

The Street Study Guide

The Street by Ann Petry

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Plot Summary

The novel begins in New York City on a cold and windy day in November of 1944. The story begins with the main character, Lutie Johnson, looking at an apartment available for rent. Lutie has two strikes against her from birth. She is black, and she is a woman. The women in the story show how their past experiences and current circumstances makes it virtually impossible for a black woman to ever achieve anything more than what they have managed to achieve.

Lutie and her son, Bub, have been living with Lutie's father and his girlfriend, Lil. Lutie wants to get Bub away from Lil. Bub is only eight years old and Lil has him lighting her cigarettes for her and she is giving him sips of gin. Lutie fears Bub will develop a taste for cigarettes and gin, and she also fears whatever else Lil might teach the young boy.

Through a flashback to the Chandler's home in Connecticut, Petry reveals how Bub and Lutie have ended up without Jim, Lutie's husband and Bub's father. While Lutie was working for the Chandler family she was gone for long periods of time. Jim felt emasculated due to his inability to provide for his family and he took up with another woman to help rebuild his ego. The adult male characters in the story, whether white or black, show what little respect they hold for women. They see the women as little more than sex objects.

Lutie works really hard and eventually manages to pass a civil servant test, which enables her to get a white-collar job. The payment for the job is still low, and she and Bub are just barely able to survive. She is trying to find a way to get her and Bub into a nicer neighbour so that she can raise the boy properly. However, she is losing her battles because of her skin color and her gender.

Lutie's attempts to obtain financial stability are ultimately defeated in the final chapter. The reader is left contemplating whether Lutie ever really had a chance to achieve her goal or whether she was doomed for failure from the beginning.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The setting for this chapter is New York City on a cold and windy day in November of 1944. The wind is so strong it is picking up everything off of the streets and blowing it into anyone who happens to be outdoors. The book's main character, Lutie Johnson, is looking at an apartment available for rent.

Lutie and her son Bub are living with Lutie's father and his girlfriend, Lil. Lutie wants to get Bub away from Lil. Bub is only eight years old and Lil has him lighting her cigarettes for her, and she is giving him sips of gin. Lutie fears Bub will develop a taste for cigarettes and gin, and she also fears whatever else Lil might teach the young boy.

There is a woman sitting at an open window at the apartment building as Lutie approaches. The woman speaks to Lutie with a very pleasant voice. However, something about the woman's eyes disturbs Lutie, and the more she looks at the woman the less she likes her.

While Lutie is standing outside of the super's apartment she fantasizes about cots in the hallway to accommodate more renters. She creates complete scenarios based on the names she reads on the mailboxes. She also spends a bit of time fantasizing about the woman in the window being a snake charmer.

The super, William Jones, makes Lutie feel very uncomfortable. She is uncertain if it is her imagination due to the influence of her granny or if she really is able to sense his thoughts.

The apartment Lutie is looking at is very small and rundown. There is very little light or fresh air in the apartment. There is a smell that Lutie believes will never go away regardless of how much painting and scrubbing is done to the apartment. She knows the rent will be low based on the appearance of the apartment. This is not some place she wants to live, but her income is very limited, and she feels she must get Bub out of their current situation.

While she is in his small apartment paying her deposit, she notes how the super struggles with writing out her receipt. She also notes how his apartment seems to have no personal touches that make a home feel like a home. Lutie is surprised when she realizes there is a woman sitting in a chair in the room. The woman is small and dressed in clothing that so closely matches that of the material of the large chair she is sitting in that she just blends into the chair. The woman is Min.

Also inside the apartment she sees a canary and a dog. The woman, the dog, and the canary seem to be shrinking. She believes the dog looks more like a wolf due to his condition. His ribcage is sticking out and his fur is worn looking. As she is leaving, she



hears the dog yelp. She assumes the super kicked him again as he did when Lutie first rang his apartment bell.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Petry describes the wind as if it is alive and is trying to prevent people from being outdoors. To do so, she uses words and phrases normally associated with human beings such as, "It found," "Fingering its way," "It even took time to," and "It did everything."

The author gives the reader a glimpse into Lutie's vivid imagination and her sense of humor, while Lutie is fantasizing about the beds in the hallway. The reader might also interpret her imaginative thoughts as a generalization of the social injustices resulting from the owners of the buildings.

When Petry reveals Lutie's thoughts about the woman in the window and about the super, the reader is uncertain whether Lutie's imagination sometimes runs wild or whether she has a very keen sense of intuition. It seems Lutie is uncertain herself. She believes some of her thoughts stem from being brought up around her granny. One may speculate that the shrinking canary, dog, and woman are a result of living with Jones, or possibly the result of just living under the current circumstances.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Lutie is traveling on a packed train. Just as the other passengers, she becomes lost in her own thoughts. As she looks at an advertisement of a sparkling kitchen, she recalls the Chandler's kitchen in Connecticut where she worked as a nanny to Little Henry and as a maid to the Chandler's for two years. While at the Chandler's, she mailed her check to her husband, Jim, weekly so that he could pay for the mortgage and feed himself and Bub. She even limited her visits home in order to save money.

In order to get the job at the Chandler's she asked Mrs. Pizzini at the vegetable market to write her a letter of reference since she had no work experience. Mrs. Pizzini agreed to give her the letter and told her to return tomorrow. When Lutie picked up the letter, Mrs. Pizzini shared some of her wisdom, "It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man." Lutie was in a hurry to get her letter in the mail and barely listened to Mrs. Pizzini, but for the next six years she remembered it over and over again.

When she received train fare from the Chandler's, she was filled with pride. She showed the letter to Jim, but he did not share her joy. He did not even go with her to the train station when she left. As she neared her train stop, she wondered how she and Mrs. Chandler would recognize each other. Mrs. Chandler approached her right away and as Lutie looked around the train station she laughed. She was the only colored person in sight. Both Mr. and Mrs. Chandler were nice enough, although Lutie felt that Mrs. Chandler lacked interest in Little Henry and Mr. Chandler drank entirely too much. Mrs. Chandler also seemed to lack interest in Mr. Chandler.

While in Connecticut, Lutie believes she learned a valuable lesson, "anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough." This lesson gave her the nudge she needed to not give up. The determination she gained allowed her to finally get a civil service typist position.

Mrs. Chandler's mother and Mrs. Chandler's white friends seemed to think that colored women slept around and that white men always wanted to sleep with them. Lutie had no interest in sleeping with their white husbands. Her granny drilled it into her mind that she should never have a white man touch her. Mrs. Chandler sometimes felt like a friend, but then she would publicly dismiss Lutie to show those around her that Lutie was simply the hired help.

Also, while at the Chandler's she witnessed a terrible event. On Christmas morning Jonathan Chandler, Mr. Chandler's brother, shot himself beside the Christmas tree while everyone was in the room. The Chandler family's money was able to turn the suicide into a tragic gun accident, which resulted in sympathy for the family. After the incident,



both Mr. and Mrs. Chandler began drinking entirely too much and Mrs. Chandler's mother's visits became more frequent and lasted longer.

