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CRJS215S

11/27/2024

Set it Off

Set it Off is a movie that tells the story of four women who are pushed to the edge by poverty, loss, an unjust treatment. It shows how life in a tough neighborhood, combined with a matter of personal struggles, lead them to commit bank robberies. In this paper, I'll summarize the movie, look at how the neighborhood and their circumstances influenced their choices, and apply two different theories to explain why they turned to crime.

Section 1: Movie Overview

Set It Off, directed by F. Gary Gray, follows Stony, Cleo, Frankie, and T.T., four friends who feel trapped by their circumstances. Stony loses her brother in a police shooting, Frankie is fired unfairly from her bank job, Cleo is drawn to the thrill of danger, and T.T. struggles to take care of her child. Feeling like there's no way out, they decide to rob banks to change their lives.

Environmental Characteristics of the Neighborhood

The neighborhood they live in plays a big role in their choices. It's a poor area with high unemployment, crime, and little opportunity for success. People don't trust the

police or the system, and many feel like they have no chance to improve their lives. This environment pushes the women toward crime as a way to survive.

Scenes That Increased the Likelihood of Bank Robberies

1. **Frankie's Job Loss:** Frankie is fired from her bank job after a robbery, even though she did nothing wrong. This not only leaves her broke but also makes her feel betrayed by a system she once trusted.
2. **Stony's Brother's Death:** When Stony's brother is killed by police who mistake him for a criminal, she is devastated. Losing him and facing mounting financial problems makes her feel like robbing banks is her only option.
3. **T.T.'s Workplace Incident:** T.T., along with the other girls, works a low-paying job as a janitor but loses her position after her son gained access to harmful chemicals on the job site. Both her employer and CPS show no compassion for her situation, leaving her broke and with a sense of hopelessness. This event solidifies her decision to join her friends in their criminal plan.

Character Motivations

- **Stony:** She feels hopeless after losing her brother and sees robbing banks as the only way to start fresh.
- **Cleo:** Cleo is bold and fearless. She's excited by the rush of robbing banks and enjoys the sense of power it gives her.

- **Frankie:** After being fired, Frankie feels like she has nothing left to lose. Robbing banks is her way of getting back at the system that let her down.
 - **T.T.:** T.T. is hesitant at first, but her need to provide for her child eventually pushes her to join in.
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Section 2: Theoretical Application of a Social Structure Theory

Strain Theory, created by sociologist Robert Merton, explains how people turn to crime when they can't achieve their goals through normal means. For example, society might expect people to work hard to succeed, but if someone is blocked from opportunities, they may choose illegal ways to get what they need.

This theory is easy to see in the movie. Frankie's firing is a perfect example. She wanted to work hard and succeed, but when her job was unfairly taken from her, she turned to crime to make money. Stony's situation is similar. After her brother's death, she feels completely cut off from the chance to have a better life. Strain Theory explains how these obstacles left the women feeling like crime was their only choice.

Application to the Movie

The struggles faced by the women in *Set It Off* align closely with Strain Theory.

- **Frankie's Job Loss:** Frankie is fired unfairly, stripping her of financial stability and self-respect. Her frustration with systemic injustice leads her to embrace crime as a way to regain control.

- **Stony's Grief:** Stony's brother's death and her inability to pay for his education leave her feeling powerless. Strain Theory explains how her blocked goals and emotional pain drive her to take extreme measures.

T.T.'s Desperation: T.T. feels the strain of being a single mother in a low-income job. Her inability to care for her son through legal means pushes her toward criminal activity.

Section 3: Theoretical Application of Social Process Theory

Social process theories focus on how people's relationships and interactions influence their behavior. Differential Association Theory, for example, says that people learn to commit crimes by being around others who think it's okay.

Individual Analysis of Each Female

- **Stony:** Stony's decision to rob banks was influenced by her friends. As their bond grew, so did her willingness to break the law, especially when they shared the same frustrations and goals.
- **Cleo:** Cleo enjoyed the thrill and excitement of the robberies. Her confidence grew because her friends supported the plan, and she felt validated by their successes.
- **Frankie:** Frankie's firing labeled her as untrustworthy. She felt unfairly judged, which pushed her to live up to that label. This is connected to Labeling Theory, which says that once people are labeled a certain way, they might start acting the part.

- **T.T.:** At first, T.T. was reluctant to participate, but her close relationship with the others influenced her. Seeing her friends succeed in robbing banks made her believe it was a real way to provide for her child.
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Conclusion

In *Set It Off*, the women's choices were shaped by both their tough environment and the people around them. Strain Theory shows how systemic barriers, like poverty and injustice, made them feel like crime was their only option. Social process theories explain how their relationships and circumstances influenced their decisions. The film is a powerful reminder of how society's failures can push people to desperate measures.

Works Cited

Gray, F. Gary, director. *Set It Off*. New Line Cinema, 1996.