

Social conditions in slapboxing with jesus: "slave" and "ghost story"



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In Victor Lavalley's *Slapboxing with Jesus* the neglected, maimed, and the damned people of New York are put in the spotlight. The people that are described are not thrown in situations without reason, their social condition puts them in their situation and keeps them there. The need to escape from an environment which has consistently neglected drives the characters in the stories "Slave" and "ghost story". The character Rob in the story "Slave" is faced with the condition of neglect since he was a pubescent boy; this environment pushed Rob to become a child prostitute and the environment forever changed his mentality of life. Lavalley also writes about Sammy in "ghost story" a man that suffers from mental illness, a combination of schizophrenia and paranoia, so that his illness is regarded with the contempt which prevents his movement in society. The influence which has marked the lives of both Rob and Sammy is a stamp that has been put on them by their social condition. Wherever they go, even after "escape", they will carry a remnant of the stamp.

Rob was led into the life of prostitution because of how society has neglected him. Rob, a child prostitute, was abandoned by his parents in a city of riches: Manhattan. How was it possible for him to be neglected? How did this neglect change him? Lavalley describes where Rob was abandoned, "Rob stood on a block he'd known as years went by, in Manhattan, with buildings that go up and up, then more" (71). Abandoned under the shadows of tall towers. Manhattan is a place that is associated with riches and prosperity. However, in Rob's case, the potential to be forgotten even in a mass of wealth is easy. Neglect makes one vulnerable because no one is there to protect. The island of Manhattan is described as being vulnerable as well, "

Manhattan often seem to cry, "Colonize me!" (67), being left open so others can "colonize" or take over. When Rob was left alone on a block in Manhattan, his body too cried "colonize me!" Rob continued to be neglected, Rob began riding the trains for "long hours" even "days" eventually "For a year" (66), this demonstrates how easy it was for Rob to be neglected by society even though he used public transportation for a year, alone. Rob needed money, food, and shelter after being neglected, his last resort was prostitution, he became a "freelance man" (65). The work Rob did was complete oppression of his body, "his mouth is a wound that should be left to heal, but there is her purse next to the bed" (54), because of the neglect in Rob's early life he is now forced to have sex for money. His body is used repeatedly by both men and women, he has no control over what is done to it, Rob only needs to be paid. Even after being paid for sex he is further hurt, "All the money she'd paid him is lodged in his underwear as he walks, the stiff bills cut against one leg" (59). The money Rob needed to survive is a bitter relief from starvation, the money at the end of the day finds a way to hurt Rob further. The neglected life of Rob allowed for the tragedies of child prostitution to befall him. Rob's life has been severely limited due to parental and societal neglect.

Rob's way of thinking has been changed due to his social condition as a prostitute, he now sees anyone with the dollar as his way for survival. This is a cycle in which he can not escape. Lavalley describes this social condition as influencing Rob to become a child prostitute. Having to beg for someone else to take one in, is a state of oppression. Rob faces this when he leaves his pimp in the story. But who does he meet? Does he meet a savior? Rob meets

someone who is like him in a way, " Those who weathered the Holocaust have been known to find a fellow fortunate survivor at the other end of a restaurant" (59), Rob is described as a Holocaust survivor but he doesn't escape completely. Rob meets Harrold at the other end of a restaurant, but Harrold wants Rob for sex, " You want to go to the bathroom or something?" Harrold asks the young Rob; Rob has to oblige if he wants to escape his pimp. Rob's life due to prostitution will always be confined to what he had to do in the past, even the areas that Rob has sex in are described as confined places, " empty" " lights are off" and " glass on all sides" (61), " Under bridges, dark tunnels that hid men" (66). The only person that took in the oppressed Rob was another oppressor, someone who wants him for the services Rob can provide. Rob is content in finding Harrold, the man who took him in, does this mean Rob is free of the slavery he ran away from? No. Rob still believes the only way for him to be free is to do what he knows: selling body and begging. Rob says to Harrold when arguing why he should take him in, " I can be really beautiful. You could put me in a dress. Really anything. Whatever you like." (Lavalley 64), this is the mindset instilled in Rob: to always be dependent, always be a slave to anyone who has power and money. Rob can never forget " He can't." (57) who has the money, the person with the money is the one in charge in Rob's mind. With that mentality, he will never be free. He will always be a slave to the person with the dollar. Rob's social condition makes him a slave to the system.

A system where it is common for people like Rob to be neglected. Prostitutes are slaves to their pimps, they are paid for what they do, but they have no freedom with their money. Their bodies become the machines which create

money for their pimps, and the fields which others destroy. No control over their money, bodies and even minds. The idea that they can not escape their small apartments which they share with five other individuals is the lack of hope they have for freedom. Putting the prostitute in a fall of neglect. Rob is beholden to the money of his clients, Rob says, "Come on. Do you want it or not?" In response his client says, "Hey! Don't forget who has the money" (Lavalley 57). Rob can never forget who has the money, the person with the money is the one in charge in Rob's mind.

Sammy in "ghost story" is faced with a similar condition because of his low level in the society like Rob. Sammy's mental illness does not gain him help, instead, he is faced with contempt. Lavalley writes, "The look on her face had nothing to do with exertion. It was all for me" (Lavalley 37), can Sammy's behavior, as a result of his illness, be used to justify how he is treated? His low standing in a society allows people to ignore him and to see him as pathetic. He is confined by this, people that know him want to confine him with medication, "How about you take the medication fixed with something?" (34). Both Rob and Sammy face the influences of their social condition, an influence which prevents them from escaping their position in society. Sammy's obsessiveness, of course, extends to his friendships. Sammy's confinement in society can best be seen when Lavalley describes the electrotherapy that was done to Sammy, "They set those wires against my little forehead, so when they flipped the charge that one time, the lines slipped and burned my cheeks black; years later the marks were still there" (28). The wires put around Sammy can be seen as the shackles that were put on him, a symbol of society attempting to change Sammy. But society's

attempt is burned forever on his “ cheeks” now Sammy lives a life that bears the contempt society has for him. He can not move up in this society nor can he move up in relationships with people.

Sammy and his friend Cocoa grew up in the same neighborhood, but unlike Sammy, Cocoa has matured and has moved into adulthood and is about to become a parent with his wife, Helena. Sammy views Helena with paranoid disdain and automatically assumes that she sees him in the same light and that they are in constant competition for Cocoa’s attention and loyalty.

Sammy believes that he has scored some type of victory over Helena when Cocoa starts to spend more and more time with him as the story progresses. However, Cocoa is spending time with Sammy out of fear for the safety of Helena’s family, and out of fear that Sammy will do something to himself. Even Cocoa doesn’t want to continue her relationship with Sammy, “ I can’t be around him no more, I’m through” (29). It’s the social condition of having a low-level in the society that influences Sammy. His relationships and his societal movement are both strained. Due to the simple fact that society holds him in contempt because of his illness.

The lives of the characters in Slapboxing with Jesus are faced with conditions that either impede their movement through society or their very survival. In the case of Rob, it was both, his life and social position are tied together. As a child prostitute being beholden to a cruel pimp, he is always in danger of death or disownment. His position in society will forever be affected by his childhood. Sammy’s life was changed because of his mental illness, society holds him in a contemptuous way which justifies the way people treat him.

Straining his very own relationships with people. The social condition affects <https://assignbuster.com/social-conditions-in-slapboxing-with-jesus-slave-and-ghost-story/>

the lives of people, the characters Rob and Sammy demonstrate the ill effects of unfortunate conditions.

Work Cited

LaValle, Victor D. Slapboxing with Jesus: stories. Vintage Books, 1999