Lutie received a letter from her father reading, "Dear Lutie: You better come home. Jim's been carrying on with another woman. Pop." Lutie told Mrs. Chandler that Bub was seriously ill, and she had to return home. When she arrived home, there was a woman in her house cooking supper. Jim was cold about the situation. He did not try to sooth or calm her. Lutie called a moving man and had all of her belongings. Lutie and Bub moved in with Pop.

When Lutie's train finally reaches her stop, she realizes that until she reaches the streets of Harlem she does not feel human. She watches the other riders, and it appears to her they feel the same way. On the train, they seem to shrink and hide, but then seem to grow as the exit the train and reach Harlem. In Harlem, they are once again individuals.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, the author flashes back to explain how Lutie has ended up alone with Bub.

There are several instances where the author illustrates that racism is going to be a key theme in this novel. When Lutie first arrives in Connecticut she is wondering how she and Mrs. Chandler will know each other, but it turns out to not be an issue. Lutie is the only colored person arriving on the train. Also, she is aware that Mrs. Chandler's mother and Mrs. Chandler's friends believe colored women are whores that will sleep with any white man. Another example is the way that Mrs. Chandler publicly dismisses Lutie rather than just saying goodbye. And lastly, Petry explains Lutie's feelings when she arrives in Harlem away from the hostile stares of the white women and the lustful stares of the white men.

As in chapter one, where the canary, dog and woman seem to shrink, the colored people on the train seem to shrink and hide, until they are in Harlem and once again become individuals.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

When Lutie gets off the train, she finds herself thinking, "having solved one problem, there was always a new one cropping up to take its place." Most of the problems that arise have to do with Bub.

Bub informed Lutie that he hates the school lunches. Now she has to figure out what to do about that. The school lunch issue is not as great as some of the other problems she needs to solve. Now that the two of them live alone, there is nobody to watch him after school. It is not the traffic that worries her while he is out running around the street, but the fear of gangs and such. She refuses to let the street beat her, and she does not want it to beat Bub.

Lutie also wonders how she and Bub will ever be able to move into a nice place. She has just enough money to make ends meet. If she were to move now, it would just be to another apartment just like this one.

Lutie visits the butcher shop and while looking at the meat, she recalls her granny telling her that butchers in Harlem use embalming fluid to give it a nice fresh color. "Lutie didn't believe it, but like a lot of things she didn't believe, it cropped up suddenly out of nowhere to leave her wondering and staring at the brilliant scarlet color of the meat." On her walk home, the nice weather and all the children in the street brighten her mood, and she is once again filled with self-confidence. She thinks, "I'm young and strong, there isn't anything I can't do."

Lutie notices how heavily the women walk carrying their marketing bags. She knows they have been working all day in "white folks' kitchens" and now they must cook and take care of their own families. The men all seem carefree as they lounge around watching the women.

Lutie becomes furious, when she sees Bub with a shoe shining kit, and she slaps him twice and instructs him to leave his box and get into the apartment. Bub is upset. In his view he is only earning a little extra money for the two of them, but in Lutie's eyes he is ruining his entire future. She believes if he is shining shoes at this age he will be performing some other low paying menial job, when he is a grown man. She explains to Bub, "White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they're fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least."

As a peace offering to Bub, Lutie scrapes together the money for him to go to a movie and sends him on his way. She is unsettled that he knows how to get into the movies at night without an adult accompanying him. Once he is gone, she begins washing the dishes and playing the radio. The silence of the apartment is too much for her,. Even with the radio playing. Without having a destination in mind she dresses in her best coat



and her white gloves and heads out. On her way out, Mrs. Hedges tells her if she is interested she has a nice white man who would like her services. Mrs. Hedges runs a little whorehouse. Lutie thinks to herself, "If you live on this damn street you're supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights. With nice white gentlemen." Lutie ignores the woman and walks down the street to Junto's Bar and Grill.

Chapter 3 Analysis

In this chapter, Petry illustrates again how Lutie's granny has influenced her life. Even when Lutie doesn't believe things her granny told her, she still wonders about them. This is evidenced while she is waiting on her turn with the meat butcher.

Racism is again a key factor in this chapter. It is best illustrated with Lutie's reaction and conversation with Bub and about his shoe shining box. "White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they're fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least."

Another example of racism in this chapter is Lutie's thoughts about Mrs. Hedges' proposition, "If you live on this damn street you're supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights. With nice white gentlemen."



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Jones, the superintendent, watches Lutie walk down the street to Junto's. He lusts after her and wishes she were wearing something less full than that coat so he can better see her figure. "She made him more aware of his loneliness that ate into him day and night." Jones has lived a lonely life. All of his jobs have been lonely. He was in the Navy, worked as a night watchman, and is now superintendent. The night watchman job was the loneliest of all.

While Jones is lost in his thoughts, Mrs. Hedge's tells him, "Ain't no point in you lickin' your chops, dearie. There's others who are interested." Jones strongly dislikes Mrs. Hedges. She is always sitting in that window. Once when he was interested in the young women in Mrs. Hedges apartment, he softly implied he would like to come in some night. She embarrassed him by telling him loud enough for everyone close by to hear that he could talk to her there in the window. That incident angered him so much he decided to go to the police where he reported that she was running a house of ill repute. The police told him there was not enough evidence to do anything.

Jones is friendly with Bub. He believes if he gets close to the boy it will be easier to get close to Lutie. But Jones is full of anger always on the verge of erupting. Just looking at Bub and imagining that the boy looks like his father enrages Jones.

Jones spends a lot of his time fantasizing about Lutie. He seems obsessed with her. While she is still out at Junto's, Jones pays Bub a visit. While there, he picks up a tube of Lutie's lipstick and smells of it. He can imagine what it would be like to kiss her with that lipstick on her lips. He gets Bub to run out to the store for him so that he can snoop around more. He looks in her closet and crushes one of her blouses in his hands as he remembers the way she looked wearing it. He puts some of her talc powder on his hands and imagines her putting it on her body. He also goes into the bathroom and looks around. He imagines her in a steamy bath with water on her body. He imagines drying her off with one of the towels hanging in the bathroom.

Once Bub returns from the store, Jones leaves with the intention of kicking Min out. But when he gets inside his own apartment, she is gone. He checks the closet to see if she has left him. Her best clothes are gone, but everything else is still there. He hates the idea of her leaving him even though he plans to kick her out. Her table is still in the living room so he concludes she will be coming back home.

Chapter 4 Analysis

In this chapter, Petry writes from Jones point of view. She illustrates to the readers that Jones is lonely, angry, and obsessed. There is a hint of danger about him. His



loneliness seems to stem from a life of working jobs in which he is often alone, but it also appears that the loneliness has made him mentally unstable.

