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Ann Petry: The Street

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The Street

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Petry, Ann
(1946)

[A Yemisi Jimoh \(University of Massachusetts Amherst\)](#)

Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

Ann Lane Petry always thought of herself as a short story writer. She began writing novels after publishing her first significant piece of fiction in *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in December of 1943. This story, “On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon”, brought Petry to the attention of an editor at Houghton Mifflin who wanted to know if the young writer had a novel and also told her about the literary competition that the publishing house was sponsoring. Although Petry did not have a novel underway, she told

the editor that she believed that she could write one. Motivated and encouraged by the notice she had received from Houghton Mifflin, Petry immediately began working and saving enough money so that she could live without employment for several months while she worked on the manuscript for her novel. In addition to her savings, Petry also received a small spouse's stipend from her husband George's military service. Early in 1944 Petry set for herself a strict writing schedule and an austere budget, and by December 1944 she had written five chapters of the manuscript that would become *The Street*, her first novel. Petry entered in the Houghton Mifflin Fellowship competition the five complete chapters that she had written and added a synopsis of the whole novel. She was awarded a fellowship in the amount of \$2,400 for a work in progress. Petry reports that she revised and re-wrote all of the chapters in *The Street* except the first one. The brief introductory first chapter of Petry's more than four-hundred-page novel, the writer says, was written on her typewriter at one sitting and was never revised.

Upon its publication in January of 1946, Ann Lane Petry's inaugural novel, *The Street*, soon became a literary success and it continues to be

her best-known novel to date. Petry's *The Street* has been translated into several languages and published in countries as varied as France, Germany, Brazil, Holland, Switzerland, Argentina, Israel, and Japan. Even though Petry presents the distressing story of Lutie Johnson, a single parent whose immediate success is thwarted by racial, social, economic, and personal barriers, the appearance of this substantial novel by a black woman shortly after the end of the second major war of the twentieth century was exciting news and brought Petry immediate, albeit unwilling, celebrity. *The Street* was the second major “race novel” published during the tumultuous war and post-war years of the 1940s, Richard Wright's *Native Son* being the first. The 1940s was a decade when among many black people there was a desire for substantial change in the racial climate of the United States coupled with conflicted feelings about black soldiers fighting for a freedom to which they would have no access. These concerns prevailed along with a deeply felt belief in the ideals and principles for which the war was being fought – democratic rights and freedom – and a belief in the nation's founding precepts and its prevailing narrative of the American Dream. This environment led many

black writers to follow the advice of several reviewers and publishers who encouraged them to de-emphasize racial conflict in their novels.

Ann Lane Petry did not eliminate the question of race from *The Street*. In fact she added the question of gender and then demonstrated the complexity of humanity's responses to the limiting social policies of exclusion, which seek to diminish or eliminate the possibility of success for characters such as Lutie Johnson. Petry did receive some criticism for writing yet another "social problem" novel. She was also criticized for what some perceived as her "failure" to write the "social problem" novel that readers of such books expected from black writers. Petry's success after the publication of *The Street*, a novel that points to race and gender as persistent impediments to the American Dream, is clearly located in her fresh approach to writing novels that critique society's injustices and failures.

Lutie Johnson is an ambitious and quite naive black woman imbued with all of the requisite concepts and beliefs she needs for success as well as the motivation to carry out her plans, yet she is unjustifiably denied access to the

world that she conjures for herself out of the philosophy of Benjamin Franklin: Lutie “couldn't get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she.” Lutie Johnson, separated from her husband and now living in Harlem, New York in 1944, is not Benjamin Franklin. Six years earlier, after returning home unexpectedly from her live-in domestic work in the home of the Chandlers, a well-to-do – despite the Depression – family in Lyme, Connecticut, Lutie finds that her out-of-work husband, Jim, has moved another woman into their suburban home. This strange woman is living with him and Bub, Lutie and Jim's son. Lutie alone has been paying the mortgage and buying the food to support her struggling family through their current economic difficulties. Jim's callous response to her anger at his faithlessness prompts Lutie to leave.

