks to Guillaume, who happily tells him to come back after closing. When he returns, Guillaume invites him upstairs, changes into a silk dressing gown, and pressures Giovanni into having sex with him. Afterward, he arrogantly informs Giovanni that he couldn't possibly hire him again—a statement that enrages Giovanni so thoroughly that he beats Guillaume to the ground and strangles him with the sash of his gown before fleeing into the streets.

Everyone in Paris knows that Giovanni killed Guillaume, and the papers run wild with this news. As David and Hella follow the story, they make plans to rent a house in southern France, where they move shortly after Giovanni is found hiding in a houseboat. Giovanni pleads guilty and is held in jail until his trial. In the meantime, Jacques sends David periodic letters with information from Giovanni's lawyer, but David knows that nothing will save Giovanni from execution. Sure enough, he is soon sentenced to death, and though David knew this would happen, he's overwhelmed by sadness—so overwhelmed, in fact, that he gets drunk one night and goes into the city of Nice, where he spends three days drinking and having sex with a sailor. Finally, on the third day, Hella tracks him down and learns the truth about David's sexual orientation, promptly packing her bags for the United States and bemoaning the fact that David kept such a secret from her for so long. Not long after she leaves, David receives a **letter** from Jacques informing him of the date of Giovanni's execution. When this day arrives, David packs his bags and leaves the house in Southern France, picturing the execution and blaming himself for what has happened to Giovanni, whom he now recognizes was the love of his life.



CHARACTERS

David – The narrator and protagonist of *Giovanni's Room*, David is a man in his mid-20s living in Paris. A handsome blonde American, he stands out in Paris as desirable and innocent, though the gay men he spends time with sense that he isn't strictly heterosexual, despite what he says. This dynamic is central to David's entire personality, as he struggles to convince himself that he isn't gay or bisexual. This issue reaches all the way back to when he was a teenager and became physically intimate with his childhood friend, Joey. However, David stops seeing Joey because he doesn't want to disappoint his father. Because David's mother died when he was only five, he's especially eager to please his father, though he has a strained relationship with him and his aunt Ellen, who also cares for him. After a stint in the Army, he decides to move to Paris, where he meets and proposes to Hella, a young American woman who decides to consider his offer while traveling by herself in Spain. Meanwhile, David manipulates his relationship with an older gay man named Jacques, who gives him money. While having drinks with Jacques one night, David meets Giovanni and falls in love. Though David resists the relationship at first, he can't deny his feelings and moves into **Giovanni's room**. The two become a couple and develop a regular routine together. However, he leaves Giovanni without a word when Hella returns to Paris, unable to commit himself to a long-term relationship with a man. Devastated, Giovanni goes down a reckless path and eventually kills Guillaume, his former employer who fired him because he was jealous of his relationship with David. After Giovanni is arrested, David moves with Hella to the South of France, trying to pretend that he wants to get married and have kids. When he hears that Giovanni will soon be executed for Guillaume's murder, though, he sneaks out of the house and spends three days drinking and having sex with a sailor. Hella finally catches him on the third day and promptly returns to the United States, leaving him alone with his guilt as he thinks about Giovanni's impending execution.

Giovanni – Giovanni is a young, attractive Italian man living in Paris, and the first man with whom David has a long-term relationship. When his first child died in the womb, Giovanni cursed God and decided to leave Italy, coming to Paris out of grief. Without money or a worker's permit, he couldn't support himself until he met Guillaume, who gave him a job as a server at his bar in exchange for various sexual favors. Giovanni explains this to David on the first night they meet, managing to entice David with his flirtatious charm. At the end of the night, Giovanni convinces David to come back to his small **room**, where they have sex. From that point on, David lives with Giovanni, leading a happy existence even though Giovanni can tell that David has reservations about their relationship. One night, Giovanni's life turns upside down when Guillaume fires

him and publicly accuses him of stealing from the bar. He does this because Giovanni has stopped responding to his sexual advances, since he's in what he thinks of as a committed relationship with David. Unbeknownst to Giovanni, though, David is out having sex with a woman on that very night. Returning home, Giovanni tells him that he would be at a loss without him, and though David comforts him in the moment, he refrains from telling Giovanni his plan to leave him when Hella returns to Paris. When Hella arrives, David simply disappears without a word, leaving Giovanni in a state of panic. With no money to support himself, Giovanni is forced to call Jacques, an older gay man who takes him under his wing and eventually has his way with him. Before long, Giovanni leaves Jacques and tries to convince Guillaume to hire him again. To do this, he has sex with Guillaume, but this backfires when Guillaume arrogantly informs him after the fact that he can't hire him. Enraged, Giovanni strangles Guillaume with the belt of his dressing gown before running off into the night. Within a week, the police find him and he is sentenced to death. On the morning of his execution, David tries to forget Giovanni but knows he never will.

Hella – Hella is an American woman living in Europe, and David's fiancée. Hella is an intelligent and kind woman who decides to travel in Spain alone after David proposes to her. Leaving him in Paris, she sets out with the hopes of figuring what it is that she wants in life. She writes letters to David while she's gone, and though he responds, she remains unaware of his developing relationship with Giovanni. After months of traveling, she has the realization that society only recognizes women in terms of their association with men. This widespread sexism unsettles her, but she decides nevertheless to marry David, thinking that this is essentially the only way for a woman to make a place for herself in the world. With this in mind, she returns to Paris and resumes her relationship with David. When she meets Giovanni one day, she's puzzled by how angry he is at David, and though she accepts David's explanation that he and Giovanni were roommates while she was gone, she remains curious about the nature of their relationship. However, it isn't until much later that she realizes Giovanni is in love with David. By this time, she and David are living in the South of France, and Giovanni is in jail for murdering Guillaume. Shortly after admitting that Giovanni is in love with him, David disappears for several days, and Hella eventually tracks him down in Nice, where he's been having sex with a sailor. Finally understanding that David is attracted to men, she immediately packs her bags and sets off for the United States, telling David that she'll never be able to love a man again because she'll always think about how he deceived her.

Jacques – Jacques is an older gay man living in Paris. A wealthy American businessman, Jacques was born in Belgium and now leads a somewhat lavish life in France, where he hosts orgies and often has relationships with attractive young men. These

relationships hinge upon the fact that he showers men in money, spoiling them in return for their affection. This is the exact dynamic that he and David have, except their relationship is strictly platonic because David insists that he's heterosexual. When he runs out of money, though, he's forced to call Jacques for help. Arranging to meet up for dinner and drinks, the two men find themselves at Guillaume's bar, where Jacques takes an immediate interest in Giovanni. While relishing the opportunity to be seen in public with David, Jacques asks him to speak to Giovanni, wanting the young American to invite Giovanni to have a drink with them. However, this does nothing to increase Jacques's chances with Giovanni, though this merely ignites sparks between Giovanni and David.

Recognizing this, Jacques urges David to finally stop denying his sexual identity, offering him sincere advice about coming to terms with oneself and allowing oneself to be happy. In this way, Jacques exists as both an exploitative figure *and* a caring friend—a dynamic that resurfaces when he eventually takes Giovanni in after David leaves him without money. Later, Jacques is the one to provide David with updates regarding Giovanni's legal battle after Giovanni murders Guillaume.

Guillaume – The owner of the bar in which David and Giovanni first meet, Guillaume is an older gay man who belongs to a well-respected French family. Like Jacques, he uses his money to convince attractive young men to sleep with him, a tactic he uses on Giovanni after meeting him at the movies one night. In return for various sexual favors, he gives Giovanni a job at his bar and a worker's permit. When Giovanni stops responding to his sexual advances because he's in relationship with David, though, Guillaume fires him, accusing him in front of an entire crowd of stealing from the bar. This enrages Giovanni, who tells David that he would be a wreck if it weren't for their relationship. In keeping with this sentiment, Giovanni goes down a dark path when David eventually leaves him for Hella—a path that leads him back to Guillaume, who insinuates that Giovanni can have his job back if he has sex with him. Swallowing his pride, then, Giovanni submits to Guillaume in a room above the bar. When they finish, Guillaume tells him that he won't hire him back after all, and Giovanni becomes so enraged that he strangles him to death with the belt of his dressing gown.

David's Father – David's father is an American man who, along with his sister, Ellen, raises David. After David's mother dies when he's only five, his father devotes himself to him, though he doesn't know how to be a conventional parent. Rather than wanting to have a traditional father-son relationship with David, he tries to bond with his son as if they're friends—a dynamic David comes to dislike because all he wants is parental support. Despite their unconventional connection, though, David's father cares strongly about him. In particular, he wants David to become a true man, a sentiment he expresses to Ellen one night after coming home drunk. Ellen accuses him of

setting a bad example for David by drinking too much and spending all of his time with women, but he doesn't pay attention to her, instead insisting that he can raise David however he wants. Later, when David moves to Paris, his father feels at a loss because he doesn't understand why his son would want to live so far away. When he implores David to return, David senses the old man's concern, realizing that his father must sense that he's attracted to men but can't bring himself to ask him the truth.

Joey – Joey is David's childhood friend, and the first male with whom David has a sexual encounter. Spending all of their time together over one summer, David and Joey kiss and explore each other's bodies one night at a sleepover. The next day, David is horrified by what they've done, so he quickly leaves. For the rest of the summer, he spends time with a different group of boys who pick on Joey. The sadder this makes Joey, the meaner David becomes.

Ellen – Ellen is David's aunt and his father's sister. After David's mother dies, Ellen comes to live with him and his father, eventually becoming critical of his father's parenting because he drinks and stays out late on a regular basis. Despite the fact that Ellen only criticizes his father because she cares about David, David himself resents her for speaking on his behalf, feeling that she's creating more problems than she's solving.

Sue – Sue is an American woman living in Paris. Although she doesn't run in the same circles as David, he's familiar enough with her to know that he would never find her attractive. Nevertheless, he decides to have sex with her after learning that Hella will soon be returning to Paris, hoping that this will help him move on from his relationship with Giovanni and reacquaint him with a woman's touch. However, he realizes that this is a bad idea once they actually start having sex, but there's nothing he can do to back out of the situation, since he had to persuade Sue to invite him to her apartment in the first place. And though he hates having sex with her, Sue herself comes to enjoy the experience, even asking him if they can go out to dinner afterwards. Not wanting to spend more time with her, David makes up an excuse and quickly leaves, telling her that he doesn't like to make plans. In response, Sue sadly tells him that he can visit her if he ever becomes lonely again, indicating that she understands that he used her for sex but is willing to put herself through the experience again.



THEMES

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SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND DENIAL

A novel about a closeted American man living in Paris in the 1950s, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* underscores the many miseries of denying one's true sexual orientation. In particular, David—the novel's protagonist—denies that he's attracted to men, and this denial causes him to resent people like Giovanni, whom he loves but can't bring himself to fully embrace. As a result, he eventually leaves Giovanni for his girlfriend Hella, whom he deceives by pretending to be a heterosexual man. Before long, though, it becomes impossible for him to pose as a straight man, effectively alienating him from Hella. Because the damage has already been done to his relationship with Giovanni, though, David finds himself alone and miserable at the end of the novel. In this way, Baldwin illustrates the dangers of lying to oneself, ultimately suggesting that denial and self-deception hurt both the people who hide their true selves and the individuals with whom they're dishonest.

David's unwillingness to acknowledge his sexual orientation surfaces early in the novel, when he rehashes a short-lived boyhood romance. He explains that he spent the majority of his time one summer with a friend named Joey. During a sleepover, the boys kissed and engaged in various sexual activities, and though David enjoyed this, he was unable to face Joey the next morning. Unnerved, he left and spent the rest of the summer avoiding his friend, trying hard to pretend that what happened between them was a fluke rather than an indication of his true feelings. When school started, David spent time with a group of boys who bullied Joey, joining them in harassing his former friend. "And the sadder this made him, the nastier I became," David remembers, making it clear that he'll do seemingly anything to avoid processing his feelings. Rather than continuing his friendship with Joey and trying to understand the implications of his own sexual preferences, he resented Joey. When he saw the effect his behavior had on his poor friend, he was forced to recognize the gravity of his actions and thus recall the strong connection he and Joey once had. In response, he became even meaner, growing angrier at Joey for forcing him to think about something he was determined to forget. David's aggression and repression of his true feelings shows just how eager he is to deny his attraction to other men, in addition to how this denial can turn into a form of misplaced resentment.

When David later forms a relationship with Giovanni and shares a **room** with him in Paris, he finds himself incapable of suppressing his true desires. However, he blames this on Giovanni, as though Giovanni created a sort of perversion in David rather than merely helping to bring David's true desires to the surface. In other words, David begins to resent Giovanni when he realizes he can no longer hide the way he feels. "With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by

the same roots," he muses. This idea solidifies the notion that David takes out his discomfort on anyone who forces him to recognize himself for who he really is. Because his feelings for Giovanni are so strong, he can't maintain his image of himself as a heterosexual man, so he develops a hatred for the very man he loves. By framing his attraction to men as Giovanni's fault, then, David once more tries to deceive himself, even as he simultaneously admits his true sexual orientation.

Blaming his insuppressible desires on Giovanni isn't the only way David continues to deny his sexual identity. He also tries to deceive himself by the way he acts with Hella, his girlfriend who returns from vacation and interrupts his relationship with Giovanni. Although he clearly wants to end the relationship so he can be with Giovanni, he hopes Hella will be the one to call things off. After all, if he left Hella for Giovanni, this would be an undeniable sign that he's romantically committed to a man. Unable to make this commitment, he tries to manipulate Hella into enacting his own will, hoping she'll leave him if he acts aloof. If she leaves him, he knows he could pretend he had no choice but to continue seeing Giovanni. However, Hella doesn't pick up on his reluctance to continue their relationship, so he's forced to abruptly cut ties with Giovanni. In turn, Giovanni suffers because of David's inability to own up to his true feelings. "You are not leaving me for her," he argues. "You are leaving me for some other reason. You lie so much, you have come to believe all your own lies." By saying this, Giovanni insists that David has thoroughly deluded himself, somehow tricking himself into believing that he loves Hella. In reality, David is only leaving Giovanni because he doesn't have the courage to stay with him, since this would mean being truthful about his desire to be in a long-term relationship with a man. Because David can't bring himself to admit this, he lies to both himself and to Giovanni, effectively pushing his lover away in order to protect his fragile self-image and façade as a heterosexual man.

The consequences of David's lies bring themselves to bear on his relationship with Hella shortly after they leave Paris. Living a quiet life in the South of France, the couple develops a stilted dynamic because of David's inability to be truthful about what he really wants. Although he says he wants to marry her and start a family, he withdraws and spends his time thinking about Giovanni. Finally, when Hella catches him having an affair with a sailor, she leaves him, saying that she'll have trouble ever loving again because of how much she has invested herself in her relationship with David. Accordingly, readers see that David's unwillingness to be honest with himself ultimately affects everyone he cares about, ruining his relationships and putting unjust burdens on the people closest to him. This, Baldwin intimates, is why it's dangerous to deny one's true feelings, as doing so only leads to a life of dishonesty, pain, and bitterness.



GENDER AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

In *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin suggests that societal gender norms often interfere with a person's sense of self. This happens when David internalizes conventional notions of what it means to be a man, making it hard for him to accurately understand his own masculinity. Because he associates manhood with heterosexuality, he feels that his attraction to Giovanni indicates his failure as a man. Worse, he's reluctant to question these restrictive conceptions of what defines a person's gender, instead resigning himself to the idea that he cannot be a true man while existing in a homosexual relationship. Interestingly enough, his girlfriend Hella also struggles with gender-related limitations, pointing out that women aren't taken seriously unless they associate themselves with men through marriage. Despite these reservations, though, she makes plans to marry David, who doesn't even acknowledge her desire to be seen as an individual. Consequently, both David and Hella give up who they truly want to be in order to fulfill the gender roles they think society requires them to assume. In turn, Baldwin shows readers just how difficult it is to deviate from stereotypical notions of what it means to be a man or a woman.

David's obsession with presenting himself as a supposedly conventional man stems from his relationship with his father. When he's a young boy, he hears his father tell David's aunt Ellen that all he wants is for David to become a true man. "And when I say a man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher," his father says, implying that only certain lifestyles are appropriate for men—lifestyles that are stripped of anything that could be associated with traditional conceptions of femininity. As a result, David tries to present himself as a heterosexual man even though he is sexually attracted to men. During his relationship with Giovanni, for instance, he frets constantly over what his father would think. In one letter, his father implores him to return from Paris, asking what, exactly, David is doing abroad. After reading this, David senses that his father has refrained from asking the following question: "*Is it a woman, David? Bring her on home. I don't care who she is. Bring her on home and I'll help you get set up.*" David believes that his father can't bring himself to actually ask this question because he knows he wouldn't be able to withstand the truth. In turn, it becomes clear that David thinks his father will only accept him if he's in a heterosexual relationship—something that would supposedly fulfill the old man's lifelong wish for David to live up to his expectations of what a man should be.