Petry also shows that Lutie's intuition is correct about Jones. It is not simply her imagination running wild. He has made her feel uncomfortable since the first day she met him. Furthermore, the author demonstrates that Mrs. Hedges always being in the window bothers Jones as well as Lutie.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

This chapter is written from Min's point of view. The author shows that Min may behave timidly, but she is very aware of what is going on with Jones. She knows that Jones is interested in Lutie. Everything has changed since the day Lutie first came and paid her deposit. Jones now treats Min with contempt. He even kicked her in her bottom one day when she was removing beans from the oven. Min's instincts kept her from dropping the beans or from crying out, but she knows he did it, because he does not like the way Min looks compared to Lutie.

Min is also aware that Jones does not like Mrs. Hedges, but Min does like her. Min chooses to ask Mrs. Hedges for advice. Mrs. Hedges invites Min in and the two of them talk. Mrs. Hedges tells Min that while she does not visit root doctors herself, the girls have mentioned David, The Prophet. Mrs. Hedges tells Min how to find David. Min tries to leave some money for Mrs. Hedges, but Mrs. Hedges reluctantly tells Min to take her money. When Min returns from seeing David, she stops at a plant shop and purchases a plant for Mrs. Hedges.

Visiting the root doctor is very difficult for Min. She has never really stood up for herself in her relationships or while working. All of the men she calls her husbands have abused and taken advantage of her, and she never ended any of the relationships. She stayed with them, because a woman by herself didn't stand much of a chance. She let the men walk out on her. All of the madams she has worked for have added more and more work to her load without paying her any more than originally agreed upon. She generally would start a job with the agreement that she would be off on Sundays so that she could attend church, but inevitably she would end up working on Sundays.

Min has terrible bunions. She is wearing her good shoes and the pain is quite intense. Someone steps on her feet as she is getting off of the bus and the pain shoots up into her legs, but she forgets about it when she sees the sign for David, The Prophet.

Her visit with David is better than she expected. Nobody has ever really listened to her before. The doctors she visits from time-to-time about her feet only look at her feet and not at her as a person. "All they saw were a pair of feet with swollen, painful bunions on them - nigger feet." Her madams just issued orders and never looked her in the face. Even the preacher did not seem to listen. He would interrupt her with "We all got our troubles, Sister. We all got our troubles." However, she felt as though David did listen, and it made her feel more confident.

After visiting the root doctor, Min has a new determination when she returns to the apartment. She does not timidly unlock and open the door, but she does so with self-confidence. She even slams the door shut rather quietly closing it. When Jones asks where she has been she simply replies, "out." He goes into the bedroom with the



intention of throwing her out, but when he sees the gold cross hanging on the bed he returns to the chair in the living room. While he does not attend church and such, he fears the repercussions associated with his actions.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter shows some of the racism that Min has encountered in her life with her madams and doctors. Min has never been treated with respect. Nobody really even listens to her. She has always just taken what she is dealt and never stood up for herself. She believes since she is a colored woman, she has so few choices in life. While Lutie and Jones both seem to dislike Mrs. Hedges, Min respects the woman and believes that she is wise. She turns to her for advice.

After visiting the root doctor, Min feels more confident. If she is successful in keeping Jones from kicking her out it may have more to do with the fact that David actually listened to her than from the items she purchased from him. She now feels that what she has to say is important enough for someone to listen.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The Junto's plays an important part of the neighbourhood. During the cold weather months the patrons seek the warmth and during the warm weather months the patrons seek the cool atmosphere. The Junto means different things to different people. Men gather there to catch up on the latest gossip. Those without money will surely find a friend that will buy them a beer. Some of the men just want to scope out the women. The elderly women in the neighbourhood hate The Junto, while the young ones enjoy it as much as the men. The women visit in search of a man, or just to escape the walls closing in on them in their small and uncomfortable apartments. Lutie visits The Junto to escape her apartment.

"The inside of the Junto was always crowded, too, because the white bartenders in their immaculate coats greet customers graciously. Their courteous friendliness was a heart-warming thing that helped rebuild egos battered and bruised during the course of the day's work." The drinks helped the patrons believe in themselves again.

Lutie sings along with the jukebox. Everyone at the bar stopped for a moment to listen to her. Her voice was able to relay a message that just the words in the song could not get across. "A story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known, because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died.."

As Lutie is about to leave, Boots Smith approaches her and takes her checks for the beer. He also buys her another one. Boots enjoyed Lutie's singing and invites her to try out for his band. Boots reminds her of the cat at the Chandler's stalking its prey. She is aware he is trying to catch her, and willingly swallows the bait whole.

The two go for a drive in Boots' car. While riding, Boots' car causes Lutie to think that it would be better to be born with no brain than to have to see everything that you could not reach. "The act of driving the car made him feel he was a powerful being who could conquer the world."

Boots asks Lutie if she is married, and she tells him that she is separated. She leaves it at that without explaining she might as well be divorced. She simply can't afford a divorce. When Boots tries to make a move on Lutie, she points out that he is going to be late. The clock saves her.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The author describes Junto's almost as if it is a alive. She details how the different people in the neighbourhood view the bar and grill and the different reasons the patrons choose to spend time there. Lutie like The Junto, because the walls of her apartment



feel as though they are closing in on her, and she sees no future. She wants to take her mind off of things for a while.

Lutie is aware Boots is like a cat stalking its prey, but she has a dream now of becoming a singer and of getting herself and Bub into a nicer home. So knowingly lets him pay for her drinks and goes for a ride with him. She believes she needs to find a way to not have to go through with sexual advances, but to keep him interested and trying until she is a successful singer. The clock saves her this time. Boots has to be some place.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

On the ride home, Lutie is concerned about Boots' risky driving. She finds herself filled with a sudden access of warmth for her tiny dark apartment. She would rather be in the apartment alive than dead in the river.

Lutie is curious about how Boots can get gas for his car. He tells her that if you pay the right price you can find the gas. She also asks how he managed to avoid being drafted. He tells her he has something wrong with his ear, but his reaction causes Lutie to believe his ear is not what kept him out of the Army. She lets the subject drop, because it seems to agitate Boots.

When Boots finally does slow down, a motorcycle policeman pulls him over for speeding. Boots hands him his license and a card. Lutie notices a bit later that he also handed the man some cash. As the cop leaves, Lutie finds herself thinking that "even with cops money makes a difference." "Even if you're colored, it makes a difference - not as much, but enough to make having it important." She is even more determined now to use Boots Smith to launch her singing career.

Boots is running so late he says goodnight to Lutie in front of The Casino where he band is scheduled to perform. He tries to put her arm around her waist, but she smiles and tells him goodnight. He tells her to meet him there the next night to try out for his band.

She knows she should not spend the bus fare, but she takes the bus home. She could have taken a bus with a less expensive fare, but she would have to have stood up on the entire trip home. While on the bus, she compares and contrasts Boots and Jim. She objectively thinks back over her relationship with Jim and what caused the marriage to end.

