

Article

Systemic Shadows: Race, Class, and Inner Conflict in Nic Stone's *Dear Justyce*

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Abstract: *Dear Justyce* by Nic Stone deals with the life of an African American protagonist, Quan, a seventeen-year-old boy who navigates a life of struggle, chaos, and loss. This paper discusses how Quan, who was academically growing, gets pulled into a cycle of incarceration following his father's arrest and death, as well as his mother, Mama's, abusive relationship with Dwight. Following Dwight's death, Quan is left to care for his mother and half-siblings without any financial stability or mentorship. Desperate, he begins to steal and ends up in juvenile detention. He wrote a letter to his friend Justyce while he was in prison. Quan finds an emotional release, sharing with his friend some of his trauma and internal struggle. The play goes between flashbacks and present-day introspection, and the novel shows how institutionalized injustice and poverty create Quan's identity. This paper applies Cultural Studies and Global Literature, drawing on theories such as Marxist theory to examine class repression, and Freud's psychoanalytic theory to discuss Quan's emotional repression and the struggle between Id, Ego, and Superego.

Keywords: *Dear Justyce*; Marxist theory; Freud's psychoanalytical theory; Juvenile incarceration; letters

Introduction

Nic Stone's *Dear Justyce* (2020) is a young adult novel that is about the protagonist Vernell La Quan Banks, also called Quan in the entire play, a Black teenager, as he writes letters to his friend Justyce while in juvenile detention. Through the letters, Quan examines how a juvenile incarceration becomes a traumatic experience in life, a father's imprisonment and death, his mother's abusive relationship with Dwight Quan's stepfather, and the responsibility of caring for his half-siblings Dasia and Gabe. Quan's father's death and Dwight's death initiated him into a life defined by poverty, crime, and incarceration. Quan was a bright and promising student, and now he is filled with a system that criminalizes his life. The novel progresses through an interweaving of past and present and reveals how society and the responsibility of family taken by the elder son, Quan, leaves a permanent scar. In this paper, *Dear Justyce* is analyzed through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, Marxist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Theory, within the larger framework of Cultural Studies and Global Literature, to consider the ways race, class, and inner conflict are constructed in marginalized identities.

Institutional Injustice from the Perspective of Critical Race Theory:

Dear Justyce is a narrative analysis of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which deals with racism that is formally rooted in the social order of American society and legal systems. Critical Race Theory theorists, such as Kimberle Crenshaw, say that race is not so much about personal prejudice but about institutional arrangements that privilege dominant groups at the expense of subordinated ones. Nic Stone's portrayal of the life of Quan captures these very views. From a young age, Quan is showing the surveillance, control, and criminalization not because of who he is as an individual, but because of the identity imposed on him by society.

The novel clearly states that Quan is not given the same opportunities as his white counterparts because his presence destabilizes the complacency of the dominant social order. His initial interactions with law enforcement, discriminatory labeling in school, and final imprisonment reflect how systemic racism is not exceptional but rather the norm. The theory also appeals to Critical Race Theory, which depicts the counter-storytelling. Quan's letters serve as counter-narratives to the prevailing narrative that depicts incarcerated Black youth as criminals rather than as a product of inequality. By voicing Quan, Nic Stone shows the dominant narrative, demonstrating how storytelling can be a vehicle for resistance and healing.

Class Struggle and Power: A Marxist Analysis

Dear Justyce is a representation of class oppression from a Marxist point of view. Quan and his family are economically precarious, without access to stable accommodation, education, or protection from domestic violence. His mother's multiple forms of employment still do not guarantee the family's welfare, given how the working class is being exploited and left open to vulnerability under capitalist systems. By Marxist logic, crime tends to be a product of class inequality. Quan's entry into illegal activity is not based on greed or evil but on survival and systemic rejection. His

relationship with Martel's gang is a response to structural marginalization. The gang itself is an alternative economy for Quan, offering food, money, and protection when the official structures of the state and capital fail.

Marxist theory also brings to the forefront the concept of ideological control. The educational and legal establishments of the novel function as tools of the state, according to Louis Althusser's theory, reinforcing the hegemony of the middle class by excluding or punishing individualists (Althusser 135). Quan is expelled from school not because he is not intelligent, but because he challenges the social order. The school's role is not to uplift, but to discipline and enforce class grouping. Quan was a studious student, but when his math tutor had misinformed his mother into believing that he had cheated on a math test, which was not the truth, this led to a misunderstanding and lack of trust that influenced Quan's life. *Dear Justyce* shows the capitalist state not through explicit statements but through a powerful narrative. It reveals how socioeconomic oppression becomes normalized, especially for Black children growing up in needy surroundings.