It's worth emphasizing just how much David associates heterosexuality with masculinity. When he has his first homosexual encounter with his childhood friend, Joey, he plunges into despair while looking at Joey's body, thinking that his attraction to the boy will cause him to "lose [his] manhood." This suggests that he thinks sexual orientation is what defines a person's gender as a man or a woman. Under this

interpretation, then, any deviation from heterosexuality will threaten his ability to be the man that both he and his father want him to be. This is why David tries to force himself into embracing heterosexuality. When he hears that Hella will soon be returning to Paris, for example, he goes out and has sex with a female acquaintance, Sue, desperately trying to reestablish his façade of being a heterosexual man. Afterward, he reflects upon this experience and begins to think of heterosexuality as a source of stability, something that will give him safety and security. He notes that he wants a woman to ground him so that he can move through life with his "manhood unquestioned." When he thinks this, readers see that he's primarily interested not in actually loving a woman, but in the idea of asserting his masculinity once and for all. To underscore this belief, he decides to leave Giovanni, saying, "What kind of life can two men have together, anyway?" By saying this, he suggests that men simply cannot survive in this world unless they exist in heterosexual relationships. For this reason, he leaves Giovanni when Hella returns, effectively sacrificing his happiness and true sexual orientation so that he can conform to what he thinks society expects of men.

Somewhat ironically, David's utter unwillingness to challenge so-called conventional gender roles stands in stark contrast to Hella's outspoken complaints about the ways in which society restricts women. While walking through Paris one day, she tells David that she recently realized she can't be free until she associates herself with a man through marriage. This, she implies, is because she lives in a patriarchal society that refuses to acknowledge her on her own terms, so she can't become someone until she *belongs* to someone else—namely, a man. Interestingly enough, David also lives in a world that refuses to acknowledge him on his own terms, but he can't articulate this to Hella because doing so would mean revealing his true sexual identity and thus threatening his ability to conform to conventional notions of masculinity. Consequently, he merely says, "I don't know what you're talking about," pretending to be ignorant of the ways in which society boxes people in to various gender roles. And though Hella is cognizant of the restrictions placed upon her by the world she lives in, she submits to reality by returning from Spain to marry David. In this sense, then, both she and David try to inhabit traditional gender roles despite the fact that these conceptions of masculinity and femininity curtail their freedom. This, of course, leads to their misery, as Baldwin intimates that gender roles are nothing but social constructs that often inhibit people's true desires and keep them from being themselves.



TRAVEL, IDENTITY, AND EMOTIONAL ESCAPE

In *Giovanni's Room*, David runs from his identity as an American while simultaneously using it to formulate superficial understandings of himself. By leaving the

United States for France, he feels as if he can be somewhat more open about his sexual orientation, though it soon becomes clear that this has little to do with France and everything to do with his sense that he can outrun his problems. To that end, he decides he must leave Paris soon, as he begins to feel uncomfortable about his relationship with Giovanni, clearly hoping that traveling to Spain or some other part of France will solve everything. However, relocating doesn't make him feel any better about his decision to choose Hella over Giovanni. In this way, Baldwin communicates the idea that, although traveling to new places might afford a person certain freedoms and a sense of anonymity, it's impossible to outrun one's emotional demons.

David has a strange relationship with his national identity. Because he knows his father would disapprove of his gay or bisexual lifestyle (however repressed it may be), he sees Paris as an escape from external judgment, since he can essentially hide from his father by living in a different country. His belief that moving to France gives him new freedoms is made evident by the fact that he frequents public spaces in Paris that openly cater to gay men and "*les folles*" (a French slang term for crossdressers or trans women), something he would never do in the United States for fear of being labeled as a gay man himself. In this regard, he relinquishes his American identity in order to allow himself a small amount of freedom, taking liberties he wouldn't otherwise dare to take. In turn, readers see that traveling to Paris has—to a certain extent—helped him run from various social mores that make it harder for him to be the person he wants to be.

At the same time, though, David can't quite let go of his American identity. This is made apparent by the way he responds to Giovanni's comments about his inherent Americanness. When Giovanni is angry at him, he explains, he calls him a *true American*, but when he's pleased with him, he says that David isn't like most Americans. "And I resented this," David notes, "resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing." On one hand, David doesn't want to be reduced to a single category, especially since this particular category is exactly what he has tried to escape by coming to Paris in the first place. On the other hand, though, he dislikes the idea of belonging to no category at all, since this means that he has nothing to define him and must therefore find his own way to present himself. And given that he's constantly at war with himself regarding his sexual identity, he's daunted by the idea of having to define himself, a process that would inevitably require him to come to terms with his sexual orientation. Accordingly, he seeks refuge in the very thing he wants to escape, hoping that leaning into his American identity will help him avoid any actual soul-searching.

Regardless of how David identifies with his home country, it's overwhelmingly clear that he thinks traveling to new places will help him flee his problems. For example, when Giovanni and David's relationship suffers a blow after Giovanni is fired from his job, David begins to worry about what will happen to them when Hella returns to Paris. To solve this problem, he suggests that he and Giovanni leave Paris for a short while, though it's worth pointing out that this would do nothing to actually change their circumstances, since David isn't suggesting that he and Giovanni should elope forever. (This, of course, would require David to make a commitment to Giovanni that he's unwilling to make). Rather, David simply wants to leave Paris because he suddenly associates it with his unfortunate predicament. "I'm sick of this city," he proclaims, later adding that "everything you put your hands on here comes to pieces in your hands." By saying this, he reveals his deluded belief that Paris itself is the root of his misery. In reality, though, his own inability to accept his attraction to men is what causes his strife, but he chooses to believe that he can outrun such problems simply by keeping in constant motion. This, it seems, is exactly what must have led him to Paris in the first place.

Inevitably, David's attempt to escape his problems is unsuccessful, and he ends up leading a miserable existence in the South of France at the end of the novel. In fact, he is perhaps even more tormented than before, since he has left Paris, Giovanni, and everything that once made him happy in life. Simply put, he realizes he can't outrun his own demons, finally understanding that he will feel the same no matter where he goes or with which country he identifies. This aligns with a thought that occurs to him when he reflects upon all that has happened to him—namely, that "home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition." This sentiment illustrates not just the lasting influence of a person's national identity, but the futility of trying to escape fundamental truths about oneself. According to this worldview, then, traveling and running from one's problems only provides temporary relief, not long-lasting happiness.



MONEY, SEX, AND EXPLOITATION

In *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin invites readers to consider the exploitative powers of money and sex, illustrating the various ways in which people use their wealth or sexuality to manipulate others. In particular, Baldwin focuses on the relationships that Jacques and Guillaume (two wealthy, older gay men) have with attractive young men who need financial support. These relationships, Baldwin suggests, have very little to do with love, since both parties are primarily interested in getting what they want from each other. For instance, David and Giovanni manipulate Jacques and Guillaume by flirting with them for money and food, while Jacques and Guillaume manipulate David and Giovanni by incentivizing this behavior in the first place.

However, Baldwin suggests that this dynamic isn't necessarily equal, since it's clear that Jacques and Guillaume have power over David and Giovanni, considering that the two young men depend upon them for financial assistance, meaning that they need them to survive. This is evident when Guillaume fires Giovanni from his bar because he's jealous of his relationship with David. This eventually leads Giovanni to kill Guillaume. Through this violent outcome, Baldwin shows that wielding financial and sexual power over a person often has disastrous results, and that mutually-exploitative relationships are inherently dangerous because one party inevitably has more influence than the other.

At first, the kind of relationships that David and Giovanni have with people like Jacques and Guillaume seem relatively harmless. When Giovanni first meets Guillaume in a movie theater, the older man tries to corner him into going out with him by making up a story that puts Giovanni in a vulnerable position. Despite his awareness that Guillaume is trying to manipulate him, Giovanni feels he has nothing to lose by indulging this wealthy stranger's fantasy of flirting with an attractive young man. After all, Giovanni is quite poor and unable to work in Paris because he doesn't have a permit, so he agrees to have dinner with Guillaume as a way of feeding himself. This, in turn, enables him to find a job, since Guillaume hires him to work as a server in his bar. But this arrangement comes at a price, as Giovanni must withstand Guillaume's sexual advances. Regardless, though, Giovanni is happy to have a worker's permit, so he puts up with Guillaume's sexual encroachments. He tells David about this arrangement in a very casual way, acting as if he doesn't mind that he has to submit to Guillaume's desires in order to keep his job. In fact, both he and David make light of this situation by frequently taking advantage of Guillaume and Jacques's willingness to give them money, confidently telling themselves that paying is "the least these dirty old men" can do for them. In turn, they treat these relationships as connections founded upon a harmless give-and-take dynamic that doesn't necessarily put them at a disadvantage.

Because Giovanni and David are apparently so comfortable with using sex appeal to manipulate Guillaume and Jacques for money, it seems that the four men have a mutually-exploitative relationship. This, in turn, gives their relational dynamic the appearance of equality. Even David, who doesn't actually sleep with Jacques, actively manipulates the older man by going out with him and allowing Jacques to pretend they're on a date. He only does this when he needs to borrow money, and Jacques seemingly understands this, but this doesn't affect the terms of their relationship, since David still gets the money he needs while Jacques takes delight in spending time with a good-looking man in public. As a result, this kind of relationship—which is completely devoid of genuine emotion—seems somewhat harmless.

However, it soon becomes clear that Giovanni and David's relationships with Guillaume and Jacques aren't truly as safe as they might seem. When Giovanni and David start living together in earnest, Giovanni stops submitting to Guillaume's sexual advances, at which point Guillaume accuses him of being unfair, suggesting that he has led him on in order to benefit from their relationship. This, of course, is true, but it has always been the unspoken contract of their relational dynamic, and the only reason Guillaume brings it up is because he wants to guilt Giovanni into having sex with him. Suddenly, then, Guillaume's desire to get what he wants looms larger than anything else, which is why he goes downstairs, fires Giovanni in front of everyone, and accuses him of stealing money. This, it's worth noting, is a severe reaction that deeply influences Giovanni's entire life, to an extent that Giovanni himself would never be able to affect Guillaume. Nothing, it's easy to see, will happen to Guillaume if Giovanni refuses to submit to his sexual desires—his life won't change at all, other than his lustful fantasies going unfulfilled. Giovanni, on the other hand, stands to lose his financial ability to survive. Worse, Guillaume's decision to publicly accuse Giovanni of stealing hurts the young man's reputation, thereby hindering his ability to find another job. In this regard, then, it's overwhelmingly clear that Guillaume has an inordinate amount of power over Giovanni's entire life.

Because Guillaume so thoroughly derails Giovanni's life, Giovanni eventually returns to him with his tail between his legs, having sex with him in order to get his job back. Afterward, though, Guillaume smugly informs him that he can't hire him again, meaning that he has taken advantage of Giovanni without making it possible for Giovanni to do the same to him. Because of this, Giovanni kills him. The fact that their relationship originally seems harmless but ultimately leads to murder underlines the volatile nature of relationships founded upon exploitation. While it may seem safe to take part in mutually manipulative relations, Baldwin implies that such exploitative dynamics can be quite dangerous. In this regard, the author suggests that these kinds of interactions aren't always as equal as they may seem, and often lead to desperation and anger.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



GIOVANNI'S ROOM

Because David and Giovanni's relationship is predominantly confined to the privacy of the small and squalid room that Giovanni rents on the outskirts of Paris, the room itself signifies the hidden and shame-ridden nature of

their affair. Although people like Jacques and Guillaume know that David and Giovanni are together, their relationship remains more or less secretive. David's girlfriend, Hella, knows nothing about it despite the fact that David has been living in Giovanni's room for months by the time she returns to Paris. At one point, David tells Giovanni that he wishes they could leave the room behind, since it's so stiflingly small, which parallels David's underlying desire to escape the equally stifling expectations that society places on him (and thus, that he places on himself) to be heterosexual. This desire is in keeping with David's tendency to view relocation as a means by which he can escape his problems, since he only suggests that they move once their relationship (and his insecurities about his sexual identity) hits a rough patch. And though they don't actually move, David continues to see the room as an overbearing place, feeling as if the walls and clutter are closing in on him. In this manner, the room comes to represent how overwhelmed David is by his effort to conceal his sexual identity as a gay man—an endeavor that makes him feel boxed into a secret and restricted existence.





JACQUES'S LETTER

The envelope that contains the time and date of Giovanni's execution symbolizes David's inability to forget about his relationship with his former lover. When David moves to the South of France, Jacques sends him frequent letters about Giovanni's legal proceedings, relaying news from Giovanni's lawyer about what will happen to him once he's found guilty of murdering Guillaume. Eventually, one of the envelopes Jacques sends contains a letter outlining the details of the imminent execution. Throughout the story, David uses travel to escape his emotions and mask his ongoing struggles to come to terms with his sexual orientation. The arrival of this letter suggests that, although David has finally followed through on his desire to move out of the small, cramped **room** he and Giovanni shared in Paris, he cannot rid himself of his lingering feelings for Giovanni. On the morning Giovanni is set to die, David leaves the house he has rented and walks out to the road with his bags. Stopping for a moment, he takes out the letter from Jacques, tears it up, and scatters it in the wind before turning his back and walking away. And though he does this in an attempt to put his past with Giovanni behind him, pieces of the letter get swept up in a breeze and gust back toward him, representing the fact that he'll never be able to stop feeling guilty about what happened between him and Giovanni.

Part 1: Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ And these nights were being acted out under a foreign sky, with no-one to watch, no penalties attached—it was this last fact which was our undoing, for nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom. I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to. Perhaps this was why, in Spain, she decided that she wanted to marry me. But people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni, Hella

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David reflects upon the initial stages of his relationship with Hella. Shortly after he moved away from the United States, he started dating Hella, and he vividly recalls the nights they spent in bed feeling liberated. This, he suggests, has something to do with the fact that their new love (or lust) plays out “under a foreign sky,” as if simply being in another country lends them a sense of unbridled freedom that would be impossible to attain in the United States. And though this might sound like an exciting dynamic, this sense of liberation weighs heavily on David, who is afraid of total freedom because embracing this fully would force him to acknowledge his true sexual identity. Not wanting to recognize his attraction to men, he finds the idea of freedom daunting because it suggests that he can do whatever he wants when, in reality, he doesn't feel comfortable embracing what he wants. In response to this feeling of boundless possibility, he asks Hella to marry him, thinking that this will “moor” him to a stable lifestyle. In this moment, then, he reveals his belief that a dependable, unchallenged existence is dependent upon the appearance of heterosexuality. At the same time, though, he recognizes in retrospect that it's impossible to make decisions on life based on what will bring stability, since romantic attraction is based on raw emotion, not on a person's desire to live a certain way.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Gardners Books edition of *Giovanni's Room* published in 2001.

☝ I was ashamed. The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness. I wondered what Joey's mother would say when she saw the sheets. Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little. A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me. And I made my decision.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni, Joey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, David recalls the first sexual experience he ever had with another male as a young man. As he lies in bed after becoming physically intimate with his childhood friend Joey, he is overwhelmed by a sense of shame. This shame becomes particularly strong when he thinks about his father, indicating that he cares strongly about earning the old man's approval—a relational dynamic that later works its way into his adulthood. He also considers a number of “half-forgotten, half-understood stories,” assumingly referring to tales he's heard people tell about gay men. Indeed, it seems that David has only ever thought or heard about homosexuality in salacious contexts, which is why he suddenly wants to cry at the thought that he's attracted to men. This, of course, is why he decides to deny his sexual identity. Lying in bed next to Joey, he makes a pact with himself to never become the kind of man that someone like his father would disapprove of, devoting himself to ignoring his true feelings about other men.

☝ For I am—or I was—one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself. People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all—a real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named—but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not.

