In reading an article about teaching Twentieth-Century literature, I stumbled upon a student question that made me smirk. The student had asked his teacher ‘if there were any authors in the Twentieth Century that weren’t depressed and killed themselves?’ At first I was perplexed, but upon viewing the class’s curriculum of texts consisting of pieces from Sylvia Plath and Ernest Hemingway, I quickly began to understand the question. Both writers explored bleak, dark themes, talked extensively about death in their writings, and both ended up taking their own lives. What is the significance of these authors and their pieces? They both wrote as a reflection of the world around them, as well as expression of their own inner demons. Plath incessantly wrote about her mental health/illness and the hardships she dealt with as the result of being a women and a victim of infidelity. Hemingway is known for his lack of ‘sugar-coating’ and telling tales that explored the hard facts of life ranging from abortion to poverty. In terms of literary critical theory, both Plath and Hemingway wrote many of their pieces in a marxist fashion. While both authors explored a variety of different critical lens including feminism, historical, and postcolonialism, the Marxist critical aspect of both authors’ writings called attention to the injustices or societal inequalities of the time and location. One of the most important and prolific authors to utilize historical, postcolonial, and marxist literary criticism, and one of my personal favorite authors of all time is the american, Twentieth-Century writer, James Baldwin. During mid-century America, Baldwin wrote many novels, plays, and essays including the famous The Fire Next Time, No Name in the Street, and The Devil Finds Work. Baldwin became a widely-recognized social critic and voice for racial, sexual, and class equality. As a homosexual, African American man living in pre-civil rights America and living through the transitions afterwards, James Baldwin experienced many hardships and reminders of how
society valued his presence and where he was situated among America’s class structure. These factors made themselves present in the writings of James Baldwin as they shaped his perception of the world, and in turn, how he expressed himself in his writing. One of James Baldwin’s most famous short stories is one that has become an important canonical piece of literature in many college English courses. The short story I am speaking of has been utilized in introductory English courses, literature courses, and even in critical theory courses, and it is “Sonny’s Blues,” by James Baldwin.

An author and its writing that can be easily examined under a multitude of literary critical lens is James Baldwin. “Baldwin was an intricate and intelligent activist and novelist that wrote about his experiences as a queer, black man in a hetero, white-controlled society” (Reilly 57). His othering by society fueled his inspiration for opening the eyes of the world to the injustices perpetrated by the controlling class onto the oppressed, impoverished, and neglected. Baldwin uses a plethora of critical lens in his various writings, but in his short story, “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin utilizes aspects of historical, African American, postcolonial, and mainly Marxist literary criticisms to show what it was like to be an African-American man in 1950’s Harlem surrounded by poverty, drugs, violence, and the low ambitions of his peers and students. The main characters of “Sonny’s Blues,” Sonny and his brother, the narrator, deal with many hardships throughout the tale, but all of the conflicts in the story seem to stem from factors pertaining class position and race. Sonny and his brother’s position in society directly relates to Sonny’s drug problems, their living conditions, and the narrators inability to relate to his brother and see the world through his eyes due to a distorted view of how the world works perpetuated by the white ruling class.

The short story, “Sonny’s Blues,” by James Baldwin begins with the narrator learning of his brother’s arrest in the newspaper. Sonny was arrested the night before for selling and using
heroin. The brothers live in Harlem, New York, and while the narrator struggles to make ends meet as an inner city math teacher, Sonny lives on the streets and in drug dens with other junkies. After learning about his younger brother’s incarceration, the narrator spends his day juggling teaching uninterested kids and reflecting on Sonny’s predicament and the similar inevitable future for his students, as well. The narrator reflects and acknowledges how environmental factors have a major impact on the welfare of the residents of Harlem. In the article, “Sonny’s Bebop: Baldwin's "Blues Text" as Intracultural Critique” published in African American Review by Tracey Sherard, Sherard discusses how the students must have been demoralized in their education by seeing that it will take them nowhere, since there are no legitimate opportunities. “At least drugs could bring them peace, selling drugs could ensure their shelter” (Sherard 693). The narrator thinks all day about how the instant gratification of drugs and the sense of family in gang-life could be more appealing to his students than learning about algebra. “Yet it had happened and here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could” (Baldwin 4). The prevalence of narcotics in the area coupled with the lack of valuing education offered very little legitimate opportunities for those who grew up in Harlem. Sonny was a prime example of how the system had failed him, and this was a glimpse of the possible futures for every student in the narrator’s class. “These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities” (Baldwin 5). Marxist critical theory examines how a text is calling attention to an injustice or problem in society. Much like how Upton Sinclair wrote The Jungle and exposed the disgusting conditions of the meat packing plants and their exploitation of immigrant workers, “James Baldwin’s writing in “Sonny’s Blues” called attention to the neighborhoods flooding with drugs and illegal activities
and the lack of those in power willing to do anything but watch the inner city rot” (Sustana). Segregated neighborhoods led to an imbalance in resources and capitol, where whites funneled money to improve their already nice neighborhoods, while neglecting black neighborhoods and increasing the wage and quality of life gap exponentially between the two. When the money and resources left the area, the jobs left with them. It seemed to many residents that illicit activities may be the only method of feeding their families and keeping a roof over head. “This bleak and desperate outlook accompanied with the instantaneous escape from reality that certain drugs offered made a dark situation worse and trapped generations in a cycle of addiction, violence, and poverty” (Duncan 4). Even the narrator, who finished college and now taught math, still saw the effects of this cycle everyday. “All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which were now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness” (Baldwin 5). To make matters worse, the youth were being indoctrinated by mesmerizing gangster movies that glorified drug abuse and violence, thus promoting their own demise.

Sonny and his brother suffer through very trying times that result from outside factors pertaining to race, class, and society. When examined through postcolonialism, or more so through African American criticism, “Sonny’s Blues” articulates the complexities of trying to survive while black in mid-twentieth century America. “Segregated neighborhoods and a massive difference in the welfare between the two groups of people created a class system that lifted the middle class and upper class up on the backs and misfortune of minorities and the impoverished” (Holliman). History has shown how the upper class and the power of white men has worked to promote an inescapable cycle of violence, addiction, and poverty to keep the poor in poverty and keep the rich in power. “Sonny’s Blues” functions as a powerful marxist novel that sheds a light on the complexities of trying to survive while black in a segregated land
that systematically promotes your demise through drugs, lack of opportunities, and glorification of crime.
Works Cited


