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## Sonny's Blues: The Accentuation of Oppression and Exploitation in Literature

In the short story, "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin (2009) the period in which it was published was the Harlem Renaissance, where there was a continual reiteration of social hierarchy that was imposed by a higher class. Similarly, "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published during the nineteenth century, which was a period in which women were oppressed and were silenced by a patriarchal society. The emphasis on the treatment of the protagonist, Sonny, who ultimately embodies the conflictive essence of black individuals who often experience injustice, unquestionably asserts the concerns of a person's color and class through a critical perspective within the short story. In juxtaposition, John, the protagonist's husband, represents the higher social power and the unnamed protagonist represents the oppressed social class. Moreover, the minorities depicted in these two short stories are depicted as pawns in a game of chess in which the higher class, manipulates the subordinate society in a way that influences their self-awareness into believing that their existence is trivial. Baldwin's (2009) approach of revealing the discrimination of the black community affirms that colored citizens are depicted as an inferior class that is excluded from society; therefore, leading black people to a state of perpetual agony and despair. At the same time, Gilman (1890) expresses the powerlessness of women and how they are painted as mere objects who are stripped of their intellectual and physical freedom. These troubled individuals are destined to remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as it is a generalization that keeps minorities in place, consequently, the intention of a rebellion seems inevitable. Through the utilization of Marxist Criticism, Baldwin (2009) and Gilman (1892) both highlight the constant oppression of minorities, women and black people, and the prejudiced world they have been placed upon, conclusively affecting the perceptions that society holds against their community which in turn strips them of their self-righteousness.

The idea of the inferiority and mediocrity of the black civilization is introduced by the narrator of the story, "Sonny's Blues", Sonny's brother, as he finds out that Sonny had been incarcerated because of his drug use. Almost immediately, Sonny's brother states that he feels "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (Baldwin, 2009. p.17) which represents the conceptualization of entrapment as well as the suffocation to unveil the suffering and sorrow that the narrator and his brother are forced to endure throughout their lives. Baldwin's (2009) act of using historical context conveys the hardships faced concerning racism, such as the poor choices of drug and alcohol abuse, and the impoverishment that occurred during this time. Not only that, but Baldwin (2009) often emphasizes the recurring motif and image of darkness that occurs within the people to further adds to the intensity of the hardships that all black individuals had to experience, including the narrator and Sonny, to feel somewhat significant in a civilization so discriminatory. Furthermore, the narrator observes a woman who "when she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore" (Baldwin, 2009. p.20) which reveals the different facades that individuals would often be described as, as not many people were open to express their anguish because for colored people, it was normal to be in a continuous state of torment and misery. Indeed, Baldwin (2009) is making the argument that the lasting inferior status of black people is ubiquitously ill-fated simply because of their color and class. However, the sense of rebellion is made known by Sonny who expresses, "No there's no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it, and to make it seem--well like

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you.” (Baldwin, 2009. p.41) the urgency in his tone discloses how the dictatorial system cannot be supported, and how the oppressed must somehow rebel to prove that all the suffering that they have tolerated must be displayed, not hidden. Even more, Sonny continues to get his matter across by claiming, “I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?” (Baldwin, 2009. p.23). This quotation affirms that he will not let his voice go unsilenced; hence, why he utilizes the expression of music to personify the journey of his suffering to those fellow black individuals who experience the same maltreatment from humanity. Once again, Sonny represents the inferior, underlying class against the prominent aristocratic and white-privileged system. Nonetheless, although the white class looks upon the black community as mere pawns in a game of chess that they claim to dominate the entitled, which according to Sonny, have no say in deciding who they are or what will become of them.

In a like manner, in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' the protagonist represents the effect of the oppression of women in society. This effect is created by the use of symbols such as the decaying house and the wall-paper which facilitate her oppression as well as her self expression. Gilman (1892) explores the patriarch that has been imposed by societal norms as the unnamed protagonist is struggling with not being understood by her husband, or society at that. Women during this era were expected to solely oblige their husbands and be child-bearers as that was the only task expected of them. The speaker states that she does not feel well, it is ironic how her husband, a physician, “does not believe” (Gilman, 1892. p.647) that she is sick, illustrating that a man’s judgement, at the time this was written was more legitimate and superior over a woman’s. Additionally, the description of the house makes it seem more like a prison rather than a home. The yellow room that the protagonist stayed in, in which she despised, contained a “heavy bedstead, and then barred windows, and that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on” (Gilman, 1892. p.649) these specific details contribute to the imprisonment that women had to endure, psychologically and substantially. Although the narrator believes that John, her husband of a high class, to enumerate, John would often speak to the protagonist in a condescending tone; thus, overruling her judgment on what treatment is best for her and deeming her thoughts inferior to his own. In short, John is asserting his dominance, as any man would during this era, by treating his wife as a minority by referring to her as a “little girl” (Gilman, 1892. p.652) and assuring her that he will care for her and make decisions about her health and well-being as a parent would for their child. Following thereafter, the narrator attempts to escape the entrapment she is forced upon by tearing off the wallpaper while her husband is away; thus, the woman she saw trapped inside is now free, except the woman she saw confined turned out to be the protagonist all this time.

“I don’t like to look out of the windows even -- there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?”

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope -- you don’t get me out in the road there!”

This quotation is the moment when the narrator finally decides to rebel against these traditional norms, which aids her in discovering her individuality and freedom from oppression. Not only does peeling the paper off the walls symbolize her attempt to liberate herself from the house and its confinements, but also from the confinements of her husband and the patriarchal oppression of society.

Throughout both of these short stories, the concept of Marxist Criticism is visible as the main

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characters of the story, the unnamed narrator, Sonny, and his brother, all are silenced in such a way that they are portrayed as minorities. The exhibition of the tragedies shown throughout the short stories epitomizes the process of secondary individuals giving into the madness and settling with the same, repetitive injustice as the people from times before. Although both pieces describe how societal structures dictate the minority class, Sonny and the unnamed narrator realize that the only solution to end their monotony state of suffering is to rebel. Without saying it directly, both short stories have made the concise argument that the overbearing, repressive society and class structure, with minorities at the bottom, has relegated these innocent individuals to believe that they are forced to live tragic, meaningless lives.

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