Related Characters: David (speaker), David's Father

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Explaining the kind of relationship he has with his father, David says that he was able to trick the old man into thinking that he leads a certain lifestyle as a heterosexual man. He claims that he's able to do this because he's the type of person who can devote himself to achieving something when he sets his mind to it. Indeed, he prides himself on having strong “willpower” and the “ability to make a decision and carry it through.” However, he now realizes that what he used to think of as a respectable discipline is nothing but a form of self-deception. To that end, he points out that people who make “real decisions” recognize that they might not be able to follow through with whatever it is they've decided to do. For instance, if David's decision to lead a heterosexual lifestyle were an honest one, he would recognize how difficult it would be for him to actually refrain from sleeping with men. And yet, he doesn't stop to think about this, instead going forth and presenting himself as a straight man, ultimately using an “elaborate system of evasion” to trick himself into believing that he's actually heterosexual. In reality, though, he knows that he's attracted to men, but he refuses to acknowledge this, instead congratulating himself for having the “willpower” to deny his true sexual identity.

Part 1: Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ As long as I was there the world could see and he could believe that he was out with me, his friend, he was not there out of desperation, he was not at the mercy of whatever adventurer chance, cruelty, or the laws of actual and emotional poverty might throw his way.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Guillaume, Giovanni, Jacques

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the way David sees his relationship with Jacques. Two years after David moves to Paris, he runs out of money and asks Jacques for financial help. This



means that he has to go out with Jacques, since there is an unspoken contract between them—according to this contract, Jacques will help David as long as David lets Jacques parade him around as if he's his date. This, of course, is rather difficult for David, who doesn't want to risk his image as a heterosexual man, but he agrees to go to dinner and drinks with Jacques because he needs the money. As a result, Jacques benefits from associating with David. This is the first time in *Giovanni's Room* that the reader catches a glimpse of the strange, mutually exploitative relationships that exist throughout the book. And though David and Jacques's friendship doesn't end up hurting either of them beyond repair, its complete lack of genuine emotion prepares readers to encounter the toxic connection that runs between Guillaume and Giovanni—a connection that eventually leads to misery and bitter enmity.

☪ “If that was his sister looking so good. I'd invite *her* to have a drink with us. I don't spend money on men.”

I could see Jacques struggling not to say that I didn't have any objection to allowing men to spend money on *me*; I watched his brief struggle with a slight smile, for I knew he couldn't say it; then he said, with that cheery, brave smile of his:

“I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment, that”—he paused—“that *immaculate* manhood which is your pride and joy. I only suggested that *you* invite him because he will almost certainly refuse if *I* invite him.”

Related Characters: Jacques, David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, David tells Jacques that he doesn't want to invite Giovanni to have a drink with them. Jacques has just asked David to offer Giovanni a drink, which is why David defensively insists that he would only do such a thing if Giovanni were an attractive woman. “I don't spend money on men,” he says bluntly, overstating the lie that he's only drawn to women. By saying this, he takes a subtle jab at Jacques himself, who has just given him 10,000 francs. In this moment, David recognizes his own hypocrisy, since he claims not to spend money on men but apparently has no problem with men spending money on him. Interestingly enough, David seems to enjoy the fact that Jacques has

picked up on this discrepancy. This suggests that he feels confident in his power over the older man, knowing that Jacques wouldn't dare point out his flawed logic because doing so would mean risking their friendship—something Jacques isn't willing to do because he likes going out and being seen with David. Nonetheless, the strange enjoyment David takes from this interaction surely dissipates when Jacques bitterly suggests that David is suspiciously protective of his “*immaculate* manhood,” since this statement indicates that Jacques is all too aware that David is trying to hide his own attraction to men by accentuating his supposed heterosexuality.



☪ “There's been no confusion,” I snapped. “Don't you go getting confused, either.”

“I think I can safely say,” said Jacques, “that I have scarcely ever been less confused than I am at this moment.” He had stopped smiling; he gave me a look which was dry, bitter, and impersonal. “And, at the risk of losing forever your so remarkably candid friendship, let me tell you something. Confusion is a luxury which only the very, very young can possibly afford, and you are not that young anymore.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I said. “Let's have another drink.”

I felt that I had better get drunk.

Related Characters: Jacques, David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43


Explanation and Analysis

When David acts on Jacques's request for David to invite Giovanni to have a drink, Jacques gets pulled away for a moment, leaving the two young men alone. Left to their own devices, they have a stimulating and flirtatious conversation. When Jacques returns, he facetiously wonders aloud if Giovanni has gotten confused, saying that perhaps the server thinks David is the one who's interested in him. Of course, Jacques knows that this actually *is* the case, but David vehemently rejects this insinuation. Nevertheless, Jacques goes on, saying that David isn't young enough anymore to continue wasting his time pretending that he isn't attracted to men. When he issues this advice, readers see that Jacques is perhaps not as unsympathetic as he might seem. While it might be true that he's interested in using David's financial instability to his advantage, it's also

the case that he's genuinely concerned about the young man's happiness and wellbeing. As a result, he tries to help David stop lying to himself about his sexual orientation. Unfortunately, though, David remains unwilling to do this, deciding to get drunk rather than genuinely considering how he feels.

●● As for the boys at the bar, they were each invisibly preening, having already calculated how much money he and his *copain* would need for the next few days, having already appraised Guillaume to within a decimal of that figure, and having already estimated how long Guillaume, as a fountainhead, would last, and also how long they would be able to endure him. [...] There was also Jacques, who might turn out to be a bonus, or merely a consolation prize.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni, Jacques, Guillaume

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis



This is a description of the small and dirty restaurant that David and Giovanni go to for breakfast with Jacques and Guillaume after having spent the night drinking at Guillaume's bar. Right away, Guillaume notices a group of young men sitting at one end of the bar in this restaurant, and David realizes that his own mutually-exploitative relationship with Jacques isn't the only one of its kind. In fact, even these young men instantly recognize that they will be able to financially benefit from establishing a relationship of sorts with Guillaume for as long as they can "endure him." Conversely, Guillaume's attention to the boys indicates that he, too, is aware of this dynamic, knowing all too well that he'll be able to manipulate these strangers because of their need for money—something he has in abundance. By putting this give-and-take relational approach on display, Baldwin demonstrates that the world in which David and Giovanni exist is often void of true love or real emotion. This, in turn, prepares readers to understand why Giovanni's relationship with Guillaume ends up making him miserable and driving him mad despite its initial appearance of being relatively innocent.

●● "I mean you could have been fair to me by despising me a little less."

"I'm sorry. But I think, since you bring it up, that a lot of your life is despicable."

"I could say the same about yours," said Jacques. "There are so many ways of being despicable it quite makes one's head spin. But the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people's pain."

Related Characters: Jacques, David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between David and Jacques. They are standing at the bar in a restaurant Giovanni took them to after a night of drinking. Having recognized David's attraction to Giovanni, Jacques urges him to treat the young man with more kindness than he has treated Jacques with in their relationship. In response, David claims that he hasn't mistreated Jacques, but Jacques points out that David never even tried to hide his dislike of him. When he says this, he reveals that he's perfectly aware David judges him for using money to attract and exploit young men. Rather than denying this, David doubles down by saying that Jacques does, in fact, lead a "despicable" life, clearly wanting to characterize Jacques as a lewd pervert. However, Jacques recognizes that David is only saying this because he wants to make a distinction between them, since David wants to deny the fact he—like Jacques—is attracted to men. Jacques tells David that "the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people's pain," forcing David to consider the way his actions influence others. In other words, Jacques tries to get David to realize that he mistreats people who remind him of himself, since he's unwilling to embrace his true identity. Because Jacques has already gone through the (likely painful) process of accepting his sexual identity, it's unfair for David to project his own discomfort with this very process onto Jacques, but this is exactly what he does, effectively turning his insecurity into resentment.

“Love him,” said Jacques, with vehemence, “love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last, since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, *helas!* in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty, you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will only *not* play it safe.” He paused, watching me, and then looked down to his cognac. “You play it safe long enough,” he said, in a different tone, “and you’ll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me.”

Related Characters: Jacques (speaker), Giovanni, David

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jacques urges David to embrace his romantic feelings for Giovanni. Having recognized that David is attracted to Giovanni, he tries to convince his young friend to listen to his heart. However, David is unwilling to acknowledge his attraction to men, so he deflects Jacques’s comments by asking why he has sex with men, saying that Jacques is constantly hell-bent on securing five minutes of “dirty” happiness in the dark. In response, Jacques tries to show him that even five minutes of genuine love is worth everything in the world. More importantly, he says that something is only “dirty” if a person *thinks* of it as dirty, implying that David could grasp happiness if only he learned to accept his desires. As it stands, though, David sees his attraction to men as dirty and wrong, and this, Jacques believes, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Consequently, he insists that David and Giovanni could have something beautiful if only David could embrace his feelings—something that he maintains is vitally important, since failing to do so might “trap” him in his body. This is an especially significant sentiment, since David looks at himself in the mirror at the end of the novel and feels as if the solution to all his misery is hidden and inaccessible inside himself. In this way, then, Baldwin implies that David has failed to follow Jacques’s advice and is accordingly doomed to a lifetime of lonely unhappiness at the end of the novel.

I saw myself, sharply, as a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored. I looked at Giovanni’s face, which did not help me. He belonged to this strange city, which did not belong to me. I began to see that, while what was happening to me was not so strange as it would have comforted me to believe, yet it was strange beyond belief. It was not really so strange, so unprecedented, though voices deep within me boomed, For shame! For shame! that I should be so abruptly, so hideously entangled with a boy; what was strange was that this was but one tiny aspect of the dreadful human tangle, occurring everywhere, without end, forever.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Hella, Giovanni

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Just before David has sex with Giovanni for the first time, he looks at his face and feels lost. It’s interesting that he sees himself as a wayward vagrant, or somebody who is “unanchored” in the world. This aligns with his original belief that marrying Hella will make him feel “moored” to something tangible and acceptable. Because he doesn’t think two men can exist in society as a legitimate couple, he feels completely at a loss when he stares into Giovanni’s eyes and feels desire overtake him. And though he’d like to tell himself that this strong feeling of affection toward a man is something he’s never experienced before, he knows that it’s not actually so foreign to him. After all, he has lived the entirety of his adult life fighting off such feelings. In this moment, then, he feels both frightened and soothed by the idea of finally giving in to his true desires, recognizing his excitement while simultaneously feeling guilty about what’s about to happen. And yet, at the same time, he also acknowledges on a certain level that love is an ordinary thing, something that has characterized humanity in many different forms—an idea that seemingly gives him permission to finally act on his feelings for Giovanni.

Part 2: Chapter 1 Quotes

“The beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again; but one day I would not be with Giovanni any more. And would I then, like all the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, into what dark places?”

With this fearful intimation there opened in me a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

David has these thoughts after he catches himself looking longingly at an attractive man who passes him and Giovanni on the street. Giovanni notices David's gaze and immediately starts laughing, but David sees this moment as uncomfortably transformative, since he suddenly realizes the extent to which he has inadvertently embraced his attraction to men. Before dating Giovanni, he was relatively successful at hiding his sexual orientation from the outside world. Now, though, he feels as if Giovanni has stirred something inside of him that he'll never again be able to hide. More importantly, he resents Giovanni for awakening the "beast" of his sexual identity, blaming his lover because doing so is easier than recognizing that his attraction to men was bound to surface at some point. That the sudden bitterness he feels toward Giovanni arises from the same place as his love is worth noting, too, since it confirms the notion that David uses resentment and scorn to mask romantic feelings with which he hasn't yet come to terms.



freedoms he thought he couldn't enjoy in the United States, such as the freedom to have a relationship with a man, though he would never admit that this was one of his actual reasons for leaving. In this regard, it makes sense that he wouldn't enjoy being called a "*vrai américain*," or a "true American," since he made a conscious decision to leave the country and thus doesn't want to be reduced to a mere American. At the same time, though, he also dislikes it when Giovanni says that he *isn't* American, since this strips him of one of the only things that might define him. Without a nationality to align himself with, he must find other ways of establishing himself. This, in turn, encourages him to examine himself more closely—something he doesn't enjoy, since he would prefer to live in ignorance (or denial) of his sexual orientation. Consequently, the way he does or does not relate to his national identity is colored by his unwillingness to come to terms with himself on a more fundamental level.

●● I cannot say that I was frightened. Or, it would be better to say that I did not feel any fear—the way men who are shot do not, I am told, feel any pain for awhile. I felt a certain relief. It seemed that the necessity for decision had been taken from my hands. I told myself that we both had always known, Giovanni and myself, that our idyll could not last forever. And it was not as though I had not been honest with him—he knew all about Hella. He knew that she would be returning to Paris one day. Now she would be coming back and my life with Giovanni would be finished.

Part 2: Chapter 2 Quotes

●● When Giovanni wanted me to know that he was displeased with me, he said I was a "*vrai américain*"; conversely, when delighted, he said that I was not an American at all; and on both occasions he was striking, deep in me, a nerve which did not throb in him. And I resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, David considers the relationship he has with his own national identity. Having left the United States, he doesn't particularly identify with the country, at least insofar as it factors into the way he wants to present himself to the world. After all, he came to France to attain certain

Related Characters: David (speaker), Hella, Giovanni

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 90



Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly after David receives a letter from Hella informing him that she'll soon be coming back to Paris from Spain. Although this should make him unhappy because it means the end of his relationship with Giovanni, the news actually gives him a sense of "relief." This is because Hella's return will finally force his love life to a point of resolution, even if that resolution is undesirable. During Hella's absence, he and Giovanni have existed in something of a gray area, in which David is happy but at odds with himself because he can't bring himself to actually commit to Giovanni. Now, though, David will be forced to leave him, and though this is upsetting, it also means he can stop

deliberating over what he should do about their relationship. This, at least, is what he thinks, though it's worth noting that this is an incredibly passive way of handling the situation. After all, David will still need to make a choice between Hella and Giovanni, regardless of when Hella comes back to Paris. Nonetheless, David sees her return as an excuse to stop thinking about the entire ordeal, thereby letting himself off the hook and allowing himself to continue denying his sexual identity.

Again, somewhere at the bottom of me, I realized that 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. Sue was not Hella and she did not lessen my terror of what would happen when Hella came: she increased it, she made it more real than it had been before.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni, Hella, Sue

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

After Hella tells David in a letter that she'll soon be returning to Paris, he decides he must have sex with a woman to prepare for her imminent arrival. This, he believes, will help him combat his fear about reentering a heterosexual relationship. With this in mind, he has drinks with an acquaintance named Sue and eventually ends up having sex with her at her apartment. This passage appears while he and Sue are having sex, as David gradually realizes that he was foolish to think that having intimate relations with a woman would do anything to change his attitude toward heterosexual relationships. When he says that his fear has "nothing to do with [his] body," he implies that he's perfectly capable of approximating physical affection for a woman. What he's incapable of, though, is forgetting about his attraction to men and his love for Giovanni. As he comes to understand that having sex with Sue will do nothing to make him feel better about leaving Giovanni, he realizes that this experience has only heightened his discomfort surrounding Hella's return. In turn, the reader sees that David has not only failed once again to come to terms with what he wants, but has also prioritized his emotions over another person's happiness, subjecting Sue to meaningless sex without stopping to consider how it would feel to be treated as a mere pawn in someone else's messy love life.

Yet it was true, I recalled, turning away from the river down the long street home, I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed. I wanted the same bed at night and the same arms and I wanted to rise in the morning, knowing where I was. I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed.

Related Characters: David (speaker), Sue, Hella, Giovanni

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

When Hella tells David that she'll be returning to Paris, David has meaningless sex with his acquaintance Sue. This leaves him feeling even worse than before, since it only emphasizes the extent to which he doesn't want to be with a woman. However, he feels differently on the walk home from Sue's apartment, thinking that he truly does want to settle down with a woman and have a family. As he looks out over the city, he sees the lights in each apartment and wonders about the families who live in these buildings. Feeling lonely, he reminds himself that he wants this lifestyle for himself. At the same time, though, it's worth noting that this sentiment only arises because David feels sad and lonely, not because he's actually attracted to women. Instead, he wants to be in a heterosexual relationship because this will give him a feeling of comfort and stability. Indeed, he believes that being married to a woman and having children will enable him to finally solidify his masculinity, once again revealing his conviction that heterosexuality is what defines manhood. Consequently, the reader sees that his gravitation toward women has nothing to do with actual romance and everything to do with his insecurities about what it means to be a man.

"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*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime. [...] You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to *kill* him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you—you are *immoral*."

