ABSTRACT

JANA MARIE KOEHLER. “I Ain’t Precious”: Embracing Shame in Sapphire’s *Push* (Under the direction of Dr. John C. Charles Williamson.)

Sapphire’s *Push* is a challenging text, both for its difficult subject matter—an illiterate African American teenage incest survivor—and its blunt, fragmented first-hand descriptions of the abuse suffered by the protagonist, Precious Jones. Many reviewers have been repelled by Sapphire’s candid depictions of trauma and abuse, leading them to accuse the author of contributing to the historically detrimental discourse on African Americans as pathological. Moreover, they also indict her for “shaming” the black community. Indeed, shame is at the crux of the novel: Precious is marked by a shame so profound that it initially paralyzes her, both physically and psychologically. In their analysis of the text, many literary critics have tried to dispel the shame surrounding Precious or to shift it onto her abusers. I argue that this impulse to banish shame, though well intentioned, overlooks a vital resource that can facilitate social critique. Further, doing so glosses over an essential component of Precious’ resistance that moves her from the static state of victimhood to the dynamic role of social activist who assists those dealing with shameful abuse. My work critically analyzes Sapphire’s text and its depictions of shame and shameful subject matter to demonstrate how an embrace of shame offers the option of self-analysis and social critique. Indeed, confronting her shame is what enables Precious to gain the tools for her survival: literacy, self-respect, and a loving community. I contend that critical attention should be given to the ways that shame can empower rather than degrade individuals who have been pushed aside by society.