She finds it a little ironic that the walls that seem to be closing in on her in the tiny apartment are similar to the walls that were closing in on Jim. Jim felt inadequate and he saw no hope for his future so he found another woman on the side to make him feel like a man. She had heard Jim had left town, but she had not seen or heard from him since the day the moving truck picked up her things.

She believes she is as much responsible for the marriage ending as Jim. She blames herself for letting Pop move in with them when he was down on his luck. Lutie and Jim were caring for state children and were receiving enough money for the children to keep the house and keep everyone in it fed. Pop's drinking and partying caused the state to come in and take the children. Lutie blamed it on the white people. While she knew it was not the white people's fault that Pops was partying in the house, she believed it was the white people's fault that Pops and Jim could not find a decent paying job.



Chapter 7 Analysis

Once again Lutie's optimism takes over. She believes if she uses Boots Smith she will not have to become involved with him, and she can launch her singing career. She once again has hopes of getting herself and Bub out of Harlem and into a house with trees and windows overlooking something other than rubbish.

Racism again rears its ugly head. Lutie believes that white people are the reason she and Jim lost the state children, which in the end resulted in her marriage falling apart. If Jim had been able to get a job, she would never have taken the job for the Chandler's. Jim's ego would have also not been lowered to a point he needed a woman to make him feel important again.

Petry also clearly points out how important money is to Lutie. She has seen it turn a suicide into a gun accident and seen a white policeman let a black man go because of money. She also believes that money is quite likely involved in Boot's not being drafted into the military.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

In this chapter, Lutie goes home. On the way home she thinks, "That's what's wrong. We don't have time enough or money enough to live like other people because the women have to work until they become drudges and the men stand by idle." This thought ignites her determination.

When she enters the building the atmosphere inside depresses her. On her way up the stairs she sees Mary, one of Mrs. Hedges' girls, and a young sailor. She questions why they are on the cold landing inside and Mary explains that the sailor is out of money and Mrs. Hedges won't let him come inside. It angers Lutie that the sailor's last memories will be of a dark hallway.

She finds Bub is still up with the light on when she gets inside of the apartment. She sees signs that someone else was inside of the apartment while she was out and when she questions Bub she finds out that it was Jones. She tells him not to allow anyone, regardless of who it is, into the apartment when she is not at home.

Lutie falls asleep thinking that Jones is less than human. Her thoughts turn into a nightmare as she falls asleep. Jones has the dog's mouth in the nightmare and he is chained to the building. He is calling out, "Unloose me." Mrs. Hedges points out to Lutie that she holds the key to unlock his chains and that it will be easy to do. When Lutie tries to unlock the chain, the man eats her arm. When she started screaming, other residents on the street turned into rats with buildings chained to them. They are jumping out of windows and crying, "Unloose me!"

When she wakes up from the nightmare, she feels a new resolve to get Bub into a better environment. She recalls walking along on a sunny day last spring and finding a crowd gathered around a man who had been stabbed to death. She became fixated on the man's worn out shoes and wondered what he thought when he saw all of the luxurious items in the windows. The man's sister comes up to identify him, and she is so resigned. Lutie thinks, "She had lost the ability to protest against anything - even death." When Lutie saw the incident in the newspaper, from the reporter's perception the dead man was a 'burly Negro.' Although the man was actually very thin, the reporter did not see him as an individual. He was a stereotypical threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke." The Chandler's and their friends also viewed Lutie stereotypical. She was a "wench with no morals who would be easy to come by."

After the stabbing incident, the black community lashed out. They looted and vandalized the bakery that the dead man had stolen bread from in retaliation of the white owner that stabbed the man. The streets looked as though a war was about to break loose.



Lutie saw the same resignation in the face of a man brought into the emergency room while she was trying to get a bad scrape on Bub's knee checked out. And again she saw that look on a young girl who had been attacked with a knife. She girl's expression indicated that she had been expecting something like this to happen to her.

Lutie finally goes back to sleep thinking good thoughts about singing at The Casino the following night. When she awakens, she goes to get her white blouse out of the closet and finds it crushed and hanging in a different place. When she asks Bub about it, she finds out that Jones had sent Bub out on an errand. Apparently, Jones had gone through her personal things and he had crushed her blouse in his hands during the process. She washes the blouse knowing that she will not wear it again for a very long time.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Petry uses metaphors in Lutie's nightmare, when Jones' mouth becomes that of the dog, and all of the residents become rats. Metaphors reappear, when everyone in the nightmare has a building chained to their back. The chained buildings represent the fact that they are chained to their current circumstances with little chance of being "unloosed." The fact they all become part or all animal represents the way the black race is treated as animals.

Resignation is a key theme in this chapter. Lutie does not want to give up and become resigned to the life she and Bub are currently living. The resignation she sees in others makes her angry and even more determined to succeed.

Now Lutie knows that Jones really is mentally unstable, and it is not just a figment of her imagination. She also realizes that he is obsessed with her. She now views him as dirty, and she does not want to even wear her blouse they he crushed with his hands.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Lutie is preparing to go to The Casino and Bub does not want to tell her he is afraid of being home alone in the dark. He asks if he can read while she is out, and she tells him no. "When she wasn't there he was filled with a sense of loss." "But when she was in it, it was warm and friendly and familiar." When she leaves he tries to obey her as long as possible, but the darkness terrifies him and he turns on the light. He then contemplates ways he can earn some money to help pay the electric bill without angering Lutie.

When Lutie arrives at The Casino, she wonders to herself if Bub is afraid of staying home alone. The Casino is very dreary when it is empty. "You could see all of it for what it was worth, and it was never good to see anything like that."

Boots greets her and introduces her to the other orchestra members. She can tell by the way they react that they think she is just another girl Boots has picked up, but after she sings they bow to her. When she sings she sings from her heart and gives the songs life. Boots tells her, "The job's yours, baby. All yours. Wrapped up and tied up for as long as you want it." She believes she has found a means of getting out of this situation.

While the band is taking a break Lutie has a drink with Boots. He tries to charm her, but she gives no indication whether or not she is interested in him. When the orchestra is through performing, Boots offers her a ride home, and she accepts. On their way out one of the bouncers tells Boots that Junto called and wants to see him. Boots acts distracted as he drives her home.

While Lutie is walking home from the corner where Boots dropped her off, she sees a man running from a hallway followed almost immediately by a woman shouting that the man had stolen her purse. The shouting woman does not bring others to a rescue, but instead draws angry shouts at the woman. "Go on home, old woman, 'fore I throw somp'n special down on your rusty head." Lutie thinks, "No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people."

Lutie enters her apartment building feeling triumphant. Since her night of singing was a success, she knows that she and Bub are going to get out of their current living conditions.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Petry writes this chapter mainly from Bub and Lutie's point of view, but she also provides a glimpse into Boots' thoughts. From Bub's point of view the reader finds out just how terrified he is of being alone in the dark in the apartment. The reader also finds



out how much comfort and security the boy feels in Lutie's presence. This shows that even though she has to leave him on his own a lot in order for them to survive, she is still doing a good job of parenting the boy.

