

Akilah Stroman

To Suffer or Survive?

A Literary Analysis Essay

Within the 1990s, an author by the name of Leslie Feinberg published an award-winning queer narrative that changed the lives of many readers. Following the life of a butch lesbian by the name of Jess, the readers are taken on a painful, heartfelt adventure of abuse, trauma, and brutality. A refusal to conform to societal standards leads her to suffer unimaginable consequences, from familial abandonment to sexual assault. Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, through the portrayal and actions of both Jess and her friends, asks one of the most challenging questions a queer person could face; is it better to suffer and live a life that is true to oneself, or is the better option to live in safety while living a lie? Throughout the novel, Feinberg seems to argue the former.

We first encounter Jess' sense of rebellion within the first few chapters of *Stone Butch Blues*; when she rejects the pressure from her household to be traditionally feminine, despite the abuse she receives. Throughout the beginning of the novel, Jess' parents were portrayed as controlling and assertive; they had already had their personal problems with how she was born, and this was only heightened by the fact that she was immensely different from her female peers. Her mother expressed being ashamed when told that her daughter could no longer attend temple unless she finally wore a dress; she just shook her head, comparing Jess to her little sister; "Why can't she be like Rachel?" (30). Even though her parents would force her into a feminine outfit, Jess still fought back; she snuck into her parents' room and put on some pants and a tie. Her

parents responded by admitting their daughter into a mental facility. After years of stress induced by her parents, who wanted so badly for her to fit into society, our main character takes the extraordinary leap of running away from home. Although her family did not accept her for who she was, Jess still refused to conform in order to please her parents and the school she grew up in; the risk of being alienated from her family was not enough to stop her.

Of course, her parents were not the only obstacle within Jess' life; she felt her own sense of identity was worth the assault and brutality faced by law enforcement, as a result of her sexuality and gender expression. Throughout her life, Jess would frequent gay clubs, which would often be raided by the police force. Countless times, she and her friends have been arrested, raped, and beaten, simply for dancing in a nightclub; it was considered such a common occurrence that she could recall countless memories of the police humiliating her friends and lovers. In the 1960s, it was not only illegal to be gay, but also heavily frowned upon; therefore encouraging the police to use excessive force, take advantage of their power, and end up going unpunished for it.

One moment that truly stands out is when she asks her co-worker, for the second time, for the address to a gay bar. Despite her co-worker's apparent discomfort with Jess asking such a thing, she persists; "It's important, Gloria. Honest to god, I really need to know." (65) Jess still felt the need to frequent these clubs; to find love, to find friends who will accept her, to be herself, regardless of the foreseeable consequences. The fact that she pleads with her coworker to get this information, after already having been tormented by the police, suggests that she needed this more than her physical safety.

Now that it is thoroughly established that Jess instinctively chose to rebel against the norms of her authority figures, it is also important to note that the friends she meets within the

bar are there to represent a sense of influence and encouragement within her journey of rejecting societal pressures. Take, for example, some of the first people she meets within the club; Jaclene and Butch Al. They are an openly gay couple that decides to adopt the young kid, giving Jess a butch haircut, finding clothes for her, and showing her the ropes of how to interact with other women. Though these may seem like small gestures, Jess' new friends are encouraging her to further reject her social upbringing; teaching her to dress in ways her parents did not approve of and coaching her on forms of love that were against the law at the time. Jaclene and Butch Al also work as a direct example of what Jess wants in life; to be in a relationship that is true to her.

Perhaps some of the most powerful moments in the book, however, are when the butches, femmes, and drag queens begin to fight back against the police officers. Around the time she was engaged to Theresa, Jess had heard about what happened at Stonewall; "Jan grinned. 'The cops tried to raid a bar in Greenwich Village, but they got a fight instead. The drag queens and he- she really kicked ass.'"(158) Witnessing her close friends standing up to the oppressive law enforcement, as well as hearing about the famous riots taking place, must've been an exhilarating experience for Jess; not only is she finding the courage within herself to fight back, but she's also receiving a message from the people around her- a message to never surrender.

Injustice is rampant within Feinburg's novel, and as the story progresses, it is quickly realized that Jess must come to a decision; to suffer, or to survive? Time and time again, the main character, along with her other marginalized friends, chooses to suffer. One may wonder what the point of suffering is; what is it that these people receive from sacrificing their physical safety? Throughout the main character's life story, she falls in love, meets new people, creates a new family for herself, and lives a life that is troubling, but true to her heart. Many people, even in

today's society, would choose to stay safe and survive; though conclusively, living a lie will always lead to more suffering than the risk of physical danger.

Works Cited:

- Feinburg, Leslie. "Stone Butch Blues" 1993 and 2014. PDF file.