Related Characters: Giovanni (speaker), Jacques, Hella, David

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis


Giovanni says this to David after David leaves him without warning for three days. By the time he returns, Giovanni has learned that David has chosen Hella over him, and when David tries to defend this decision, Giovanni accuses him of being a coward. Understanding that David doesn't truly love Hella, Giovanni knows that the only reason David is leaving him is because he isn't courageous enough to accept his own sexual orientation. Rather than coming to terms with his sexual preferences, Giovanni claims, David tricks himself into thinking that he's "clean" and pure. For this reason, he fears committing himself to Giovanni, since he thinks of homosexual love as dirty and wrong. Giovanni, on the other hand, is unafraid of "the stink of love," completely unashamed of his feelings. It's worth pointing out Giovanni's suggestion that David doesn't want to feel dirty for even five minutes, since this recalls Jacques's earlier assertion that even great romances sometimes play out over the course of five minutes, which a person can choose to think of as either dirty or beautiful. In this moment, it becomes clear that David still hasn't managed to shift the way he thinks about his attraction to men.

Part 2: Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ "I wasn't sure about that letter." I was thinking, *Perhaps I can get out of it without having to tell her anything*. "You were sort of—offhand—I couldn't be sure whether you were glad or sorry to be throwing in with me."

"Oh," she said, "but we've always been offhand, it's the only way I could have said it. I was afraid of embarrassing you—don't you understand that?"

Related Characters: Hella, David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between David and Hella shortly after Hella comes back to Paris. As they discuss their relationship, he asks whether or not she came to any conclusions about what she wants while she was traveling in Spain. In response, she asks if he read the letter she sent

him, which made it rather clear that she wanted to come back to Paris, resume their relationship, and get married. The reader knows that David did read this letter, and that it caused him a great deal of anxiety. The fact that he pretends to not have understood its message, then, suggests that he's trying to find some way out of resuming his relationship with Hella. To that end, he wonders if he can manage to "get out of" their relationship without ever having to tell her about Giovanni. If she were to end the relationship on her own, he realizes, he would be able to continue seeing Giovanni, which is what he actually wants. Because he can't bring himself to commit to a long-term relationship with a man, the only way he could possibly find happiness is if he managed to subtly trick Hella into enacting his will. Unfortunately for him, though, Hella doesn't seem to mind his noncommittal attitude and doesn't try to end their relationship, forcing him to either articulate what he really wants or simply go along with their plan to get married. Needless to say, he chooses the latter option.

☝☝ "You may laugh," she said, humorously, "but there is something in what I say. I began to realize it in Spain— that I wasn't free, that I couldn't be free until I was attached—no, *committed*—to someone."

[...]

"What do you want, Hella? What have you got now that makes such a difference?"

She laughed. "It isn't what I've got. It isn't even what I want. It's that *you've got me*. So now I can be—your obedient and most loving servant."

Related Characters: Hella, David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis


In this conversation between Hella and David, Hella talks about the realization she had in Spain that women aren't seen as complete individuals. Explaining what she means, she says that women aren't "free" until they commit themselves to a man. This is because they exist in a patriarchal society that effectively views marrying a man and have children as a woman's sole purpose. Without anything else to define them as independent people, then, women attach themselves to men, which is exactly what Hella is doing by marrying David. Now that she has decided to become David's wife, she explains, she can fill the only

female role that society recognizes as valuable. Simply put, Hella realizes that she lives in a male-dominant society that dictates what is acceptable for women. Interestingly enough, David can relate to this sense of limitation more than Hella might think, since he, too, feels restricted by gender-related societal expectations, though he won't admit this because doing so would mean being honest about his sexual identity.

Part 2: Chapter 5 Quotes

“But I *knew*,” she said, “I knew. This is what makes me so ashamed. I knew it every time you looked at me. I knew it every time we went to bed. If only you had told me the truth *then*. Don't you see how unjust it was to wait for me to find it out? To put all the burden on me? I had the *right* to expect to hear from you—women are always waiting for the *man* to speak. Or hadn't you heard?”

Related Characters: Hella (speaker), Giovanni, David

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hella tells David that she always suspected that he was attracted to men. She says this shortly after finding out that he's been cheating on her with a sailor in Nice for the past three days. Packing her things, she openly regrets all the time she wasted by dating David. More importantly, she tries to get him to see how unfair it was for him to keep such a secret from her. Throughout the novel, David struggles with his emotions in an extremely internal way, rarely talking about them with anybody. This, however, doesn't mean that his self-deception doesn't affect other people—a notion that becomes all too clear when Hella says that she had a “right” to know about his feelings toward men. Because they live in a society that gives men all the power, she says, it should have been David's job to work through his feelings. Instead, though, he put the “burden” on Hella to find out for herself that he doesn't love her. By

emphasizing this injustice, Hella underlines just how much David's inner emotional life has influenced her happiness, illustrating why it's dangerous for people to hide their true identities—a decision that inevitably hurts their loved ones just as much as themselves.

“The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation.”

Related Characters: David (speaker), Giovanni

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In the concluding pages of *Giovanni's Room*, David envisions Giovanni's execution while getting dressed. As he does this, he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and eventually wills himself to face the image of his naked body. When he looks at himself, he has the sudden sense that his body is—like Giovanni's—sentenced to death, an idea that indicates just how doomed he feels by the choices he's made throughout the novel. Staring at himself, he thinks that there is something mysterious that exists inside his body, an idea that aligns with his inability to honestly assess his true nature. Because he can't seem to come to terms with his sexual identity, he feels estranged from himself, as if something unknowable and strange lurks within him. All he needs to do, though, is find the courage to embrace his sexual orientation, which would finally enable him to seek happiness without any reservation. As it stands, though, he remains unwilling or unable to do this, making him feel as if he is “trapped.” And though he hopes that his body “hurries toward revelation,” this seems depressingly unlikely, since it's clear that he already knows what he needs to do in order to be happy but still can't bring himself to accept it.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: CHAPTER 1

David stands before the window of a house he's renting in southern France. It's night, and he watches his reflection in the glass, trying to peer past his blond hair and the image of himself holding a drink. He'll be leaving the following morning and knows that he'll be drunk by then. But instead of cleaning the house like he's supposed to, he thinks about his girlfriend Hella, who left him not long ago and is making her way back to America at this moment. He and Hella rented this house while they were still living in Paris, and he can still remember that period of his life, during which he tried to convince himself that he loved her. Now he understands that this was never the case.

Still thinking about the first stages of his relationship with Hella, David remembers that she decided to travel on her own to Spain as a way of determining whether or not she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Before she left, David asked her to marry him, but she didn't take him seriously. While Hella was away, though, she realized she that she *did* want to marry David, but by the time she came back to Paris he was already with Giovanni, effectively dooming their relationship. However, she didn't know this at the time, and David didn't tell her anything about the nature of his relationship with Giovanni. In this state of ignorance, she agreed to move with him to the south of France.

David reflects upon his feelings for Hella, remembering how he insisted that he once truly loved her while she was packing her things on the day she left him. He wonders now if this was ever actually true, realizing that he must have been confusing love for passion and thinking about the many nights they spent luxuriating in bed together. He thinks about the fact that these nights took place in France rather than the United States—a fact that he thinks made him and Hella feel strangely free. Interestingly enough, though, this freedom also made him uncomfortable, and he thinks that he proposed to Hella because he wanted to give himself something “to be moored to.”

Although it's not immediately apparent why David is drinking alone in an empty house, one thing becomes clear in this opening scene: David has been lying to himself about his own romantic feelings. That he's only realizing now that he never loved Hella—with whom he was living—suggests that he's quite adept at deceiving himself. Though Baldwin doesn't yet clarify the nature of this kind of deception, it's worth noting that being truthful with himself has plunged him into a bout of lonely, depressive drinking. This, in turn, means that he's most likely unused to being honest about his romantic emotions.



Again, the particulars surrounding David's troubles aren't immediately forthcoming. However, Baldwin hints at the fact that David had a romantic connection with a man named Giovanni while Hella—his girlfriend—was away in Spain. This aligns with the previous notion that he has trouble being truthful about his romantic emotions, and readers see that he has been lying not only to himself, but also to Hella. Given that he's morosely drinking alone in an empty house in southern France, it's reasonable to say that his inability to be honest about his love life has probably driven away the people he cares about most.



An American man living in France, David associates living outside of the United States with a certain kind of freedom, one that enables him to escape whatever pressures or expectations await him at home. This, at least, is what Baldwin intimates when he suggests that David and Hella felt an unexpected sense of freedom when they made love in France, as if simply living in a different country gave them a feeling of sexual liberation. But because David never actually loved Hella (and, indeed, seems to have loved a man instead), the very idea of sexual freedom in their relationship most likely daunted him, as it only emphasized the extent to which he was pretending to be someone he wasn't. In this way, then, he was actually imprisoned by this so-called freedom, though he apparently embraced this imprisonment by “moor[ing]” himself to Hella—yet another sign that he is an expert at denying what he really wants.



In retrospect, David comes to think that he'll never again be able to have such care-free nights full of lovemaking, since he doesn't think he can be trusted with another person's love. After all, if it weren't for him, he thinks, Giovanni wouldn't be facing execution that very night while David himself drinks and stares into the darkness of southern France.

David thinks of all the lies he's told in his life. One stands out in particular, which is that he insisted to Giovanni that he had never had sex with another man before. This, David now admits, isn't true. When he was a teenager he spent all of his time one summer with a boy named Joey. While sleeping at Joey's house one night, David woke up to find his friend searching for bedbugs beneath the lamplight. Making fun of him for being paranoid, David reached out to rustle him in a lighthearted way, but Joey responded gently to his touch, and the two boys suddenly found themselves kissing. After spending the rest of the night exploring each other's bodies, David woke up the next morning in a state of horror. Looking at Joey's body, he became afraid that his attraction to another boy would cause him to lose his "manhood."

Still recalling the aftermath of his sexual encounter with Joey, David remembers how confused he felt. He'd wondered how he could have possibly slept with another boy, bewildered that he could ever want to do such a thing. He'd also thought sadly about his father, remembering that he was all the old man had. Then, suddenly, he decided to put this experience behind him. Getting up, he quickly made breakfast before leaving Joey's house. He avoided Joey for the rest of the summer and even started bullying him with a group of tougher boys when school started. Every time he saw how much his behavior hurt Joey, he only grew meaner and more ruthless.

Readers don't yet know what took place between David and Giovanni or, for that matter, between David and Hella. Whatever happened, though, it's clear that his inability or unwillingness to be truthful about his emotions somehow led to misery and—in Giovanni's case—death.



In this moment, Baldwin illuminates why David must have had such a hard time being truthful with himself and with Hella about his romantic feelings, as his sexual experience with Joey indicates that he's attracted to men. This, of course, doesn't mean he's attracted exclusively to men—an important idea to keep in mind when discussing Giovanni's Room, since Baldwin never clarifies whether David is gay or bisexual (a distinction that Baldwin perhaps felt was beside the point). David's feeling of terror in the aftermath of his sexual encounter with Joey illustrates the many internalized biases he has against gay or bisexual people. Unable to accept the idea that two people of the same sex can have romantic relationships, David thinks he can't pursue his connection with Joey because it will threaten his masculinity, ultimately suggesting that he thinks being a true man is directly linked to heterosexuality.



David's thoughts about his father suggest that he cares deeply about what the old man thinks. Indeed, he wants to live up to his father's expectations, which apparently don't include homosexual (or bisexual) relationships. In turn, the readers see that David's denial of his sexual identity is fueled not only by his own entrenched biases, but by his fear that he won't fulfill certain expectations placed upon him by others. To counteract these fears, it seems, David takes out his aggression on Joey, bullying him so that David doesn't have to think about the implications of what happened between them.



Thinking about his childhood, David reflects upon his relationship with his father, remembering that his mother died when he was five and that, for this reason, David became the center of his father's life. He and his father lived with his aunt, Ellen, who helped raise David, though he never particularly liked her. He can still vividly recall overhearing her yell at his father one night when he came in late after hours of drinking. Accusing his father of spending all his money on women and alcohol, she said that he was negatively impacting David's life—something that hadn't occurred to David until he heard her say this. However, he didn't agree with Ellen and felt a sense of solidarity with his father. Shortly after his sexual experience with Joey, though, David started drinking heavily and misbehaving, effectively fulfilling Ellen's prophecy.

Hoping to bond over a shared sense of masculinity, David's father has always wanted to treat him as a friend rather than a son, but David yearns to have a genuine father-son relationship. One night as a young man, he gets outrageously drunk and crashes a car full of people into a telephone pole. When he wakes up in the hospital, his father is beside him and speaks emotionally about how David could have died. During this conversation, David breaks down and begins to cry, feeling that he's all his father has. He apologizes profusely for driving drunk, though he privately senses that he can't bring himself to articulate the real reason he's sorry. Hearing his apologies, his father says they will have a long talk about the direction of his life when he leaves the hospital.

When he leaves the hospital, David and his father have a frank discussion about his future. David hasn't gone to college and doesn't know what he wants in life, but he understands that the conversation he's about to have with his father won't be a genuine form of communication, ultimately realizing that they'll never be able to talk frankly with one another. In keeping with this, he manages to convince his father that he should move out and find a job, making the old man feel as if this was his own idea when, in reality, David is the one to manipulate the conversation to his benefit. From that point on, he and his father get along very well because his father thinks he's living the life they agreed David should be living.

Part of David's desire to please his father has to do with his mother's death. Feeling an undue amount of pressure to make his father happy in the wake of his mother's passing, he refuses to let himself pursue gay or bisexual relationships. In this way, he lives his life according to a set of expectations, limiting himself based on what he thinks will make his father happy. Interestingly enough, his father also has to contend with certain societal expectations, as Ellen shames him for failing to lead the life of an upstanding single father. In turn, readers see the many ways in which people often subject each other—both knowingly and unknowingly—to gendered cultural norms that effectively curtail happiness and personal freedom.



The way David's relationship with his father informs his ideas of masculinity is noteworthy, since his struggle to embody the image of a quintessential man is what later keeps him from happiness. His father's approach to parenthood is so casual and friendly that it is void of the kind of emotional support that typically characterizes father-son dynamics. Wanting to connect over conventional notions of manhood, his father unwittingly sets certain expectations for David, sending the message that their bond is centered around one thing: the fact that they're both men. As a result, David feels like he can't deviate from the lifestyle of a conventional heterosexual male without threatening his relationship with his father. This, it seems, is why he can't bring himself to apologize for what he really feels, which is that he has let his father down by harboring desires for other men.



Because David can't tell his father about his true identity (and, for that matter, isn't even honest with himself about his sexual orientation), he realizes that they will never be able to truly relate to one another. Accordingly, he misrepresents himself so that his father will accept his lifestyle. In this regard, readers see that David is quite capable of hiding from both himself and the people to whom he's closest.



For a long time, David keeps his father happy by leading a life that pleases the old man, even joining the Army at one point. He notes that he's able to trick his father in this way because he's the type of person who can will himself to do anything. However, he now recognizes that this kind of self-assurance and willpower is nothing but deceit and denial. To that end, his decision long ago to leave Joey behind is evidence of his determination to manufacture a life that masks true identity and sexual orientation.

In this passage, David demonstrates a certain amount of self-awareness by acknowledging his own ability to deceive both himself and others. However, this is an observation he's apparently only capable of making in retrospect, a fact that once more demonstrates his talent at fully deceiving himself when it matters most. This technique of coping, Baldwin suggests, is only temporary—although David was able to suppress his feelings at the time, as an adult he now realizes the gravity of his own self-deception and poor treatment of Joey.



Still standing at the window in southern France, David remembers the fear he felt when he was in the Army and a fellow soldier with whom he'd had sex was court-martialed because others found out he was gay. This terrified David, whose sexual orientation remained a secret. In the coming years, he threw himself into drinking and meaningless relationships with women, hoping all the while to come to terms with himself. Wanting to “find [him]self”—a phrase he now thinks indicates his subconscious understanding that something was amiss regarding his identity—he left America. If he'd known that traveling would only force him to confront the same problems he tried to flee, though, he thinks he would have stayed in the United States. And yet, he also thinks that he knew precisely what he was doing by moving to France in the first place.

As David thinks about his past, he suspects that he wasn't as ignorant or naïve as he would have liked to think at the time. Although he left home to “find himself,” he now recognizes that the very fact that he wanted to do this was an indication that he understood he was hiding something from himself. However, it's much different to acknowledge this in retrospect than it is to realize it in the moment, which is why he was able to travel to France to seek a new form of freedom without admitting to himself what he really wanted. Instead of recognizing that his move to France was an attempt to embrace a lifestyle as a gay or bisexual man, he tricked himself into thinking that he was simply embarking upon a new adventure. In turn, Baldwin once again shows readers just how adept David is at deceiving himself.