The Psychological Conflict: Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego:

Freud's structural model of the inner self, Id, Ego, and Superego, is suitable here in explaining Quan's internal conflict. The Id, which is governed by instinct and desire, is evident in the way Quan reacts unconsciously to violence, injustice, or fear, only because of the reason to take care of his family. For instance, when he reacts to his stepfather Dwight's abuse or chooses to defend his siblings by making dangerous decisions, he is driven by survival instincts and not by logical thinking. However, Quan's Ego, his balanced self, strives to balance the raw desires of the Id and the moral disapproval of the Superego. His communications with Justyce are primarily under the guidance of this Ego, as he attempts to make sense of his previous choices, justify them, and clarify his intentions. These letters become therapy places where he attempts to make sense of himself and the world. He does not idealize his errors but analyzes them honestly. The Superego, or affected morality, is most evident when Quan considers what he "should have" done. Guilt, shame, and regret recur as he describes his decisions. This voice of morality, informed by his mother's lessons, Justyce's advice, and literature that he has read, demonstrates an inner conflict between self-worth and self-blame. Freud's theory sheds light on Quan's inner depth. Instead of regarding him as a mere victim or delinquent, the novel presents him as a psychologically complex individual struggling with opposing impulses, morality, and outside pressures.

Letters as Identity and Consciousness:

The narration of epistolary technique in *Dear Justyce* enables readers to experience the inner life of Quan in an intensely isolated way. Composing these letters to Justyce provides him with a personal arena to face realities that are inadmissible in his public life. Following the tradition of reflective writing as an instrument of identity construction, Quan's letters work not only to chronicle events but to examine his awareness. The letters document his emotional development. Early entries find Quan defensive, angry, and suspicious. However, as time passes, his vocabulary shifts, he

grows more reflective, more optimistic, and more open to imagining himself capable of change. This emotional growth is consonant with both psychoanalytic healing and social awakening.

Through these letters, Nic Stone gives Quan a unique level of agency, a characteristic often lacking in characters in his situation. The system does not merely act upon him but instead responds, reflects, writes, and regains control over his story. This is similar to the epistolary protest tradition, which was historically found in captivity narratives and prison / juvenile literature, in which writing is used as a form of rebellious resistance.

School and Surveillance: Policing Youth of Color:

The novel *Dear Justyce* portrays a school system that is not an environment for learning but an environment of exclusion and discipline. This is consistent with both Critical Race Theory and Marxist Theory, as it shows how schools function as both racialized and class-based sorting machines. Quan is immediately stigmatized as “troubled”, and no real attempts are made to tap into his intelligence or provide assistance for his well-being. Instead, he is tracked, disciplined, and ultimately driven out and conveyed into the criminal justice system. This is a phenomenon consistent with the social theory of the school-to-prison pipeline, which describes how students, generally, and Black and Brown youth in particular, are tracked systemically out of schools into incarceration. Teachers function as surveillance officers. The role of the school is not to teach but to conform, and to disobey becomes criminalized. This failure is an integral piece of Quan’s narrative. He is not afforded the benefit of doubt, a second chance, or restorative justice. The way is not random; it is systemic and works as a contemporary manifestation of carceral capitalism.

Brotherhood and the Politics of Survival:

Without a stable family, Quan creates replacement kinship relationships that assist him in negotiating an unforgiving world. His connections with Martel, Trey, and subsequently Justyce become increasingly important in defining his moral and emotional orientation. These connections resonate both with Marxist concepts of solidarity among the oppressed and Freudian concepts of ego formation through social reflection. Brotherhood in *Dear Justyce* is two-edged protectors and identifiers, but also enforcers of harmful norms. Martel, the leader of a gang, is both a protector and a gatekeeper to a risky life. However, he also shows Quan books and critical thinking, unveiling how mentorship could emerge even from some unexpected sources. Nic Stone does not idealize these friendships, but she makes them legitimate. They are a crucial aspect of Quan’s growth and emotional strength. In a world that isolates, dehumanizes, and criminalizes, brotherhood is a survival tactic.

Mental Health, Trauma, and Recovery:

Dear Justyce is passionately concerned with probing the psychological impact of structural violence. Quan’s psychological trauma is not remote; it materializes in concrete ways through insomnia, panic, guilt, and emotional taking away. His affliction merely reflects the wider emotional cost that racialized poverty and imprisonment

impose on young people. Quan's trauma follows Freudian theory on repression and defense mechanisms. He tends to downplay or deflect his hurt, a defense mechanism influenced by years of emotional repression. He starts the process of facing these repressed emotions in a positive way through writing. Significantly, Nic Stone never proposes a magic fix. There is no miraculous cure or redemption story. Instead, she makes therapy, emotional expression, and helplessness common and provides a model of resilience based on truth and human connection.

Conclusion:

Quan's narrative in *Dear Justyce* is not merely an individual testimony of a boy struggling through incarceration. It is a reflection of the larger realities of systemic injustice that many prefer not to perceive. His voice, expressed through letters, lends depth to emotions that are otherwise ignored through fear, confusion, hope, and the desperate desire to be heard. Nic Stone does not depict Quan as a flawless character, but as a flawed, introspective, and full of possibilities. The paper encourages us to rethink how society so quickly labels young Black men by assumption instead of fact. By making Quan the narrator, Nic Stone shows the need to slow down and think, and to challenge the systems that make it almost impossible to escape from poverty and racism. This makes its moving is not only its truth, but its gentle insistence, such as Quan's, must be told. Amid the burden of unfairness, there is room to change, to reflect, to grow. Quan is imprisoned on the surface, but through his words, he starts to regain the right to define himself. Ultimately, *Dear Justyce* shows compassion by putting down the phone to listen to someone's voice.

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