

Dogs in cages: the dangers of city living in ann petry's the street



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Ann Petry's novel *The Street*, even the most simple, everyday objects take on fiendish personalities and shifting, threatening aspects. From the cruel wind in the story's opening chapter to the hard, bitter street itself, glaring situational cruelty and injustice brings vivid color to the narrative. Even the walls, as Petry describes, "were reaching out for her – bending and swaying towards her in an effort to envelop her." (*The Street* 12) This haunted woman, the protagonist, Lutie Johnson, stands as a perfect example. Facing much more than just the challenges of an economically disadvantaged single mother, wide-spread discrimination places Lutie at a severe societal disadvantage, while an atmosphere of unapologetic chauvinism subjects her to repeated exploitation and disrespect. The aspects of race and gender, though they are only made obstacles due to tragically backward social norms and systemic inequality, become further and further internalized over the course of the novel. As her own perceptions and actions towards the outside world begin to pervert and twist, Lutie's race and gender function as both inner and outer demons, providing volatile context for her life as a woman, a provider, and a mother.

The perceptions of Lutie as an adult woman, both sexually and socially, range from the inappropriate to the predatory. These prejudices manifest themselves at times in puzzling, yet deeply cutting misconceptions, as Petry bitterly muses, "Apparently it was an automatic reaction of white people – if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute" (*The Street* 44). Though it may seem a resentful overstatement, the behavior of the men, white or otherwise, around her gives the impression of a more literal translation. From Mr. Crosse, who sees Lutie's audition for

his singing school as an opportunity to extort sexual favors in exchange for free singing lessons, to William Jones, the Super of her apartment building, who violently attempts to rape her on her way home from work, men in Lutie's life view her as little more than a sex object, to be attained by whatever means necessary or available. It is this pattern which has Lutie surviving in constant fear and thinly repressed anger, robbing her of her safety at home and opportunity throughout her life. Unable to find companionship based on terms of mutual respect and affection, she has little choice but to isolate herself emotionally after the collapse of her marriage. This alienation, coupled with an escalating culture of violence, ultimately plays a critical role in pushing Lutie towards her most life-altering decision of the novel: the brutal murder of Boots Smith.

Another factor of constant frustration throughout the path of Lutie Johnson's life is the economic disadvantage imposed upon African-Americans by discrimination endemic throughout the job market. Much of her ill-fortune begins after her husband is unable to find work, no matter how hard he searches. The reason for this curious lack of employment is summed up ruefully by Petry, "It all added up to the same thing, she decided – white people" (The Street 206). In times of economic hardship, white men were given obvious preferential treatment in the quality of work, as well as availability. Even when African-Americans were tenacious, and lucky, enough to find work, the work was degrading, humiliating. In the case of Boots Smith, he could not even pursue a career as a pianist without having to be constantly wary of violent abuse at the hands of a white police force. In a country run on the backs of dollar bills, to intentionally hold back an entire

race of people is not only indicative of a truly disgusting sense of superiority and entitlement, but is also incredibly harmful to society over the long term. As we see Lutie struggle from one low-paying, demeaning job to the next, we see her own faith and personal character be beaten down bit by bit. It is in this way that widespread discrimination becomes so truly poisonous to a people; by denying the means to succeed or excel, a pattern of entropy is created; a pattern in which a mother's child truly has little hope of anything more than a lifetime of gradually escalating desperation and violence.

It is the tragedy of young Bub Johnson, and the choices his mother was mercilessly driven to make, that is truly the most poignant condemnation of racial and gender inequality within the novel. Forced to work for such low pay that she must work late into the evening, merely to afford a tiny apartment in a crime-ridden neighborhood, Lutie struggles to raise her son away from corrupting influences. However, the anger and frustration she constantly carries with her surfaces in ways which are confusing and frightening for her son. After finding Bub running a makeshift shoeshine stand, she lashes out, as Petry details, " She slapped him sharply across the face. His look of utter astonishment made her strike him again – this time more violently, and she hated herself for doing it, even as she lifted her hand for another blow" (The Street 66). In being a constant witness to his family's abject poverty, Bub is left facing a problem he neither understands, nor has any capacity to solve. To raise a child based on the values of love, hard work, and understanding, is virtually impossible within the environment Lutie has been entrapped within. Due not too any aspect of her own personal race or gender, but instead as a result of society's flawed, hateful beliefs towards

those aspects, Lutie's most sacred and intimate of tasks becomes irrevocably tainted. As she reflects on her decision to abandon her son at the close of the novel, Lutie realizes that to leave is truly the best she could for him. In a world which turns caring mothers into panicked, suffocating denizens of poverty, the woman that the street had turned Lutie into was worse than no mother at all.

Any remotely human sense of justice would regard the life of Lutie Johnson as an undeniable failure of the American social system. A victim of what some may deem as simple bad luck, a closer inspection into how her race and gender affected the behavior of those around her, and in turn her reactions to those around her, reveals a stark pattern of discrimination and exploitation. Over time, these outside influences begin to color Lutie's own thought-processes and beliefs about herself, creating a volatile frame of mind verging on psychosis, driving her to beat her son, lash out at strangers, and ultimately commit murder. To cage a human being as if they were an animal is crime enough; but the consequence of a human being that has been made to believe they truly are one is even darker, and impossible to truly measure, count, or comprehend.

Works Cited

Petry, Ann. *The Street*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1946. Print.