PART 1: CHAPTER 2

After two years in Paris, David meets Giovanni in a bar frequented by people to whom Parisians refer as “of *le milieu*.” At the time, David has almost no money and is about to get kicked out of his hotel for failing to pay rent. Because of this, he calls an older gay man named Jacques and arranges to meet him for dinner. Jacques is a businessman from the United States who was born in Belgium and now lives in Paris, where he frequently hosts orgies and spends lavish amounts of money on attractive young men. Although he senses that David is only reaching out to him because he needs money, he agrees to meet him, delighted by the idea of being seen at the bar with such a good-looking young American man.

The narrative present of Giovanni's Room takes place as David drinks alone in southern France, but the majority of the novel focuses on the time he spends in Paris directly preceding this period. When David goes to dinner with Jacques, then, it has been two years since he left the Army and traveled to France. The nature of his relationship with Jacques is important to note, since they seem to have a mutually-beneficial connection that hinges upon their shared ability to exploit each another. While David uses Jacques for money, Jacques uses David to benefit his public image. In this regard, then, both men allow themselves to be manipulated so they can each get what they want. As Baldwin outlines this dynamic, he prepares readers to question who, exactly, has more power in such relationships—a question he doesn't address until later in the novel.



Although David often spends time with other gay (or possibly bisexual) men, he pretends to be straight, which is why Jacques wants to be seen as his date, relishing the thought that people might think he has finally gotten through to the closeted American. In retrospect, David thinks that Jacques is partly responsible for Giovanni's eventual death, though no more responsible than David is himself.

After David and Jacques have dinner and Jacques agrees to lend him 10,000 francs, they make their way to a bar owned by Jacques's friend, Guillaume, another older and wealthy gay man. David has spent a fair amount of time at this bar but has always tried to pose as an interloper. In this role, he judges the young gay men and "les folles" who frequent the establishment, harshly thinking that some of them don't even look like humans. On this particular night, though, he and Jacques see that Guillaume has hired a strikingly attractive young Italian man, Giovanni, as a server. This is the first time David sets eyes on Giovanni, and though he's immediately attracted to him, he hides this reaction. Jacques, on the other hand, makes no effort to conceal his interest in Giovanni, so David offers to disappear for a moment to allow the old man to flirt.

David knows that the only way Jacques will be successful in wooing Giovanni is if Giovanni needs money. In fact, even Jacques understands this—after all, this is the exact dynamic that characterizes his relationship with David, who pretends to be unaware of just how much Jacques is attracted to him. In doing so, he's able to use Jacques's interest to his benefit by keeping the older man in a constant state of hope.

Part of Jacques's interest in David has to do with David's inability or unwillingness to be truthful with himself about his sexual orientation. This, it seems, makes him even more appealing to someone like Jacques, who wants to be seen as a flirtatious and devilish older man capable of sexually conquering a confused and attractive young man. In this way, the nature of their mutually exploitative relationship begins to shift. Jacques's fascination preys on David's delicate emotions, whereas David's interest in Jacques is strictly monetary and, thus, surface-level. In turn, the power dynamics of their relationship no longer seem quite as equal as they first appeared.



David's intolerance when it comes to the people surrounding him in Guillaume's bar recalls his decision to bully Joey after their sexual encounter. In both cases, he recognizes something of himself in the people around him, and because he doesn't want to acknowledge this part of himself, he treats these people with bitterness. Judging the gay men and "les folles" (a French slang term for crossdressers or trans women) in Guillaume's bar, he appears determined to deny his own attraction to men. In turn, this determination turns into a form of resentment of anyone who might threaten his contrived self-image as a heterosexual man.



Although it might be the case that Jacques preys on David's closeted confusion, it also becomes clear in this moment that David exploits Jacques's emotions. Of course, his desire to take Jacques's money is certainly less psychologically invasive than the delight Jacques takes in making him uncomfortable, but David's technique of giving Jacques hope is indeed emotionally manipulative. In this manner, Baldwin continues to develop the complicated power dynamics at play in such relationships.



Giovanni comes to take Jacques and David's orders. They're both stunned by his beauty, but Giovanni politely defers when Jacques tries to flirt with him. Uninterested, he turns away to serve another table, at which point Jacques asks David to invite Giovanni to have a drink with them. When he sees how much this terrifies David, he says, "I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment, that [...] immaculate manhood which is your pride and joy." Going on, he explains that he wants David to ask Giovanni to have a drink with them because he knows the young server will refuse if he himself is the one to ask. After some initial hesitation, David finally agrees.

When Giovanni returns to David and Jacques's table, David invites him to have a drink with them. Just then, Guillaume appears behind Jacques and says, "Not only have you finally—thank heaven!—corrupted this great American football player, you use him now to corrupt my barman." This delights Jacques, who wants to be seen as a misbehaved and seductive older man. Laughing together, he and Guillaume fall into conversation while David faces Giovanni, remembering with a start that he has just asked him to have a drink. Giovanni accepts his offer, and because Jacques is distracted, David is forced to use some of his 10,000 francs to pay for the drinks.

Giovanni asks David where he's from, and the two men discuss the differences between New York City and Paris. David maintains that New York feels different because Paris is old and majestic, whereas Manhattan is modern. Giovanni, who is from Italy, flirtatiously disagrees, marveling that Americans always seem to think of themselves as futuristic and new when, in reality, the United States is made up of emigrants. Giovanni suggests that everyone experiences the same predicaments in life, saying that people are like fish in a vast body of water and that, no matter what happens, big fish eat always little fish. In response, David insists that a person can choose to eat or be eaten—an idea that strikes Giovanni as absurd. "To choose!" he laughs. "Ah, you are really an American."

In this scene, Jacques gives David an excuse to finally explore his true desires. What's worth noting is that Jacques's request gives David the perfect opportunity to pursue his attraction to men while maintaining his guise as a heterosexual man, since he's only asking Giovanni to have a drink on Jacques's behalf. Jacques recognizes that this is the perfect way to get David to leave behind his strict ideas about masculinity without damaging his "immaculate manhood," a phrase that underlines David's sense that his own masculinity is fragile and precious, something he might ruin by deviating from stereotypical male behavior. Now, though, he can both indulge his inner desires while maintaining his public image as a straight man—a perfect combination to get him to step slightly outside his comfort zone.



The fact that David has to use his own money to buy Giovanni a drink is a perfect representation of how invested he is in this flirtatious interaction. The only reason he agreed to ask Giovanni to have a drink was because he thought he would be able to preserve his heterosexual image while secretly indulging his attraction. Now that he's left alone with Giovanni, though, he loses hold of his excuse to pursue the attractive young server, thereby making it harder for him to posture as an uninterested straight man.



In David and Giovanni's first conversation, they lean on their national identities, using them to define each other. In particular, Giovanni calls attention to David's American belief that people can choose their fate. This is an important conversation because it is related to David's approach to his sexual identity. In the same way that David believes he can choose to ignore his attraction to men, he thinks it's possible for a person to meticulously control their lives. In contrast, Giovanni clearly believes that humans must embrace the unchangeable realities of life. What's interesting, though, is that he associates David's naiveté with his American identity. Giovanni's categorization undoubtedly has complicated implications for David, who has purposefully left the United States in order to enjoy the freedoms of a new lifestyle—a lifestyle that Giovanni himself perhaps represents.



David doesn't like being so closely associated with American ways of seeing the world, but Giovanni is only being playful. After a moment, Giovanni asks if Jacques is David's uncle, and when David assures him that he isn't, he admits that he finds Jacques rather absurd. David agrees, but feels he must vouch for Jacques because he has just taken his money.

It's relatively unsurprising that David dislikes Giovanni's suggestion that he's a quintessential American, since he has made such a concerted effort to escape that way of life. On another note, readers once again see the strange power dynamics at play in David's relationship with Jacques, since he feels obligated to speak kindly about the old man merely because he has accepted money from him. As the novel progresses, then, it becomes clearer and clearer that this friendship is fraught with unspoken concerns and struggles.



As David talks to Giovanni, he's unnerved by how much he's enjoying himself. However, he becomes acutely aware that everyone in the bar is watching them, clearly taking pleasure in watching David flirt with a man. Before long, Giovanni turns away to serve more tables, though not before promising to return to finish his conversation with David.

Again, David is either unable or unwilling to embrace his attraction to men. For this reason, he feels ashamed for enjoying his conversation with Giovanni so thoroughly. In keeping with this, he can't stop thinking about what other people might be saying or thinking about him, an indication of just how much he cares about his public image.



While Giovanni is gone, David is terrified to see a trans woman slowly approaching him, though he himself doesn't refer to her as anything but "it" and, finally, "he." Finding this woman grotesque, he's petrified when she stops before him and asks if he likes Giovanni. Outraged, David says that this is none of her business, and she surprises him by agreeing. However, she also tells him that someone like Giovanni is dangerous for someone like David. When David tells the trans woman to go to hell, she laughs and says, "Oh, no, I go not to hell. But you, my dear friend—I fear that you shall burn in a very hot fire." She then touches her head and indicates that the flames of hell will consume David's mind. In response, David tells her to go fuck herself. Before she parts, she tells him that he'll be very unhappy.

David's unwillingness to refer to the trans woman who approaches him as "she" underscores the resentment he feels toward anyone who might pose a threat to his tenuous conception of masculinity. In this regard, his transphobia stems from his own confusion about what it means to be a man. To him, heterosexuality and conventional manliness are what define masculinity. Consequently, it unsettles him to think that both he and this trans woman could be attracted to men. This person has made the decision to present as a female, and her ability to do this forces David to reckon with the socially-constructed nature of gender. If this trans woman who has the same sexual preferences as him can be something other than a man, then David could be too, and this idea disconcerts him because he's trying so hard to commit himself to such a narrow conception of masculinity.



When David is on his own again, Jacques leans toward him and says that everyone is talking about him and Giovanni. With a coy smile, he asks if Giovanni has grown confused about which one of them is interested in him, and David assures him that there has been no confusion. David also adds that he doesn't want Jacques to get confused about how David feels regarding Giovanni, but Jacques dismisses this idea, saying that he has never been less confused about anything in his life. Going on, he gives David a piece of advice, saying that only very young people have time to entertain confusions about who they are and what they want. He then points out that David isn't all that young anymore. However, David merely shrugs this off by saying that Jacques is speaking nonsense.

Although Jacques seems to take a mean-spirited kind of delight in toying with David's closeted confusion, it's worth noting that his advice in this moment is quite sound. In fact, his blunt words indicate that he cares about David to a certain extent, since he doesn't want the young man to spend more of his adult life in denial about his sexual identity. Unfortunately, though, David is unwilling to hear this from Jacques, even if his attitude toward Giovanni has already made it quite clear that everything Jacques has said is true.



Giovanni briefly circles back to David and Jacques, at which point Jacques drops overwhelmingly obvious hints about the fact that David is interested in him. And though David hates him for doing this, he also can't deny that he's enjoying himself and is extremely glad that his girlfriend Hella is on vacation in Spain. At the same time, though, he wishes he could bring himself to leave the bar and find a female prostitute, but he knows he doesn't have whatever it would take to do this.

As David continues speaking to Giovanni, his guard slowly falls. However, this doesn't mean he's comfortable with the effect Giovanni has had on him—it simply means that his repressed desires are too strong to overcome. After all, he began this interaction thinking that he could safely step outside of his comfort zone without sacrificing his image as a heterosexual man. As soon as he did this, though, he saw that it would be impossible to hide his true feelings, and now he seems to have surrendered to whatever's going to happen between him and Giovanni.



PART 1: CHAPTER 3

When Guillaume finally locks the door of his bar, it is 5:00 in the morning. Together, he, Jacques, David, and Giovanni decide to get breakfast, taking a taxi to another part of Paris. On the way, Jacques and Guillaume make lewd jokes and laugh about how closely Giovanni and David have to sit in order to fit into the car, but Giovanni appears unbothered by this, so David simply ignores them. When they arrive at a small and rundown restaurant that Giovanni suggested they visit, David reaches for his wallet, but Giovanni stops him, flashing him a look to indicate that Jacques and Guillaume should be the ones to pay.

When Giovanni stops David from paying for the taxi, readers see that he, too, has a somewhat exploitative relationship with older wealthy men. To benefit from Guillaume and Jacques's riches, it seems, Giovanni and David have to endure their unsavory comments. Consequently, readers might ask themselves who is manipulating whom, since both parties (the young men and the old men) objectify each other in different ways.



Inside the dirty restaurant, Giovanni warmly greets the hostess, who ushers the men inside. Before making their way to the dining room, Guillaume suggests that they should all have a drink at the bar, clearly wanting to talk to the small group of attractive but dirty young men sitting there. When the hostess welcomes this idea, David realizes that she's quite adept at allowing men like Jacques and Guillaume to feel comfortable in her establishment, helping them find any excuse to flirt with younger men. Sure enough, she agrees to have a drink with Guillaume and Jacques, but tactfully recedes into the background as soon as Guillaume addresses one of the boys sitting at the end of the bar—a boy David is sure has already calculated just how much money he'll be able to get out of Guillaume.

In this scene, Guillaume and Jacques's interest in attractive young men comes to the forefront of the novel, as David watches the two older men quickly descend upon the good-looking boys sitting at the bar. The hostess apparently condones this sort of behavior by actively—but subtly—helping Guillaume talk to one of her regulars. This is most likely because the hostess knows that her young customers stand to benefit from any relations they might have with a rich man like Guillaume. In this way, the world in which David and Giovanni exist is seemingly structured to support mutually-exploitative relationships based only on money and sex rather than genuine emotion.



While they stand at the bar, Jacques speaks to David in a low voice, saying that this has been an important night for him. Although David tries to ignore his implications, Jacques speaks straightforwardly, saying that David is lucky that he's finally coming to terms with his sexuality before it's too late. He asks if David is going to write to Hella about tonight, and when David suggests he would have nothing of note to say, Jacques glances at him with a look of pity and sadness.

Once more, Jacques shows actual concern for David's wellbeing, despite the fact that he is usually interested in using his riches to manufacture exploitative relationships. In this moment, he tries yet again to help David embrace his sexual identity, empathetically urging him to acknowledge what he has long denied. However, David refuses to acknowledge his attraction to men (or, more specifically, to Giovanni), even when it's overwhelmingly obvious to everyone else.



In a serious tone, Jacques asks if David is going to treat Giovanni the same way he has treated him, adding that David has been quite insensitive. David feigns ignorance, but Jacques says that he has been mean because he has failed to hide dislike of him. This, in turn, prompts David to say that he finds Jacques's life detestable. In response, Jacques says that the most loathsome way to behave in life is to "be contemptuous of other people's pain." Defensively, David asks why Jacques can only find happiness through homosexual encounters, but Jacques merely turns the question around on him, imploring David to consider the men he himself has had sex with while pretending to be a heterosexual. He then urges David to be truthful about his feelings, insisting that he should love Giovanni and let Giovanni love him back.

After Jacques and David finish their conversation, Jacques starts flirting with one of the young men at the bar. Since both he and Guillaume are preoccupied, then, Giovanni and David slip into the dining room and order a bottle of white wine with oysters. As they drink and eat, Giovanni tells David how he met Guillaume. After coming out of a movie, Guillaume stopped him and told a story about how he had put his scarf on the seat in front of him. According to Guillaume, Giovanni sat on the scarf and caused it to fall on the ground. Claiming that it was an expensive scarf, Guillaume asked Giovanni to go back into the theater to look for it. Giovanni obliged, and to no great surprise, there was no scarf in the theater. Guillaume then invited Giovanni to have drinks and dinner with him.

Giovanni tells David that he had no money when he first came to Paris, which is why he accepted Guillaume's dinner invite. At dinner, he learned that Guillaume owned a bar and that he could get him a worker's permit, so he decided that his relationship with the older man could be beneficial. However, he admits to David that he was unsuccessful in dodging Guillaume's physical advances, though at least he now has a worker's permit and a job. Every once in a while, Giovanni explains, Guillaume will come onto him or grow jealous because others like him so much, but this has slowed down because Guillaume realized that Giovanni generates good business in his bar. Still, Giovanni knows Guillaume will soon make up some reason to be angry at him, and this poses an inescapable threat to his job.

While it's true that Jacques dangles his money in order to have a relationship (of any kind) with David, it's also true that David dangles his sexual appeal to take advantage of Jacques's wealth. To do this, he leads Jacques on by giving him hope of someday having a genuine emotional relationship with him. Recognizing this, Jacques points out David's tendency to resent the very people he's hurting, but David refuses to candidly reflect upon his behavior, instead implying that Jacques would be happier if he were heterosexual. To his credit, Jacques doesn't lash out at David in response, but simply encourages him to be honest with himself for once, something that would ultimately enable him to be kinder to people like Jacques.