The author uses Lutie's point of view to address how the street has sucked the humanity out of the people that live on it. Everyone has become resigned to live in their current circumstances. Lutie's optimism is now soaring. She believes that singing with the orchestra will finally be a way for her to get Bub into a better environment to keep the streets from claiming his humanity. Petry reveals that Boots is very interested in Lutie.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Jones is obsessed with the gold cross that Min has hanging above her bed. The cross prevents him from throwing Min out. He now thinks that he sees the cross everywhere that he looks. He believes that Min is what stands between him and Lutie.

He is restless and cannot sleep so he decides to go to the furnace room. He has spent so much time in places like the furnace room that he now finds comfort in the dark basement. Before Jones has a chance to enter the furnace room, Lutie returns from The Casino feeling triumphant. Jones believes that the look of triumph Lutie has on her face is, because she is glad to see him. He decides he will have her tonight and he begins dragging her towards the cellar door.

The wolfish dog jumps on Lutie's back, and she is screaming. Mrs. Hedges hears her screams and comes to her rescue. Mrs. Hedges tells Jones, "You done lived in basements so long you ain't human no more. You got mould growin' on you."

Mrs. Hedges fixes Lutie some hot tea to help calm her nerves. While the two of them are talking, Mrs. Hedges tells Lutie, "He ain't really responsible. He's lived in cellars so long he's kind of cellar crazy." As Lutie is leaving, Mrs. Hedges reminds her that there is a white gentleman interested in her. She also tells Jones, without Lutie hearing, that it is Junto that is interested in Lutie.

Once Lutie has lefts Mrs. Hedges' apartment, Mrs. Hedges recalls the fire and the life she was living prior to the fire. Her size and the dark color of her skin caused the white people in the employment agencies to openly stare at her with revulsion. Mrs. Hedges was forced to scrounge for food and clothing in the trash, which is how she met Junto.

She was eating chicken from a trashcan, when Junto entered her life. He asked her to help him collect bottles and cans and he would pay her for her work. This was the beginning of their business partnership. When Junto purchased his first piece of real estate, he gave her a job and an apartment in the building.

It was in this building that Mrs. Hedges became so scarred. A fire broke out, and she was badly burned. She had hoped that she would be able to buy herself a man, but now with the hideous scars she has decided that she will always be alone.

The fire is what cemented their relationship. Once Mrs. Hedges was released from the hospital, she moved into another apartment that Junto had furnished for her.

She decides she needs someone to run her errands for her, and she sees Mary walking down the street.



Mary is the beginning of her business venture, and also the beginning of Junto's. Junto speaks to people at the police precinct to assure she will not be bothered. Junto slowly and quietly obtains more real estate and he ventures into bars, dance halls, and whorehouses.

Mrs. Hedges spends most of her time sitting at her window and watching the people on the street. Watching the people gives Mrs. Hedges a good idea of what the people want and need. And, it is also good for her business.

Junto has a great admiration for Mrs. Hedges, and it seems he would like to have a more intimate relationship with her. However, Mrs. Hedges does not want anyone to ever see just how extensive her scarring is so she refuses all of his advances.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter provides the reader with an understanding of just how crazy Jones has become. His fixation with the golden cross and his obsession with Lutie are definite signs of his mental instability. To quote Mrs. Hedges comment to Lutie, he's kind of cellar crazy."

The author uses flashbacks in this chapter to demonstrate how strong the bond is between Mrs. Hedges and Mr. Junto and to show how their partnership began and then grew with time.

These flashbacks are also essential in understanding the character formation of Mrs. Hedges. The reader learns how racism and the fire in the apartment played a major part in Mrs. Hedges current state of mind. Jones' actions towards Lutie and his thoughts about Min are clear indications that he views women merely as sex objects.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Before he goes inside to talk to Junto, Boots contemplates what it could be that is so important it cannot wait until morning. He decides that it must have to do with Junto helping him dodge the draft by arranging an unnecessary surgical procedure.

Boots recalls the day he talked to Junto about the draft. Junto was questioning him as to why he did not want to be drafted and Boots explained, "Them white guys in the army are fighting for something. I ain't got anything to fight for. If I wasn't working for you I'd be changing sheets on Pullman berths. And learning fresh all over again every day that I didn't belong anywhere. Not even here in this country where I was born."

Boots is astonished to learn that it is not the draft dodging that Junto wants to discuss. Junto wants Boots to keep his hands off of Lutie. He wants her for himself. Boots has to contemplate this for a moment before he agrees.

Boots recalls his life before he met Junto. He had been a homeless piano player who worked for food and a few dollars in places that he despised. The people in the places he played were not really listening to his music. The white people treated him more like an animal than like a person. He eventually got a job on The Pullman, but he was still treated as though he were inhuman.

When he came home from The Pullman one night and found Jubilee sleeping with a white man, he was so full of anger he wanted to kill her. But he decided she was not worth spending the rest of his life behind bars or being sentenced to death.

Even though he knows he does not love Lutie, he really wants to have her for himself. But he also knows that Junto is responsible for the life he now lives and that Junto can put an end to his luxurious lifestyle. He decides Lutie is not worth giving up everything else. He agrees he will not pay Lutie for singing and he will try to persuade Lutie to show Junto some interest.

Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, the author reveals a great deal about Boots and about Junto. Through flashbacks Petry explains how Boots came to work for Junto. The flashbacks also explain how Boots' passionate hate for white people developed. The reader is given more insight into Junto's character. The deep bond between him and Mrs. Hedges is confirmed when Boots recalls the first time he went to the apartment on 116th Street with Junto and the fond way Junto speaks of Mrs. Hedges.

The depth of Junto's control and power is proven through Boots' contemplation about Junto's request for Lutie. The reader is shown that Junto controls most of the

businesses in Harlem and Junto also controls a lot of the lives in Harlem. If he chooses, Junto can destroy Boots' orchestra career. He is also controlling Lutie's life by keeping Boots from paying her for singing with the band. Even though the people that know Junto do not really view him the same as they view other white people, it is ironic that he has so much control over their lives.

Boots and Junto's conversation about Lutie are a great example of the problems that Lutie faces concerning her gender. She is viewed by the two men as nothing more than a sex object to be possessed.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Jones returns to his apartment filled with rage. His anger is first directed towards Mrs. Hedges for interfering with him and Lutie, and it is then directed towards Min, because he knows she must have let the dog out. He believes if the dog had not jumped on Lutie's back she would not have screamed and Mrs. Hedges would not have gotten involved.

His anger again focuses on Mrs. Hedges. He now knows that the reason he could not have her arrested when he reported her whorehouse to the police was because of the woman's ties to Junto.

Jones' thoughts are so disjointed that he cannot stay focuses on one through without going off to another one. While he thinks about the way Lutie had screamed, he tries to explain it to himself that she was just frightened, but he finally settles on the thought that she is in love with a white man and black men are not good enough for her.

