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An Analysis of *If Beale Street Could Talk*

In the film, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, adapted from James Baldwin’s 1974 novel under the same name, director Barry Jenkins illustrates Black relationships in a uniquely intimate manner. This much of an intimate look at Black desire is seldom touched in Hollywood, and Jenkins does a brilliant job of presenting it in a way that isn’t too much too handle for the viewer while still showing the audience a powerful message. This message seeks to break the stereotypes of how Black individuals are normally portrayed on screen through love and family. These are such simple and familiar concepts that are able to be intertwined in a story about Black lives in a society that wants to oppress those lives. While you can’t fix the longstanding systemic racism that was and still is built into the United States, If Beale Street Could Talk provides a glimpse into how you should treat Black bodies. You treat them like you treat any other person, but while also keeping in mind that there exists intergenerational trauma and racism that can and will affect every Black person in this country.

The storyline follows a young Black couple, Tish and Alonzo (also known as “Fonny”), the latter of whom has been arrested and charged with the rape of a woman, Victoria, whom he has never met before. Although Tish and Fonny’s friend, Daniel Carty, were with Fonny at the time of the rape, Tish isn’t believed due to her romantic interest in Fonny and Daniel isn’t believed because he was previously convicted for stealing a car as a result of a plea deal for marijuana possession. While Fonny is being held in jail, Tish must deal with the fleeting hope of finding justice for Fonny while also carrying his child. Tish and her family all work jobs in order to fund Fonny’s expensive legal defense, including flying Tish’s mother out to Puerto Rico, where Victoria ran away, to try to talk her out of accusing Fonny for the crime. However, in the end, like most other cases involving defendants that look like Fonny, he was forced to take a plea deal and miss raising his newly born son.

Within a society that is so harsh on the Black body, Beale Street provides a much more intimate glimpse into the Black experience in the 1970’s (that still rings true today) through its focus on a simple concept: love. Love is used to paint a much more positive picture of a Black couple swept up in the corruption of the American criminal justice system. Not only does it focus on love, but it is intimate and sometimes erotic love that challenges the otherwise potentially rugged visual of Blacks in America. Beale Street also achieves this by oftentimes having the characters glimpse forward straight into the camera, making the audience feel warm and comfortable and helping the intimate narrative of the movie. The voice-over being done by Tish, a Black female voice, furthers the helpful and positive narrative as it pertains to its Black characters. Even with the voice-over playing a valuable role in guiding the audience through the movie’s narrative, the movie still manages to use few words to deliver a strong message of Black love in the face of racism and trauma.

Baldwin’s If Beale Street Could Talk does his best to display Black love in an incredibly complex manner, one of intimacy but an inclusion of an understanding of the delicacy of Black love in the United States. No matter how deep and personal of a connection is created between two Black lovers, the cruel, White world will bluntly intervene and interrupt their love and happiness. This happens to Tish and Fonny in the film, but it happens to so many that are wrapped up in the criminal justice system. However, through all of this, the movie leaves the audience with a feeling that love and family will persevere.