The beginning of Guillaume and Giovanni's relationship highlights the coy manipulation that people like Guillaume use to gain access to young men like Giovanni. Rather than simply approaching Giovanni to say hello, Guillaume tries to make him feel as if he owes him something. By putting Giovanni in this position, Guillaume effectively makes it harder for him to refuse his offer to go to drinks, using his power as a wealthy older man to his advantage because he knows he wouldn't have a chance with Giovanni otherwise.



Guillaume's position of power over Giovanni puts an undeniable strain on their relationship. Although all Guillaume wants is for Giovanni to show him affection, he has created an environment in which it's very unlikely that Giovanni could ever feel any kind of fondness for him whatsoever. After all, it's painfully evident that Guillaume is willing to maliciously manipulate Giovanni, creating a subtly abusive dynamic that all but ruins any good will that might otherwise exist between them.



Upon leaving Guillaume and Jacques at the restaurant, Giovanni insists that David should come back to his **room**, which is a small lodging on the outskirts of Paris. Refusing to entertain any other idea, Giovanni leads him there, saying that David will have to see his room at some point or another. When they arrive, Giovanni opens the door and David walks into a tiny, cluttered room. Then the door closes behind him and he turns to face Giovanni, feeling suddenly nervous and unsure of what he's doing. Looking into Giovanni's eyes, he understands that he will be lost forever if he doesn't run from this room, but he can't bring himself to leave. And then Giovanni curls into his arms and steers him to the bed while David internally screams *No!* and *Yes!* at the same time.

David's memories of his time with Giovanni are suddenly interrupted by the old woman who has rented her house to him in southern France. It is the night before he is set to leave, and she has come to take an inventory of the property. Going from room to room, she notices the mess he's made of the place. She also asks why he hasn't left the house for days on end, and he makes feeble excuses while trying to hide how drunk he is. At one point, she asks where Hella has gone, and when he says that she returned to the United States without him, the old woman becomes deeply concerned, telling him that it's not good for a man to spend his time in isolation without a woman's presence. Going on, she instructs him to return to his father in America, find a wife, and have kids.

PART 2: CHAPTER 1

After their first night together, David moves into Giovanni's **room**. It's nearly springtime in Paris, and they develop a routine wherein David meets Giovanni just before the bar closes, at which point they have a drink before going to breakfast. Although they sometimes have breakfast at Guillaume's bar, this is rare because Guillaume has come to dislike David. Consequently, they usually leave the bar to go eat, and afterwards they walk around Paris, strolling along the Seine and looking at the houseboats, which David notes Giovanni later uses as a hiding place when the police are after him. After spending the day traversing the city, they finally return to Giovanni's apartment, where they drink coffee and cognac and have long conversations.

Once more, David's internal conflict brings itself to bear on his life, this time waging a war inside him as he tries to decide whether or not to have sex with Giovanni. It's quite obvious that this is what he wants on the deepest, most fundamental level, but his inability to accept his attraction to men makes the entire experience significantly more complicated than it might otherwise be. It's worth keeping in mind that even though David's reservations are couched in denial, homophobia, and narrow conceptions of masculinity, they are still quite real and valid. After all, sleeping with Giovanni will likely upend David's entire self-image, turning this single experience into a deep existential upheaval. Simply put, it's helpful to remember that David's hesitations are based on genuine emotional consequences even if the reservations themselves are flawed or narrowminded.



As if it isn't bad enough that David subjects himself to such unyielding rules about how he presents himself, the housekeeper mercilessly reminds him of all the ways in which he has failed to live up to various societal expectations. While going through the house, she forces him to once again consider the fact that he isn't leading the existence of a stereotypical American family man. The fact that this interaction takes place in the present (after his relationship with Giovanni) only serves to illustrate just how difficult it is for him to escape these kinds of expectations.



Despite David's many reservations, he eases into a relationship with Giovanni, apparently overcoming his tendency to deny what he really wants. At the same time, though, he hasn't ended his relationship with his girlfriend Hella, meaning that his existence with Giovanni is less of a final decision than it is a temporary acquiescence to his true desires. In this regard, he continues to live in denial, most likely telling himself that this period is nothing more than a happy and strange little interlude in the broader sweep of his life.



Roughly a month after they've been living together, David tells Giovanni about Hella, explaining that her letters give him the impression that she might soon return to Paris. At first, Giovanni is lighthearted about the matter, jokingly proposing that Hella must have a Spanish lover. Otherwise, he wonders, why would she be spending so much time away from David? Soon enough, though, he suggests that David should find a different female lover, since he doesn't think Hella sounds like the kind of woman who will stay away from him for long—a fact that will make it hard for David to continue seeing men. When David asks if Giovanni has ever had female lovers himself, Giovanni says that he has had sex with many women, though usually the experience lacks true emotion. This kind of lovemaking can make a person very lonely, David remarks, surprising himself with the comment.

Giovanni is also surprised by David's assertion that making love without true emotion can make a person lonely. No longer joking, he strokes David's face and apologizes for speaking disparagingly about Hella. Giovanni then asks what, exactly, Hella wants, but David can only tell him that this is the very reason she went to Spain, hoping—apparently—to figure things out about herself. This once again strikes Giovanni as ridiculous, but David points out that if Hella weren't traveling abroad, he wouldn't be able to live with Giovanni. In response, Giovanni suggests that their relationship would certainly continue even if Hella were in Paris. This idea frightens David, who says that Hella might discover their relationship, but Giovanni makes fun of him for caring so much, saying, "We have not committed any crime."

Emphasizing how terrible it would be if Hella found out about their relationship, David tells Giovanni that it would emotionally devastate her. He also points out that homosexuality is a crime in the United States. Still, Giovanni remains unperturbed, insisting that they can simply continue seeing each other even after Hella returns, saying that she will have nothing to complain about as long as David is still handsome and isn't impotent.

When Giovanni says that David should find a female lover who will travel even more than Hella, he reveals his belief that Hella is nothing more than a prop in David's life. Along these lines, Giovanni thinks that David is dating Hella simply as a way to maintain a certain public image while acting on his attraction to men. To David, though, his relationship with Hella is genuine and serious. Of course, Giovanni's interpretation is probably more accurate, but David can't see this because recognizing such a thing would require him to acknowledge his own self-deception.



What Giovanni doesn't understand in this conversation is that David more or less feels that they have committed a crime. For David, their relationship is so illicit and shameful that they might as well be outlaws, which is why he can't bear the idea of continuing to see Giovanni when Hella returns. In turn, readers once again witness David's naivety, since he thinks he'll be able to simply separate himself from Giovanni as if it's no big deal when Hella returns—an attitude that grossly underestimates the strength of their bond and in this regard serves as one more form of denial.



When David tells Giovanni that homosexuality is illegal in the United States, he calls upon his American identity in a way that he normally tries to avoid. While he usually balks at the idea of being associated with the United States, he now sees that he can use his American identity to his benefit in his argument with Giovanni. In this way, he reveals his manipulative side while simultaneously voicing his perpetual worry that he will fail to live up to certain societal expectations. Even though he has tried to escape the American value system, he now superimposes it onto his life in Paris, unable to stop judging himself through other people's eyes.



During this period, David writes letters to Hella and his father without actually telling them much of anything. Privately, he feels as if Giovanni has made it impossible for him to ignore his attraction to men. One day, for instance, he and Giovanni walk by a very handsome man. Unable to resist, David follows him with his eyes, and Giovanni bursts into laughter. For this reason, David comes to hate Giovanni just as much as he loves him, recognizing that both feelings arise from the same place within him.

It's significant that David's resentment of Giovanni comes from the same place as his love. This is because his resentment is actually nothing more than a recognition of his own feelings of love and attraction. Because Giovanni has made it impossible for him to ignore how he really feels about men, he can't help but begrudge him. This, it seems, is the only way to protect himself from his feelings, which is why David misdirects his complicated emotions.



PART 2: CHAPTER 2

Giovanni's **room** is so messy and squalid that in the first stages of their relationship, David entertains himself by pretending to be a "housewife," cleaning the space while Giovanni is at work. When he's not doing this or having meals with Giovanni, he sometimes goes to the American Express Office to retrieve his mail. While standing in line, he has the disorienting sense that there truly is such a thing as an American identity, regardless of how little he himself identifies with where he's from. This calls to his mind the fact that Giovanni refers to him as a true American when he's angry with him. When he's pleased with him, though, he suggests that David isn't really very American at all. David dislikes both interpretations, since he doesn't like to be reduced to just one thing but also dislikes feeling as if he's nothing at all.

Once again, David has trouble situating his national identity. On one hand, he left the United States in order to lead a new life, so being called a true American makes it harder to detach from his old identity. On the other hand, not having his American identity to call upon means that he has to fully commit himself to a new lifestyle, and though it might seem like he's already done this (given that he's in a relationship with a man), he's not ready to completely inhabit a new self-image. As a result, he finds himself stranded between two cultural personas in much the same way that he's suspended between his façade of heterosexuality and his true homosexual (or bisexual) desires.



One day, David receives letters from his father and Hella. The one from his father implores him to come home. His father doesn't understand what he's doing abroad and wants him to return. Insisting that David is a red-blooded American, he suggests that there's nothing for him in Paris. He also says he won't send David money, not wanting him to waste it all. Ending his letter, he promises to help David however he can, though he wants his son to tell him whatever it is that's keeping him from coming home. As he reads, David recognizes that his father's letter is missing a central question that the old man clearly can't bring himself to ask—"Is it a woman, David? Bring her on home [...] and I'll help you get set up." The reason his father can't ask this, David knows, is because he understands that he wouldn't be able to bear the answer.

David's relationship with his father once more brings itself to bear on his everyday life. This time, David projects his own insecurities onto his father, thinking that the old man already disapproves of David's lifestyle without even knowing that he's living with a man. He thinks his father wants to know if he's dating a woman, once more associating heterosexuality with the kind of masculinity he believes his father cares about above all else. This, it seems, is partially why he has such a hard time coming to terms with his sexual orientation.



David leaves the American Express Office and sits down at a café to read Hella's letter, in which she tells him that she's finished traveling in Spain. Explaining that she has decided to return in 10 days, she makes it clear that she wants to get back together with David. Looking up, David orders a scotch and soda and nurses it while feeling terrible, realizing that he's been dreading this letter for a long time. This, he feels, marks the beginning of the end of his relationship with Giovanni.

David treats his impending reunion with Hella as if it's an unfortunate but unavoidable reality when, in truth, he could simply decide to stay with Giovanni. If he listened to his heart, he would certainly turn away from his relationship with Hella. Unfortunately, though, he doesn't see this as a true option, since he can't bring himself to embrace a long-term commitment with a man.



After finishing his drink, David lets his anxieties about Hella's return steer him to the Parisian neighborhood of Montparnasse, feeling oddly liberated by the fact that his relationship with Giovanni will soon come to an end. However, as he continues to walk, he imagines the pain that will appear on Giovanni's face when he finally leaves him. Wanting to bury this image, then, David looks for a woman to have sex with, feeling that anyone at all will soothe his worries. Sitting at a bar, he watches people pass on the street and waits for someone he knows, finally recognizing a woman named Sue. David doesn't find Sue attractive, but he eagerly invites her to have a drink and begins flirting with her. At first, she's delighted by his attention, but she soon grows distant as David becomes more and more obvious about what he wants.

David tells Sue that she should invite him over for a drink, and though she refuses at first, she eventually relents, saying in what she clearly hopes is a flippant tone that she'll certainly regret this decision. Once inside her apartment, David almost loses his nerve, suddenly afraid of going through with his plan. Because of this, he tries to get as drunk as possible, but they soon embrace. While having sex, David is painfully aware of his surroundings and the fact that Sue wants a true lover, not just a sexual partner. He also tries to make it clear through his thrusts that he doesn't hate Sue as a person, and then he realizes that all of his fears have "nothing to do with [his] body." In turn, he understands that having sex with Sue will do nothing to calm his nerves about Hella's return.

After having sex, David and Sue lie in silence for a long while, though David itches to leave. As he dresses, she asks if he'll go to dinner with her, but he makes up an excuse. When she asks if he's free the following night, he tells her that he dislikes making plans, saying that he'll simply surprise her the next time he wants to see her. Disappointed, she accepts this arrangement, telling him that he can seek her out if he ever feels lonely again. Heartbroken and ashamed, David moves toward the door. "Keep a candle," he says, "in the window."

David's elation about the end of his time with Giovanni makes sense if readers consider the fact that Hella's return forces him (at least in his mind) to put an end to a relationship that has brought him immense emotional and existential turmoil. However, this sense of sudden freedom from his own romantic desires is short-lived because he soon recognizes how much he's about to hurt Giovanni. To avoid thinking about this, then, he decides to have sex with Sue, effectively using her for his own needs without considering that he's just hurting yet another person and thus doing very little to solve his original problem.



David is a man who romanticizes the idea of escaping his emotions. Wanting to outrun his misgivings about masculinity and his attraction to men, he fled the United States only to find himself in a relationship that threatened to wound his delicate idea of what it means to be a man. Similarly, he now invests himself in the fantasy of blocking out his emotions by having sex with Sue, thinking he'll somehow be able to escape his troubles if he can only make love to a woman. This, of course, is nothing but an attempt to run once again from his insecurities, which is why he fails miserably to find any relief. In fact, he even realizes that his issues have "nothing to do with [his] body," a sentiment that emphasizes just how futile it is to seek emotional rehabilitation through meaningless sex, an act he has already admitted leads to profound loneliness.



The fact that David used Sue to escape his emotional pain doesn't mean that he feels any kind of connection with her. As a result, he can't bring himself to associate with her after they have sex, heartlessly leaving her on her own because he doesn't have the dignity or courtesy to place her feelings before her own. In this moment, then, readers see how truly selfish David is when it comes to the way he manipulates others to make him feel better without trying to give them anything in return.



PART 2: CHAPTER 3

As David walks toward Giovanni's **room** along the Seine, he thinks about all the bustling lives playing out at that moment in the Parisian nighttime. Thinking this way, he unexpectedly feels as if he has come a long way from home just to succumb to misery and despair. At the same time, though, he tells himself that he wants children, a family, and the stability that a relationship with a woman would afford him. Being with a woman, he thinks, would be like having something to ground him, enabling him to be confident about his masculinity.

When David comes home that night, Giovanni isn't at work. Instead, he's very drunk and distraught. Explaining what happened, he tells David that Guillaume fired him. Going on, he informs him that Guillaume arrived at work that night in a dark mood. Clearly wanting to yell at Giovanni, he tried to find flaws in his work but was ultimately unable to, so he retreated upstairs. Shortly thereafter, though, he called Giovanni up and asked him about his relationship with David, which surprised Giovanni because Guillaume never likes to talk about David. At this point, the old man began asking lewd questions about their sex life, and when Giovanni finally stopped him and said he had no right to say such things, Guillaume shouted at him and reminded him that he'd still be on the streets if not for their relationship.

In his argument with Giovanni, Guillaume suggests that the young man has manipulated him by leading him on. To counter this idea, Giovanni says that he never once felt anything for Guillaume, prompting Guillaume to remind him that they had intimate relations shortly after they first met. In response, Giovanni says that things are different now because he has a boyfriend, but this does nothing to quell Guillaume's rage, instead setting him off on a string of insults about David. Unwilling to put up with this kind of abuse, Giovanni goes downstairs to continue his shift. Before long, though, Guillaume follows him and accuses him of stealing from the bar. As everyone watches, he forces Giovanni to leave, throwing money at him out of the cash register and claiming that he'd rather give it to him than have Giovanni rob him.

Once again, David associates masculinity and even stability with heterosexuality. To be fair, he's correct that existing in a homosexual relationship in the 1950s would be significantly more difficult than having a wife and children. However, this has nothing to do with masculinity, other than that David has internalized society's narrow-minded belief that being a man means finding a wife and having children. And while this lifestyle might afford him with stability, it's worth noting that it would clearly make him unhappy.



It's significant that David was nowhere to be found when Giovanni was undergoing such a troubling experience. This reflects how little Giovanni can count on him for emotional support. On another note, Guillaume's cruelty underscores the toxic nature of his relationship with Giovanni, which is founded upon nothing but exploitation and manipulation. Now, though, it seems especially obvious that Guillaume holds an inordinate amount of power over Giovanni. Whereas Giovanni can only make Guillaume yearn for him, Guillaume can interfere with Giovanni's work and therefore his livelihood. In turn, Baldwin intimates that supposedly mutually-exploitative relationships are often not as equal as they might seem, since one party often has more influence over the other.