He contemplates ways to get even with her and decides that he will have to do it through Bub, because he cannot reach Lutie herself. The next morning, while in the kitchen, he finds a vial of vibrant scarlet liquid. The smells of the liquid and then believes he smells it in his coffee cup and in the coffee pot. He recalls the candles and the cross and confronts Min with the vial. Min tells him that it is heart medicine. He insists she keep it in her room instead of in the kitchen.

Jones goes outside for a breath of fresh air and while out there he sees the postman coming. The sight of the postman ignites a plan to get even with Lutie. He decides that he will persuade Bub to steal mail from mailboxes. He was going to get Min, as well. When Min arrives home, he is unusually friendly with her. After supper, he asks her to go down and have a mailbox key made for him. She agrees and runs the errand for him. The following day, Jones approaches Bub with his plan. He tells the boy that he can get paid for helping the police catch crooks that are using the mail for their crimes. Bub is uncomfortable with the idea and tells Jones he is not interested.

Chapter 12 Analysis

If the author had chosen to write this chapter from a point of view other than Jones' one might be lead to believe that Jones is an evil man because of his attack on Lutie and because of his plan for revenge. However, Petry chose to write it from Jones' point of view.

Written from his perspective, the reader is provided with even further proof that the man is mentally unstable. He is unable to direct his anger at one person because of his

disjointed thoughts. Yet, he is still clever enough to develop a plan of revenge and draw Min into it.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

It is intermission at The Casino and Lutie and Boots are sitting at a table together. She asks him about her salary and he tells her that she is just singing for the experience. When she questions him further he tells her that Junto owns The Casino and that he does not think she is ready yet. All of her hopes are now crushed. She gets up to leave and Boots gives her some rhinestone earrings from Junto. While she has no interest in Boots, she does not understand his sudden disinterest in her.

When she enters her apartment building, she sees all the grime and dinginess of the building. Just last night she had been blind to it. She feels beaten, yet she is determined not to become resigned to live there forever.

The next morning Lutie scolds Bub for sleeping with the light on again. He asks her if she is mad at him, because it seems that for the past week she has been cold and hard towards him. She explains that she is not, but she is concerned about the amount of money they are spending. Over the next week she tries to quit discussing money with Bub, but she finds herself scolding him for things that seem wasteful to her.

One evening on her way home from work she sees a newspaper ad on the subway. The advertisement is for training singers. She decides to visit the Crosse School for Singers. Mr. Crosse auditions her and tells her that he can get her a job making about \$75.00 a week. When she asks about the catch, he tells her there is none. Then he explains that she will need about six weeks of training that will cost her \$125.00. Lutie knows she cannot come up with that amount of money and tells Mr. Crosse. He tries to persuade her to let him see her a couple of times a week in return for free lessons. She threw ink on the man and left.

On her way home from the singing school she is engulfed in hatred towards the white race. Her experience with Junto, Mr. Crosse, and the Chandler family only reaffirmed how difficult life is for a black female. She thinks, "Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs."

When she gets off of the subway, Bub is there waiting for her. He again asks if she is angry with him, and she again reassures him that she is not. When they get inside of the apartment she burns her hand while cooking dinner and all the hatred and frustration that has been building up comes out. The next day Bub visits Jones and tells him he has changed his mind and he does want to earn some extra money.



Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter is written from Lutie's point of view, and it demonstrates how difficult it is for a black female to have financial stability. Although her gender is as large of an obstacle as her race, she believes her skin color is what continuously holds her back.

Although Lutie tries to reassure Bub she is not angry with him, her worry over their finances is also taking its toll on Bub. Although he is apprehensive about taking the mail from the mailboxes, he decides that they need the money.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

It is thirty minutes before the children leave and Miss Rinner is anxious for the day to be over. Miss Rinner believes the smell in the school is the smell of colored people, and she despises the odor. She believes she can even smell it in her own apartment. The children disgust her, and she is afraid of them and their families.

Miss Rinner does not try to teach the children. She simply tries to maintain order. She is not expected to do anything further with the children. A few minutes before class is over, Bub claims he needs to use the restroom. Miss Rinner tells him no at first, but the thought of the mess he might make if he really does have to use the restroom encourages her to change her mind.

Bub is thankful to be out of class early. He has some money in his pocket that he earned from the mail detective work and he plans to buy a gift for Lutie. He rushes across the street to the candy store. While he is buying her a pair of earrings, Gray Cap and five other boys enter the store. Bub knows the boys will take his change and the earrings if he does not get away from them so he runs. He manages to lose the boys and decides to do some of his detective work in one of the apartment buildings in the area.

While inside of the building, an elderly woman strikes up a conversation with him. Bub feels really bad that he told two lies to the woman without hesitating and he thinks that he may have to quit this job, because he knows Lutie will disapprove. He stops in three more apartment buildings before heading home.

He is so lost in his thoughts about the excitement of his work that he does not see Gray Cap standing in front of his apartment building until it is too late. Gray Cap and his friends surround Bub and pick a fight with him. Bub ends up with a bloody nose before it is all over. Mrs. Hedges is the one that puts an end to the scuffle. She talks to Gray Cap from her window and sends him on his way.

Bub enters the building and gives Jones the mail he has collected today. His conscience causes him to ask about putting the letters back when the police are through with them and Jones tells the boy not to worry about it. The other people do return the mail. Bub then heads out to do more work.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter focuses on two key themes. One theme addressed is the problems a young boy Bub's age has to deal with on a regular basis. The other key theme is Good vs. Evil. The two encounters Bub has with Gray Cap are typical examples of problems a young boy in Harlem must face. Gray Cap is the type of boy that Lutie worries about



with Bub being left alone. She fears Bub will be drawn into something that will prevent him from leaving the streets. She is fighting so hard to keep the street from grabbing hold of Bub and taking away his chances for a decent future.

Petry demonstrates that Lutie's parenting skills are good, but there is a chance that the street may supersede her parenting. The author uses two incidents in this chapter to show that Bub has a conscience. The first incident is when Bub feels bad for telling two lies so easily. The second incident is when Bub shows concern about the mail being returned to the people.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Min walks outside of the apartment to go to work, and she looks up at the sky. "It is the color of lead - gray, sullen, lowering." "Last winter there had been more mornings where the sky was a clear, deep blue and the sun spread a pink glow over the street." She was content last winter to no longer have to worry about paying rent.

Now, Jones has changed and the changes have made her life miserable. The apartment seems to have shrunk, but her big lonely bed seems to have grown in size. It did not feel right for her to sleep alone.

She contemplates returning to see David, The Prophet, but realizes that she no longer wants to stay in the apartment with Jones. Since Lutie first showed up and paid her deposit, Jones has not treated Min the same. His complete lack of interest hurts her deeply.

She makes up her mind that she is going to move today rather than go to work, and she is not going to tell Jones she is leaving. She asks Mrs. Hedges to send her a pushcart man if she sees one. Mrs. Hedges asks, but Min does not tell her that she is leaving.

