

The struggles of urban life in "the street"



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Rife with opportunity, urban centers often allow the diverse groups of people drawn to them to realize their dreams and achieve their goals; however, the challenges that come with a bustling city life are not suited for everyone.

One excerpt from Anne Petry's novel *The Street* demonstrates this conflict through the image of a personified and forceful wind against city folk and the protagonist Lutie Johnson, who is characterized as she struggles to find an ideal apartment in the city.

The personification of the wind characterizes it as antagonistic to the city's pedestrians, establishing the excerpt's menacing tone and the conflict between man and nature. The " cold November wind" (1) introduced in the exposition establishes the setting and characterizes the gust with the connotations of loneliness and inhospitality. The forceful diction of the wind driving people " bent double" (8) out of the streets with its " violent assault" (9) both personifies the wind and depicts it as a hostile being that seeks to claim its turf. The wind's humanlike qualities are further emphasized as it " grab[s]" (31), " prie[s]" (32), and " st[icks] its fingers" (33) around the hats, scarves, and coats of passerby. With these qualities, the wind becomes a symbol for a kind of street thug that personally violates pedestrians and causes them to seek shelter from it. Although the billowing wind's interactions with the city folk can be primarily viewed as a perpetuation of the man versus nature conflict, the wind's antagonistic personification suggests that the interactions also reflect a conflict between man and man.

The constant presence of the wind to citizens of all backgrounds reflects the common struggle of city life, reminding readers of the difficulties and potential dangers that are present in an urban setting. The imagery of "

theater throwaways, announcements of dances and lodge meetings" (11-12) blown around shows some of the city's local color and—with the asyndetic structure—identifies and emphasizes the large scope of the wind's area of effect. As a symbol of the varied lives of the city-goers, the scraps of paper show how hardships are equally experienced by all kinds of people in the city. The wind lifting dirt "into [the pedestrians'] noses" (24), "[stinging] their skins" (26) with grit, and blinding them as "dust got into their eyes" (25) shows through sensory language the extent to which the pedestrians must face hardship in the city life. The possibility of death or violence in the city is implied through the image of the apartment sign's white paint—symbolic of purity, innocence—being battered by "years of rain and snow" (53) to appear with a "dark red stain like blood" (55). While the wind is understood to be the antecedent of the repeated sentences beginning with "It," such as "It found" (10) and "It did everything" (21), the ambiguity introduced by the indirect pronouns suggests that the wind's antagonism can represent several individuals in the city, whether it be a violent killer or someone violating one's personal space.

Lutie's interactions with the wind indirectly characterize her as determined and resilient, showing how she adapts to life in an urban setting. Lutie is also affected by the struggles of the city since she feels "suddenly naked and bald" (36-37) as the cold wind feels its way around her neck and head; however, she does not retreat from the streets like the other pedestrians. Motivated by her goal to find a three-room apartment, which symbolizes warmth and security with its "steam heat" and "respectable tenants" (59-60), Lutie endures the bitter cold, characterizing her as both mentally and

physically resolute. Lutie's qualities are emphasized when her character is juxtaposed with the pedestrians, who lack her physical and mental fortitude as they "[curse] deep in their throats" and "[stamp] their feet" (37-38) when the wind harasses them. The excerpt's structure of establishing the setting and the conflict between the wind and the pedestrians of the city shows both the scope of the wind's effect and highlights the contrast between the pedestrians and Lutie before the focus of the excerpt centers on her.

The personification of the wind represents the struggles of an urban life as it affects the lives of the pedestrians and the protagonist Lutie; her conflict with the wind reflects how she too is subject to the hardships of the city, but she remains determined in her goal to find an apartment in the city. The characterization of Lutie reinforces the notion that one can reach their goals in the city amid adversity with the mettle and motivation to succeed.