In this scene, readers see once and for all that Guillaume's treatment of Giovanni is blatantly abusive, as he wields his power to punish Giovanni for simply refusing to have sex with him. Although Giovanni may have used his good looks to get money out of Guillaume at the beginning of their relationship, this doesn't mean that Guillaume is forever entitled to his body. As soon as Giovanni rejects his advances, though, Guillaume fires him and ruins his reputation in front of everyone, making it unlikely that Giovanni will be able to find another job. In this way, he uses his influence to demolish Giovanni's ability to survive in Paris—a clear indication that their relationship isn't equal at all.



Giovanni tells David that he punched Guillaume, at which point a crowd of people pulled him away. Knowing that the police might come, he agreed to leave. “But I will see him again,” he says, “I swear it, and on that day—!” Cutting himself off, he looks with intensity at the wall before saying that this would be the end of him if it weren’t for David’s support. Although David suggests that he’s being too dramatic, Giovanni insists that he would be at a complete loss if he were on his own. Trying to lighten the mood, then, David proposes that they go out for a drink, and Giovanni agrees on the condition that David will take him home afterward. Before they go, they lay out all the money they have between them and realize that it’s only enough for them to survive for a very short period.

In the rented house in southern France, David continues to drink and think about Giovanni, knowing that the executioners will soon be coming for his poor lover. As he contemplates this, he realizes that he can’t deny that he loved Giovanni and that he’ll never love somebody so fully ever again. Despite himself, he can’t help but envision what it’s like for Giovanni in prison, wondering what he’s feeling at this very moment and whether or not he’s had sex with anyone in jail.

After Giovanni loses his job, he spends his time trying to improve his **room** by installing bookshelves, though David feels as if this work amounts to little more than trying to keep the very walls of the room from encroaching upon them. One evening, David unexpectedly proposes that they leave Paris simply to get away. Everything good in life perishes in Paris, he claims. Giovanni, for his part, doesn’t feel strongly either way, and when David asks if he’d like to return to Italy, he says he doesn’t want to do this for the same reasons that David himself wouldn’t want to return to the United States. In response, David says that he *does* want to return to the United States someday, but Giovanni points out that actually going home takes away one’s ability to take comfort in the *idea* of going home—a notion that unsettles David.

Giovanni’s insistence that he would be at a loss without David suggests that he hasn’t yet realized how little he can depend upon his lover. Because David is so focused on his own emotions, he’s ill-equipped (or selfishly unwilling) to help Giovanni through this difficult time. Worse, he fails to inform Giovanni that he’ll soon be getting back together with Hella. This is a selfish thing to do, as it’s obvious that David simply wants to avoid a difficult conversation. Once again, then, he prioritizes himself above everyone else. What’s especially noteworthy is that his decision to focus on his own problems doesn’t even lead him to happiness, since he’s at war with himself and his sexual identity. Consequently, everyone—including him—suffers because of his emotional failures.



In retrospect, David is finally able to acknowledge the true nature of his feelings for Giovanni. However, this doesn’t mean that he accepts these feelings any more than he did while still living in Paris. Rather, he’s simply capable of recognizing how he felt, which is not the same as coming to terms with his sexuality.



David’s sudden desire to leave Paris aligns with his tendency to want to outrun his problems. Now that Giovanni has been fired from Guillaume’s bar and Hella is about to return to Paris, he wants to simply leave the city, apparently thinking that doing so would help him forget about all his woes. However, it’s worth noting that he’s not proposing that he and Giovanni elope and stay together permanently. In fact, he has said nothing to indicate that he plans to stay with Giovanni when Hella returns. For that matter, he hasn’t even told Giovanni that Hella is coming back in the first place. Nonetheless, he still romanticizes the notion of picking up and leaving, even saying that he will someday return to the United States. Giovanni, on the other hand, is cognizant of the fact that people can’t simply change their lives by relocating. This, he understands, only works in the abstract, which is why the mere idea of having a home to revisit tends to be more meaningful than the actual experience of returning home.



Returning to their **room** after discussing the possibility of leaving Paris, Giovanni asks David if he's heard from Hella recently. In response, David says that although he hasn't received any letters in the past few days, he senses that Hella is likely to appear at any moment. With a sad tenderness, Giovanni tells David to come give him a hug, and as they stand together in the middle of the room, David feels as if they are slowly killing each other.

That David feels like he and Giovanni are killing each other is a perfect representation of his inability to accept that he's in love with a man. Rather than seeing their tenderness as a beautiful thing, he sees it as a source of pain and misery, clearly believing that he will soon have no choice but to abandon Giovanni once and for all. In reality, he could choose not to do this, but he doesn't recognize this as a legitimate option.



PART 2: CHAPTER 4

David doesn't tell Giovanni when he leaves the apartment to meet Hella at the train station. When he hugs her, he feels a sense of elation about the prospect of resuming their relationship, and she tells him how happy she is to be back in Paris, taking his face in her hands and kissing him. In this moment, David decides not to think about Giovanni yet, resolving to spend the night with Hella. Having made this decision, he goes with her to her hotel, where they kiss and talk. All the while, David hopes he can erase Giovanni's image from his head by touching Hella. Because this thought distracts him when he and Hella are having sex, though, she stops and asks if she's been away for too long, and he leads her to believe that this is indeed the case.

David avoids telling Hella the truth by insinuating that he simply needs to get used to her touch again. In reality, he's unable to perform sexually because he has a guilty conscience, knowing all too well that he's betraying Giovanni. Furthermore, it's quite likely that he has trouble having sex with Hella because he simply isn't attracted to women, though it's worth acknowledging that Baldwin never clarifies this point. This lack of clarity regarding whether or not David is strictly gay, or perhaps bisexual, might have to do with the fact that David himself is the novel's first-person narrator, meaning that any insight into the nature of his sexuality must come from him. And because he's apparently so committed to leading the life of a heterosexual man, he wouldn't admit that he isn't attracted to women even if this were indeed the case.



Lying next to David after giving up on having sex, Hella says that she was very lonely in Spain. Originally, she says, she wanted to explore the world and spend time thinking about what she wants in life. But before long she felt directionless and alone. When David asks if she was able to come to any conclusions about their relationship, she reminds him of the letter she sent, in which she told him that she was eager to rekindle their bond. Noncommittally, David says he didn't know what to think about that letter, secretly hoping that perhaps he'll be able to avoid resuming their relationship without even having to tell her about Giovanni. However, Hella now makes it clear once and for all that she wants to be with him, and David finds himself saying that he wants to start a family with her.

This conversation is a perfect example of how David tries to subtly manipulate people into enacting his own will. Because he can't bring himself to declare his love for Giovanni, he also can't tell Hella that he doesn't want to be in a relationship with her. After all, this would essentially mean committing himself to his relationship with Giovanni. Consequently, David underhandedly tries to get Hella to end the relationship, which would give him the excuse to continue his affair with Giovanni without ever having to make a conscious decision to do so. Angling toward this, he pretends to not know what Hella wants, hoping that she will back out of their plan to get married so he doesn't have to. Needless to say, this doesn't work because Hella is excited to once more invest herself in their relationship, so David goes along with their original plan.



David writes a letter to his father. In this letter, he claims that he has been keeping his relationship with Hella a secret, not wanting to say anything until he knew she would marry him. After explaining that Hella is from Minneapolis—which, he points out, means that she has the same values as his father—he asks his father to finally send his money.

Now that David has agreed to marry Hella, he can finally become the kind of man he thinks his father has always wanted him to be. The fact that this comes with a financial bonus is also worth considering, since it supports David's idea that his father—and, for that matter, society at large—smiles upon heterosexual men like himself, thereby giving him an incentive to continue denying his true sexual identity. Furthermore, David's comment that Hella shares the same values as his father once again illustrates the ways in which he pays close attention to the trappings of a person's national identity, ultimately letting this factor into his decision to marry an American woman instead of remaining with an Italian man.



It has been three days since Hella arrived in Paris, and David has yet to return to Giovanni's **room**. He has been busy wandering the city with Hella, having long conversations about her time in Spain and their plans for the future. During one discussion, Hella points out that society only acknowledges women as individuals if they're married to men, arguing that women have to be associated with men in order to be taken seriously. David claims to not understand what she means, simply laughing and saying, "You're adorable. I don't understand you at all." As this conversation ends, they duck into a bookstore and come face to face with Jacques.

When David says that he doesn't understand what Hella is talking about, he perfectly illustrates her point. Hella has just dared to make an astute observation about the ways in which women are disenfranchised in society, but David is unable to recognize the validity of her claims. Interestingly enough, though, his failure to respond well to her point might have to do with the fact that he, too, feels stuck in an arbitrary societal role. As a gay or bisexual man trying to pass as heterosexual, he is unable to be the individual he would like to be. In this way, both he and Hella feel trapped in their identities, unable to define themselves the way they want.



"We were beginning to think that you had gone back to America," Jacques says, and when David asks who he means when he says "we," Jacques says that Giovanni called him because he was left with no money. Jacques then explains that he went to get Giovanni, who wanted to search the Seine for David, but he persuaded the young man that David probably only left to think things through. As Jacques greets Hella—who doesn't like him—he explains that Giovanni has just stepped out of the bookstore. Hearing this, David hopes Hella won't want to stay much longer, but before he can do anything, Giovanni enters and shouts at him, asking where he has been and saying that he thought he was dead.

It's helpful to remember that David has just abandoned Giovanni for three days without telling him where he was going. As his lover, Giovanni was understandably worried sick about him, but Jacques clearly took a more cynical view of the situation and insisted that David left of his own accord. Jacques is able to see the truth of the matter because he knows that David's unwillingness to embrace his true sexual identity has grave consequences for his loved ones. In the same way that David has always given Giovanni false hope about perhaps one day having a romantic relationship, Jacques knows that he has now led Giovanni to believe that they will live happily together for a long time. In reality, though, it's clear that David has no intention of staying with Giovanni, and Jacques uses this information to his own benefit, swooping in to establish a mildly exploitative relationship with Giovanni in his time of need.



Calmly, David smiles and ignores Giovanni's many questions, simply turning to introduce him to Hella, whom he calls his fiancée. Giovanni greets her coldly, at which point Jacques proposes that they all go out for a drink. Ignoring this, Giovanni addresses David directly, chastising him for leaving without saying goodbye. In response, David suggests that Giovanni clearly didn't have any trouble figuring out where to go, having noticed that he's wearing a tie that undoubtedly belongs to Jacques. As the group walks out of the bookstore toward a bar, Giovanni tells David that he's cruel.

When they reach the street corner, Hella announces that she'd like to go home. David, for his part, says he'll walk her home and then return for a drink, but when he asks where he should meet Giovanni and Jacques, Giovanni bitterly tells him that they shouldn't be hard to find. With this, David says farewell and walks Hella home. On their way, Hella asks David about Giovanni, clearly unsettled by Giovanni's raw emotion. David tells her that they've simply been sharing a **room**, explaining that Giovanni is only his roommate and, as such, doesn't deserve to be so angry at him for leaving. Hella accepts this explanation but continues asking questions about the nature of their relationship, wondering why Giovanni is so emotionally intense. No matter what she asks, though, David comes up with a convincing answer.

That night, David stays home with Hella. Lying in bed, she asks more questions about Giovanni, wanting to know why David chose to live with him. Trying to sound casual, David says that he liked Giovanni, prompting her to ask if he no longer likes him. In response, David says that he still cares about Giovanni and that Hella most likely didn't get an accurate impression of him. He also takes pleasure in saying, "I love him, in a way. I really do." Hearing this, Hella proposes that they should take Giovanni out to dinner sometime, and David agrees that this would be a good idea, eventually saying that people like Giovanni have a hard time in France because the country doesn't have any resources for poor immigrants.

Changing the subject, David tells Hella that he wants to leave Paris when the money from his father arrives. Although she's surprised by this suggestion, Hella agrees to go wherever he wants, so they decide to go to southern France. At the same time, though, David senses that Hella finds his desire to leave strange, so he tells her that he wants to get away because he'll inevitably keep encountering Giovanni in Paris. As soon as he says this, he stops, not knowing how to proceed when she asks why running into Giovanni would be a problem. Carefully, he says that seeing Giovanni puts a burden on him because Giovanni wants his help, thinking he's rich because he's American. Though Hella seems skeptical, she tells David she'll go anywhere he wants as long as they go together.

David has no right to be upset that Giovanni has sought comfort in his relationship with Jacques, since he cruelly abandoned him with no warning and left him with no money. Nonetheless, it's evident that David dislikes the bond developing between Jacques and Giovanni, indicating that his feelings for Giovanni most likely won't go away as easily as he might have hoped.



As someone who constantly lies to himself, it's unsurprising that David has no trouble deceiving Hella. Regardless of what she asks, he manages to answer her questions about Giovanni in a way that frames the young Italian's anger as unwarranted but somewhat logical. At the same time, though, Hella's suspicion shines through in this moment, though it's apparent she doesn't want to push too hard on the matter, perhaps because she—like David's father—doesn't want her suspicions confirmed.



Although David largely denies his sexual identity, he also relishes any moment in which he can be honest with himself and his loved ones. In this conversation with Hella, he takes delight in saying that he loves Giovanni, and though he says so in a disingenuous manner, it's obvious that he feels a sense of relief by simply uttering a true statement. In turn, Baldwin spotlights just how much of a burden it is for David to constantly lie about his feelings.



Once again, David demonstrates his belief that he can escape his problems simply by moving. This time, he wants to literally get away from Giovanni because he knows that seeing his former lover around the city will cause him too much emotional pain. In this sense, he might be correct that leaving Paris would temporarily ease his troubles, though it's unlikely that relocating would do anything to quell his inner turmoil regarding his sexual identity.



Late the next night, David goes to Giovanni's **room**. Giovanni is asleep, but he jumps up when the door opens. Seeing that it's David, he slumps over and starts sobbing as David bends over him and pleads with him to stop. When he collects himself, he says he now realizes that he never really managed to get through to David, suggesting that David was withdrawn for the entirety of their relationship. Calling him evil, he says that it was wrong of David to give him hope about their love. He then tells a story about his life in Italy, where he had a wife whom he loved very much. He could, he says, have stayed in Italy for his entire life, though he knows he would have become a mere tourist attraction for vapid Americans like David who want to marvel at quaint Italians and beautiful landscapes.

Giovanni tells David that his wife gave birth to a baby who died in the womb. For hours, Giovanni prayed for his little boy and tried to bring him back to life with holy water, but nothing he did made a difference. When it became clear that the baby was dead, he grabbed a crucifix hanging on the wall, spat on it, and threw it on the floor. He and his wife buried the child the following day, and shortly after that Giovanni left home forever. Now he believes that God has punished him for spitting on that cross.

Taken aback by Giovanni's story, David stands and turns to leave. The **room** feels claustrophobic and in constant motion, and he hears Giovanni pleading with him to stay. Unable to resist, he goes and wraps his arms around him as Giovanni cries and cries. Trying to reason with him, David says that Giovanni must have known all along that he would someday return to Hella, but Giovanni rejects this, saying that David isn't truly leaving him for her. "You are leaving me for some other reason," he says. "You lie so much, you have come to believe all your own lies." He then accuses David of never truly loving anyone at all because he wants to be pure and clean. He says that David is leaving him because he's afraid of "the stink of love."

In the same way that Jacques once told David that it was cruel to give him a constant sense of hope about their relationship, Giovanni now insists that David is morally wretched because he led him to believe that their love was substantial and lasting. Now that David has left him for Hella, Giovanni realizes that there was never any true future for them, since David is too focused on denying his feelings to sustain a relationship with another man. Perhaps to make David feel guilty, Giovanni tells him about his life in Italy, once again calling upon the differences between their national identities in order to set them apart from one another. In doing so, he frames David as a callous and unemotional American—an identity that aligns with his cruel behavior.



Whereas David is constantly running from his own sexual identity, Giovanni is running from something else entirely: his past. However, the difference is that Giovanni doesn't actively deny anything about himself. Instead, he simply wants to create a new life that will enable him to be happy. David, on the other hand, wants to escape himself in ways that will only lead to more sadness. Knowing just how precious life really is, Giovanni understands how tragic it is for somebody like David to waste time making himself miserable, which is most likely why he tells this story in the first place.