When Min goes back inside the apartment Jones is in there tearing up some letters. He believes she is spying on him and he becomes enraged at her presence and attacks her. She makes the sign of the cross in front of her body and he backs off and leaves the apartment. While she is sitting there remembering how poorly Jones has treated, she thinks, "Funny how she got to believe that not having to pay rent was so important, and it really wasn't. Having room to breathe in meant much more."

She notices that the letters he was tearing up belong across the street. Min believes that Jones must be doing something crooked and he thinks she knows about it. He will kill her if she does not leave. She makes sure that she does not take anything that does not belong to her, and she cleans up everything before she leaves.

Just before the pushcart man arrives she thinks, "I musta known all along I was going, Never even took my hat and coat off." She bargains with the pushcart man. She places her door key on the desk as a final farewell to the apartment. She decides to say goodbye to Mrs. Hedges, because leaving without saying goodbye to someone just doesn't feel right to her. As Min and the pushcart man head down the street, Min thinks that a woman doesn't stand much of a chance alone. She begins an insinuating conversation with the pushcart man.



Chapter 15 Analysis

When Petry describes the sky in this chapter, she is also describing Min's living situation. She compares the winter mornings from last year to the winter mornings of this year. Last year she was content and the skies were brighter.

Petry uses Min's point of view for this chapter. The chapter ends leaving the reader uncertain as to whether or not Min is going to finally survive on her own, or if she is already beginning the vicious cycle of being abused and taken advantage of by men.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Every time Jones looks at Min, he thinks about Lutie. He now hates Lutie. He goes outside for a breath of fresh air and sees that the sun has come out. Mrs. Hedges tells him from her window that Min is gone. Unsure whether or not she is telling the truth, he enters his apartment. He knows right away that she is gone. The room seems deserted.

He tries to rearrange the furniture because of the big empty space where Min's table once sat, but nothing feels right. "He hadn't realized how familiar he had become with all the detail of that table until it was gone." When he goes into the bedroom to make sure she did not take anything that did not belong to her. The closet is so clean it appears that she had never been there. He thinks that he needs to put something in the closet.

At first, he believes Min left the cross, but he realizes it is just an outline of the cross where it had hung. He begins seeing crosses everywhere. "Min had done this to him. And if he went on like this, seeing crosses all about him and never being sure whether they were real or figments of his imagination, he would go to pieces."

He goes back outside away from Mrs. Hedges' sight and watches the women walking down the street. None of the women so much as glance in his direction. He wishes he could join in the conversations of the men on the street, but he never fits in. They all end up wandering away from him. While he is standing there, two men approach him.

The two men are post-office investigators. Jones slyly suggests that Bub could be their culprit and he agrees to point Bub out to them. When he does, the two men put Bub in the car and drive off with him. The people on the street are unsettled with the incident. "And each one of them is left with an uneasy sense of loss, of defeat."

When Lutie arrives home, Mrs. Hedges informs her that there are two detectives waiting for her, because apparently Bub has been stealing mail. The two detectives tell Lutie that Bub has been taken to the Children's Shelter, and she can see him tomorrow. They leave her with the documentation.

As she walks back down the stairs, she thinks, "The women work because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families." Lutie begins to cry and to shout. People passing her on the stairway have seen papers like the ones she is holding. They know what it means, "a symbol of doom."

When Lutie finally stops crying, she leaves the building and goes in search of a lawyer. The attorney listens to her case and wonders why she does not know that she does not need a lawyer. But, he is not one to kick money away so he tells her that he can help Bub for \$200.00. He plans to tell the judge that Bub is too young to have moral sense



and with Lutie working he is often left alone on the street. "Any place where there is slum and dirt and poverty you find crime."

Chapter 16 Analysis

This chapter is written from the point of view of Jones first, then Lutie, and finally the attorney Lutie visits.

Although Jones wanted to kick Min out, one may speculate that he already misses her. The description Petry gives of the missing table and the empty closet are symbols of the emptiness of the apartment without Min's presence.

The people on the street are unsettled when Bub is taken away by the two white men. "And each one of them is left with an uneasy sense of loss, of defeat." Their sense of loss and defeat is not just for Bub, but symbolizes loss and defeat for their race. The street has yet again destroyed the future of one of their own.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Lutie is walking around Harlem thinking about \$200.00. She is trying to find a way to come up with the money, but the people that she knows gets money in small driblets. She did not even own anything she could sell for that amount of money. She finally thinks about Boots Smith and decides that she will make him loan her the money.

She looks him up in the phonebook and gives him a call. He was sleeping when the phone woke him and he does not comprehend what she is saying to him, but he tells her he wants to see her and invites her to his apartment.

When she arrives at his apartment, her only reaction to the lavish building is, "if Boots could afford to live here, then lending her two hundred dollars would present no problem to him."

While telling him about the situation, she realizes that she had never told him she had a son. Boots agrees to loan her the money and tells her to come back tomorrow night to get it, because he does not have that much money on him. Lutie leaves thinking that it was way too easy to get him to agree to loan her the money.

When she arrives at the apartment, it feels so empty without Bub in it. Neither the lights nor the sound of the radio do anything to change the empty atmosphere of the apartment. She contemplates what Bub's life will be like now that he will have a record. She knows that he will end up being sent to reform school for even the slightest infraction.

She decides that the two of them will have to move away from here. She will have to get a job working for a family that will allow Bub to live with her in the home. She knows it is not the best life for Bub, but it is the best that she can provide.

She climbs into bed in the dark, empty apartment. "When people are alone, they are always afraid of the dark, she thought. They keep trying to see where they are and the blackness around them keeps them from seeing. It was like trying to look into the future. There was no way of knowing what threat lurked just beyond tomorrow or the next day, and not knowing is what makes everyone afraid."

The next morning, she awakens feeling rushed. She has temporarily forgotten about Bub's situation and thinks she needs to get his white shirt ironed for assembly at school. She realizes quickly that he is not going to school, and she is going to visit him at the Children's Shelter instead of going to work. Outside, it is dark and grim.

At the shelter, Lutie fills out the paperwork and sits down to wait. She notices that there are three women that are not colored. She thinks that perhaps the problem has more to do with being poor than with being colored. The silence in the room is bothersome.



She is only able to visit with Bub for a short while. She has just enough time to reassure him that she will be back each day, until he goes before the judge on Friday. When she leaves him, she tries occupying herself by cleaning and scouring the apartment. However, the deadly silence is too much for her, so she goes out. The silence seems to follow her everywhere. She tries watching a movie, but leaves in the middle of it. She has her hair shampooed, but even the beauty salon is too silent.