Lutie and Bub move into a flat on Seventh Avenue in Harlem with her father and Lil, his girlfriend. Lutie quits her job in Lyme and soon finds work in a steam laundry. Lutie, though, is determined to improve her lot in life, as her experiences with the Chandlers, as well as her

new-found perspective on the Pizzinis – the green grocers who helped her get the job with the Chandlers – have shown her another angle on life and the acquisition of wealth. She rejects the Chandlers' small-mindedness and emotional vacuity yet values their philosophy of hard work.

Lutie attends night school, where she acquires secretarial skills. She passes several civil service examinations, and after four years waiting for a position, is finally selected for an appointment as a file clerk. Lutie believes that her plan for success is well underway, even if by inches: “First the white-collar job, then an apartment of her own where she and Bub would be by themselves away from Pop's boisterous friends, away from Lil with her dyed hair and strident voice, away from the riff-raff roomers who made it possible for Pop to pay his rent.” But, as Petry demonstrates, Lutie is still on The Street, and just as she is not Benjamin Franklin, she is also not the Pizzinis nor the Chandlers. With her acquisition of an apartment and a white-collar job, Lutie Johnson also runs blindly and idealistically into the societal barriers that ultimately will demonstrate to her the differences between herself and those whom she has chosen to

emulate.

Petry focuses most of *The Street* on the events and characters in Lutie Johnson's life after she moves into her own apartment on 116th Street. This novel is Ann Lane Petry's initial venture into her practice of creating neighborhoods that become important characters along with the individual personae that occupy them. The streets like the one on which Lutie Johnson lives as well as many others like it at the time in urban, northern, cities are, as Petry's main character finally comes to understand, “no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs”. In Lutie's building there is William Jones who deviously involves Bub in an illegal scheme stealing mail after Lutie rebuffs his sexual advances and after he is forbidden by Junto, the white owner of the building that he supervises, from acting on his desires. Min, William Jones's live-in girlfriend, is Petry's example of the fate of many women on The Street who lack motivation because they believe that their survival depends on finding a man to support them. Mrs. Hedges, Junto's closest advisor, also lives in the same building with Lutie, although she doesn't have to do so. Mrs. Hedges is a hardened power broker who works along with Junto to enmesh Lutie in Junto's

web of control on *The Street*.

When Lutie meets the bandleader Boots Smith and he compliments her singing, the struggling file clerk optimistically believes that she finally has found her means to move off *The Street*. Yet again she learns that things will not be as easy as she believes. Boots Smith operates as nothing more than an agent for Junto, the white owner of the building where Lutie lives, the bar where Lutie relaxes after work, and the club where Lutie sings with Boots Smith's band. Boots, along with everyone else around Lutie, lives, eats, and plays under the control of Junto who now refuses to pay Lutie for singing and offers her a pair of earrings instead. So, when Lutie believes that she needs legal help after Bub is apprehended for mail fraud by the juvenile authorities, she seeks assistance from Boots Smith and angrily refuses to allow Junto – who is in Boots's apartment when she arrives – to help her instead. Junto leaves the apartment after Lutie has an angry outburst.

Boots Smith knows that everyone has been warned to stay away from Lutie, as Junto wants her for himself, yet the bandleader impulsively decides to take revenge on Junto and seduce Lutie, as he erroneously believes

that Lutie would eventually acquiesce to Junto as well as to him in order to get the money she wants to help her son. Boots Smith's attempted sexual assault on Lutie, his slap on her face, his threat of a beating after she rejects him, as well as his assumption that she would sleep with him and with Junto for money, all send Lutie into a blind rage that causes her to fall from the edge of sanity. She kills Boots Smith, leaves Harlem and Bub, and desperately flees to Chicago.

Ann Lane Petry's *The Street* represents an important milestone in the literary history of black women writers: it was the earliest novel by a black woman to sell over one million copies. In *The Street* Petry gave her contemporary readers a new, black, female protagonist, one that lived alone on the urban streets and survived them. Through Petry's depiction of Lutie Johnson and 116th Street in Harlem, she demonstrates the devastating power of gendered and racialized social policies that proscribe the lives of her characters, yet she also demonstrates the complexities of characters such as Lutie Johnson and, by extension, all residents on various streets in impoverished and dispossessed neighborhoods in the United

States.

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