Giovanni knows that David's inner turmoil is what's really standing in the way of their relationship. Although David might claim that Hella is the reason he's leaving, it's obvious that this is just an excuse he's using because he can't commit himself to a long-term relationship with a man. When Giovanni says that David is terrified of "the stink of love," he frames true romance as messy and raw, playing on David's fear that his feelings for other men are socially unacceptable. Wanting to present himself as a respectable heterosexual man, David can't bring himself to embrace his relationship with Giovanni because he sees it as uncouth and wrong. By calling his lover's attention to this, then, Giovanni tries to force David into at least owning up to his insecurities.



At a loss, David says that he's a man, reminding Giovanni that nothing can happen between them because of this simple fact. Unperturbed, Giovanni says that David is perfectly aware of what could happen between them, which is exactly why he's leaving to be with Hella. After saying this, Giovanni gives up. Taking out a bottle of cognac that Jacques left in his apartment, he tells David that they should have one last drink together, adding that he doesn't want to fight anymore. Although his lover is leaving him, Giovanni says, he will always know that David belongs to him. Hearing this, David tells him that he'll never come back, though he accepts the cognac. While drinking, he tells Giovanni to be careful about spending so much time with Jacques.

David stays with Giovanni until the early morning. When he's about to leave, he looks at Giovanni and knows he must get out of his **room** before he loses his willpower. Walking on the street, he recognizes that he will cry about this day in the future, though he keeps his tears at bay in the moment. In the coming days, David spends time with Hella and watches Paris turn from summer to fall. Before long, he receives money from his father and starts preparing to move to southern France, where he and Hella have rented a house.

In the days before David and Hella leave Paris, David sometimes bumps into Giovanni and Jacques. During these encounters, he notices a change in Giovanni, who's always dressed in beautiful clothes that clearly belong to Jacques. Despite this, he looks unhealthy, and David is unsettled by how much he laughs at Jacques's jokes. He doesn't want to know what kind relationship Jacques and Giovanni have developed, but Jacques salaciously and proudly makes it obvious to David one day that they're sleeping together. During this conversation, Giovanni is quite drunk and acting unlike himself, and David begins to hate his former lover for forcing him to recognize how unhappy he's made him.

Soon enough, David starts seeing Giovanni around Paris without Jacques. No longer dressed in nice clothes, he spends time with a group of rough young men on the streets—people he used to think of as detestable. When David is drunk and wandering through the city one night, he sees one of these boys and recognizes him as Giovanni's new boyfriend. David buys him a drink, and the young man tells him that Giovanni is no longer with Jacques. He also says that Guillaume might give Giovanni his job back. Within the week, though, authorities find Guillaume dead in the upstairs part of his bar with the sash of his dressing gown wrapped around his neck.

David can't fathom the idea of openly committing himself to a long-term relationship with another man, thinking that two men can never have a future together. However, Giovanni doesn't let him off the hook so easily, pointing out that David is purposefully denying what their relationship could be so that he doesn't have to admit to himself that this is exactly what he wants. On another note, David's warning to Giovanni about Jacques suggests that he is cognizant of just how dangerous it can be to exist in relationships void of true emotion—a somewhat hypocritical realization, considering that he's the one who has been so careless about Giovanni's feelings.



It's quite telling that David has to quickly leave Giovanni behind in order to go through with his plan to marry Hella. This suggests that he isn't as in control of his emotions as he'd like to think, though he does manage to force himself away from Giovanni, thereby proving his unfortunate ability to act against his true desires. In the ensuing period, he and Hella plan their trip, giving him yet another opportunity to try to outrun his demons.



The dynamic between Jacques and Giovanni is similar to the arrangement Giovanni used to have with Guillaume, since it's obvious that their connection is based on nothing but what each of them selfishly want. Giovanni, for his part, needs money and stability, so he sleeps with Jacques, who wants Giovanni's companionship. When David recognizes this, he begins to resent Giovanni because he realizes that he himself is responsible for this unfortunate arrangement. Unable to hold himself accountable, then, he begins to feel spiteful toward Giovanni, which is how he always responds to situations that encourage him to think honestly about himself.



By this point, it's apparent that Giovanni is in a downward spiral. Without David's love or any money, he has no choice but to turn to Guillaume, a person he detests. This undoubtedly makes David feel even worse about what he's done, since Giovanni most likely wouldn't return to Guillaume if he were still living with David. In this regard, then, David's inability to accept their relationship has a profoundly negative impact on Giovanni's life.



PART 2: CHAPTER 5

News of Guillaume's murder travels throughout Paris. The newspapers run long pieces about the details of the incident, speculating about Giovanni and his background. Meanwhile, Giovanni has gone into hiding, since all the evidence so clearly points to him as the murderer. Interestingly enough, David observes that the papers begin to overlook Guillaume's reputation as the owner of a gay bar. Because Guillaume belongs to one of the oldest and most respected families in France, reporters focus on his lineage, lamenting the fact that he was the one of the country's last living members of a different age. Giovanni, on the other hand, receives widespread animosity in the press because he's a foreigner—something that upsets David, who complains to Hella about the fact that Guillaume was nothing but a “disgusting old fairy.”

Surprised by David's anger toward the press, Hella asks why he's so surprised to discover that Giovanni is a murderer. After all, he lived with him, Hella points out, meaning that he should have sensed Giovanni would be capable of such a crime. In response, David insists that it's impossible to truly know anyone, suggesting that Hella would have no way of knowing if he—David—were a murderer.

Giovanni remains hidden for a week. During this time, David often looks out the window and scans the city with his eyes, wondering where his former lover is and how he's surviving. Then, shortly after the newspapers suggest that he's escaped to Argentina, the police find him hiding in a houseboat along the Seine. When David looks at Giovanni's mugshot in the papers, he feels as if he is staring out at him and asking for help, though David knows there's nothing he can do.

David imagines the night of Guillaume's murder, knowing that Giovanni must not have intended to kill him. Envisioning the entire scene, he sees Giovanni preparing to return to Guillaume's bar, having decided that he's willing to do whatever the old man wants. After all, he has already submitted to Jacques, so he might as well please Guillaume so he can have his job back. Arriving at the bar very drunk, Giovanni approaches Guillaume and tells him he wants a job, explaining—much to Guillaume's delight—that David has left him. After having a drink, Guillaume tells him to return after closing, so Giovanni retreats and continues to drink with his friends. When he comes back, Guillaume takes him upstairs and changes into his silk robe.

That David's decision drove Giovanni back to Guillaume is worth keeping in mind, since this is what eventually led Giovanni to murder his former employer. Because of this, David's guilt certainly amplifies during this period. Furthermore, the fact that the press speaks badly about Giovanni because he's an immigrant demonstrates how suspicious society can be of people who are different. As for David, he remains stranded between his American identity and whatever lifestyle he wanted to build in France—a lifestyle that has led to nothing but unhappiness.



When David says that it's impossible to fully know anybody, he indirectly references the fact that Hella doesn't know his true identity as a gay or bisexual man. Once again, then, he finds a way to casually acknowledge everything he tries to hide, working his secrets into conversation without actually revealing anything he isn't ready to admit.



David's feeling of helplessness accentuates his guilt. Although his decision to leave Giovanni eventually led to this situation, he is now powerless to help Giovanni. In turn, David is forced to simply sit with the knowledge that Giovanni's present misery is the far-reaching result of his own inability to be honest about his emotions.



Giovanni drinks heavily before confronting Guillaume because he knows that he will have to surrender his dignity in order to get his job back. This, of course, is how exploitative relationships work—Giovanni has to give something up in order to gain something in return. The fact that he's actually willing to do this underscores just how desperate he is, thereby emphasizing the profound effect David's decisions have had on his life.



Guillaume touches Giovanni and has his way with him, instructing him to take off his clothes. For a moment, Giovanni hesitates, feeling as if he can't go through with his plan. However, he remembers how badly he needs a job, so he forces himself to stay and lets Guillaume overwhelm him like an ocean tide pulling him underwater. When it's all over, Guillaume stands and starts pacing, telling Giovanni that he can't possibly hire him again. As he listens, Giovanni works himself into a rage, and before he knows what he's doing, he beats Guillaume to the ground and coils the sash of his dressing gown around his neck, strangling him to death before running into the streets.

David already doesn't want to be in Southern France by the time he and Hella move into the house they've rented. By this point, he knows he can't be happy with Hella, but he goes through the motions anyway. Jacques sends him frequent updates about Giovanni's case, sending word about what his lawyer has said, though it's clear that nothing can be done to save Giovanni from execution. This is especially true because Giovanni pleads guilty and is sent to prison to wait for his trial.

Although David knows there's nothing he can do for Giovanni, he hopes that Hella will be able to help *him* lead a happy life. When Giovanni's trial arrives and he's sentenced to death, though, David understands that nothing Hella can do would ever chip away at his misery. In the following weeks, then, his love slowly turns to resentment and hatred, as he notices that her body no longer appeals to him even in the slightest. He also withdraws from her emotionally, and whenever she asks what's bothering him, he pushes her away. One day, though, she guesses that he's upset about Giovanni, and he finds himself unable to deny this. Going on, she speculates that David thinks it's his fault that Giovanni killed Guillaume. Wanting to make him feel better, she insists that there's nothing he could have done to help his friend.

"He was so beautiful," David says without meaning to. For a moment, Hella just stares at him, so he continues, saying that he feels responsible for Giovanni's decline. He then tells Hella that Giovanni wanted him to continue living with him, and Hella says that Giovanni must have been in love with him. When David turns to hide his face, she tells him that it's not his fault, insisting that he couldn't have stopped Giovanni from loving him. In response, David lashes out at her, saying she doesn't know what she's talking about. Relenting a bit, he asks her to leave him alone, saying he just needs time. This, however, prompts Hella to say that they've been languishing in France for too long. She wants, she says, to get married and return to the United States to start a family.

Through Giovanni's murder of Guillaume, Baldwin illustrates the dangerous nature of exploitative relationships. In these types of arrangement, the power inevitably becomes imbalanced. As soon as one party has an inordinate amount of influence over the other, the dynamic can become quite volatile. Because Guillaume takes advantage of Giovanni and makes it impossible for the young man to gain anything in return, Giovanni loses his temper. In turn, readers come to recognize the explosive emotions that lurk within relationships based on manipulation.



David's troubles don't magically disappear once he moves to Southern France. Although he likes to think that moving will help him escape his emotional turmoil, he sees that this isn't the case when he's forced to languish in the countryside while his lover awaits execution.



Hella's attempt to make David feel better is kindhearted, but she knows so little about the actual situation that her thoughts are meaningless to David. Without knowing how David treated Giovanni, she can't say anything to soothe him. In this regard, then, his secrecy isolates him from the people to whom he's closest, leaving him to sort through his complicated emotions on his own.



Because Hella doesn't know anything about his relationship with Giovanni, she doesn't know how to help him sort through his emotions. This is why David tries to tell her as much of the truth as possible, hoping that she'll be able to grasp the situation enough to help him deal with his feelings. However, he refuses to admit that he was in love with Giovanni. When he yells at Hella for saying that he couldn't stop Giovanni from loving him, he takes his anger out on her even though he's actually angry with himself and his own inability to be truthful about his romantic feelings.



One night shortly after talking to Hella about Giovanni's love for him, David goes to Nice and gets profoundly drunk. After walking the streets in search of a man, he finds a sailor who takes him to his hotel. David spends the next two days with this sailor and his friends, drinking heavily and having lots of sex. On the last night of their time together, they sit in a crowded bar. All of a sudden, Hella appears behind David. When he turns to face her, he can think of nothing to say. "Hasn't she got the wrong bar?" the sailor asks. "It's not the only thing I got wrong," Hella says before leaving.

David follows Hella out of the bar, and she tells him that she's going back to the United States, wishing aloud that she never left in the first place. Later, as she packs her bags, she tells David that she might forget how to be a woman if she continues to live with him, saying that she still understands that being a woman doesn't have to mean enduring constant humiliation. Despite the way he has treated her, she says, she still knows that she deserves more than scorn and disgrace. In response, David says that he hopes she can understand that he wasn't just lying to her, but also to himself. Furthermore, he tells her that he didn't mean to hurt her, but she merely laments the fact that she always knew—on some level—that he was attracted to men.

Before she leaves, Hella tells David that it was unfair for him to simply wait for her to find out about his true nature. She refers to this as a burden David placed on her, saying that she had every right to wait for him to be truthful. After all, she points out, women are supposed to wait for the man's lead. Given this, she asks what a woman should do when a man refuses to take the lead. She also says that she might never be able to find happiness in love, since she cared so much about David and will inevitably think about him every time she embraces another lover. Having packed her things, she loads her suitcases into the taxi she called, holds out her hand, lets David grasp it, and says farewell.

It was only a matter of time before Hella discovered David's infidelity and attraction to men. Even though David left Giovanni in an attempt to commit himself to a heterosexual lifestyle, he still finds himself seeking out romantic encounters with men, unable to fully deny his sexual orientation but also unable to outwardly acknowledge it.



It's interesting that Hella says she might forget how to be a woman if she stayed with David. This would suggest that existing in a loveless relationship can ruin a person's femininity, meaning that Hella defines womanhood in terms of heterosexuality. In the same way that David sees masculinity as directly tied to a man's attraction to women, Hella sees femininity as linked to a woman's ability to be desired by men. This, it's worth noting, is a rather patriarchal view that conflicts with her previous ideas about female independence. Still, the fact that Hella wanted to get married despite her misgivings about society's sexism suggests that she is willing to sacrifice her own individuality to fit society's mold of what a woman should be: a wife and a mother.



When Hella tells David that it was cruel of him to hide the truth from her, Baldwin invites readers to consider just how thoroughly David's denial has affected the people in his life. Because he struggles to accept his sexual identity, he has deceived Hella and made her life considerably harder. The fact that she thinks she'll never be able to love again is a testament to how much his behavior has impacted her entire life, demonstrating that self-deception has grave consequences not just for the people who trick themselves, but for the people influenced by this dishonesty.



Still gazing out the window, David watches the first hints of morning light strain over the horizon of southern France. His bags are packed and the house is clean. He is about to leave for Paris. Next to him on the table sits an envelope with a **letter** from Jacques—the letter that informed David that Giovanni will be executed this morning for Guillaume’s murder. As David undresses to change into the clothes he’ll wear while traveling, he envisions Giovanni’s final moments. Avoiding the image of his own naked body in the mirror, he thinks about Giovanni’s face as the guards come to get him. Giovanni yelps when they grab him but otherwise lets them lead him down the hall. David begins to sweat as he imagines Giovanni approaching the priest who will bless him before his death.

Envisioning Giovanni walking toward the room in which he will be executed, David turns and faces his naked reflection in the mirror. Staring at himself, he realizes that his body is a mystery, and he comes to see that he doesn’t understand the feelings it hides. Looking at his penis, he thinks the answer to all his problems exists somewhere inside of him, hidden. Suddenly, he sees the door to the executioner’s room. It opens and Giovanni moves through it, angling down as the ground meets his vision and cuts to darkness. Only then does David will himself to move away from the mirror and dress, hoping desperately that God will deliver him from his misery.

Leaving the house, David locks the door and walks to the side of the road. Stopping for a moment, he takes out the **letter** Jacques sent him and tears it up, letting the small pieces of paper drift away on the wind. As he walks toward the bus stop, though, some of the shreds of paper circle back and gust toward him once more.

As David imagines the scene of Giovanni’s execution, readers come to understand that he will live with the guilt of what he’s done for the rest of his life. Not only is his lover about to die, but he blames this death on his own inability to be truthful with himself. At the same time, though, this doesn’t mean he’ll finally be able to honestly embrace his true identity, as signified by the fact that he actively avoids looking at himself in the mirror—a representation of his unwillingness to engage in genuine introspection.



David’s sudden willingness to examine himself in the mirror seems at first like a sign that he might finally start being honest with himself about his sexual identity. However, the only realization he draws from looking at his reflection is that his body is a mystery. This, it seems, is yet another way of denying his true identity, since he chooses to think of himself as an enigma instead of acknowledging that he’s gay or bisexual. Furthermore, when he hopes that God will help him, he once again takes the impetus off of himself to figure out his own problems, wanting someone else to do the emotional labor of helping him find happiness. Because of this mindset, then, it seems likely that he will continue to torture himself by refusing to embrace his true nature.



David’s decision to rip up Jacques’s letter spotlights his desire to put his relationship with Giovanni behind him. Wanting nothing more than to move on, he tries to cast away any memory of Giovanni. However, the pieces of paper circle back on the wind, suggesting that it’s impossible to simply repress and forget true romance. In this way, Baldwin hints that David will struggle against the memory of Giovanni for the rest of his life.





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