Chapter 17 Analysis

The author uses the description of being afraid while alone in the dark as a metaphor for being uncertain of what the future holds. Petry describes the dead silence that seems to be following Lutie around. The dead silence cannot be shut out. The silence actually represents the loss of Bub's presence. Regardless of where Lutie is at or what she is doing, she feels the loss of Bub. Again, the author matches the state of the weather with the current situation. Both the sky and Lutie's predicament are dark and grim.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

When she arrives at her apartment building, Mrs. Hedges again mentions the nice white gentleman, Mr. Junto. Knowing that Junto is also the reason her singing career did not work out, she is infuriated.

Inside of her apartment, she imagines the deadly silence is Junto. She even imagines him sitting there. She contemplates waiting until tomorrow to see Boots. "Perhaps by tomorrow she would be free of this mounting, steadily increasing anger and this hysterical fear that made her see things that didn't exist, made her feel things that weren't there." But, she is afraid if she waits Boots will change his mind.

When she arrives at Boots' apartment, she is uncertain whether Junto is really there or if she is again seeing things. Boots introduces Lutie to Junto and then takes her in the bedroom to talk to her. In the bedroom she feels as though the deadly silence has followed her here. Boots tells her that Junto will give her the money if she just agrees to be nice to Junto. Lutie is so full of rage and hate. She wants to hum a tune and kill a man at the same time. When she tells Boots to get Junto out of the apartment, the rage in her own voice startles her.

When Boots asks Junto to leave, Junto asks him if this is something he has planned. Boots tells him no and instructs him to come back around 10:00. But, Boots has decided he wants to have Lutie for himself before Junto gets her.

Once Junto is gone, Boots tries talking to Lutie. Lutie seems to have no interest in talking. She just wants to leave, but her anger prevents her from moving. When Boots makes sexual advances towards her she begins shouting at him. Her shouts result in his slapping her and threatening to beat her and force her to have a relationship with himself and with Junto.

Lutie grabs a heavy iron candlestick off of the fireplace mantel and strikes Boots in the head with it. Her anger takes complete control of her actions. She begins repeatedly striking Boots in the head with the candlestick until he is dead.

When Lutie tries to leave the apartment, she finds the door locked, and she has to fish the key out of Boots pocket. She opens his wallet and sees it is full of money, and she takes half of it. The she realizes that the two hundred dollars will not help Bub now. The courts will not parole him into the care of a murderer, and he will always be expected to turn into a criminal since his mother is a murderer. She decides she has no choice other than to leave and never return. She purchases a one-way train ticket to Chicago and thinks, "Yes, a one-way ticket. I've had one since the day I was born."



Chapter 18 Analysis

This chapter reveals that no matter how much hard work and careful planning, Lutie really never had a chance of achieving her goal because of her race, gender, and financial situation. She has been doomed from the beginning. Petry shows that Lutie finally realizes this fact, and she is giving up when she purchases her ticket to Chicago. "Yes, a one-way ticket. I've had one since the day I was born."

When Lutie is beating Boots, he is no longer just Boots. He now represents everything that she hates. He is the street. He is Jones. He is the white race. After Boots is dead, Lutie gets the money she needs from his wallet. The irony of the situation is that now the money will not help Bub proving once again that she has been doomed from the beginning.



Characters

Lutie Johnson

Lutie is a young, single parent living in Harlem, New York on 116th Street in the late 1940s. She is trying her best to beat the odds and make a better life for herself and her son. She desperately wants to get the two of them out of the poverty and violence in which they live. She believes that with hard work and careful planning The Street will not beat them the way it has beaten so many others of her race.

Lutie works as a civil servant clerk. It took her a lot of studying and hard work to get the job, but she defied the odds and managed to do something other than perform menial labor for white people. Lutie's job in Connecticut played a large part in her drive to succeed. While working for the Chandler family she came to believe that if you work hard enough and plan well enough you can do anything.

To better understand Lutie, the author demonstrates her history through flashbacks and memories. One flashback explains how Lutie and Bub ended up living on their own. Lutie's husband, Jim, could not find work so she decided to take a job working for the Chandler's in Connecticut. With Lutie being away from home for such long periods of time, Jim became involved with another woman. Lutie returned home to find the woman in her home cooking for Jim and Bub. Lutie called a moving truck and moved herself and Bub in with her father. Lutie worked hard and saved money to get Bub out of the bad influence of Pop's girlfriend, Lil, and the other boarders living at Pop's. Once she had enough money saved up, she and Bub moved to 116th Street.

Lutie's grandmother played a large part in raising her and instilled in her a strong sense of morals and values. Unfortunately, she also filled Lutie's mind full of racist ideas. Her grandmother's ideas, and Lutie's experience with Jim and Pops, caused Lutie to have a strong dislike for white people. Her dislike of them only grew with her life experiences. It seemed that there was always a white person controlling everything and preventing her and all other members of her race from living a prosperous life.

Bub

Bub is Lutie's eight-year-old son. He is a good child who is always eager to please his mother. Since Lutie has to spend so much time working to make ends meet, he is often alone. Lutie worries about the influence the street may have on the boy, and she is constantly striving to get him into a safer environment.

Since money is so hard for them to come by, Lutie is constantly talking to him about saving. He tries to earn some money on his own, and it infuriates Lutie, because she is afraid that if he is shining shoes at eight-years-old he will be performing low paying labor jobs throughout his life. When he finds another way to earn some money, it lands him in some serious trouble.



When Lutie is home the apartment feels safe and more homelike. However, he does not like being in the apartment alone. It frightens him. He is especially terrified when he is alone in the dark. He becomes somewhat streetwise, but remains innocent throughout the novel. Sometimes in Lutie's absence he does things with Jones, the building superintendent.

Jones, The Super

Jones is the apartment building superintendent. He has spent most of his life working and living alone. Being alone so much has made it difficult for him to interact with people and made him, what Mrs. Hedges calls, 'cellar crazy.'

He becomes enraged easily, and spends much of his time fantasizing. He begins seeing and imagining things. Jones becomes obsessed with Lutie and he befriends Bub in an effort to get closer to Lutie. Throughout the first half of the novel, he wants Lutie to belong to him, but later on he decides he hates her and he seeks ways to get revenge.

Min

Min is the woman who lives with Jones. She has lived with many men throughout her life. She believes that a woman cannot make it on her own. She is not really happy with Jones, but she feels secure until Lutie enters the picture.

Throughout the novel, she is worried that Jones is going to throw her out. She knows he is infatuated with Lutie due to the way he has been treating her since Lutie first showed up at the building. She finally reaches a point where she has had enough, and she chooses to leave him. She feels that she is not really living. She is simply surviving. She turns to Mrs. Hedges for help a couple of times.

Mrs. Hedges

Mrs. Hedges lives in the same apartment building as Lutie and Bub. She spends her days sitting at her window and looking out at the people on the street. Some of the residents see her as a nosey busybody, but Min sees her as wise and worldly. Mrs. Hedges seems to have the answers to most things. It sometimes seems she can read minds, but she has actually just learned to read people very well.

She runs a whorehouse from her apartment and everyone knows it. She has strong ties with Junto. Therefore, she has protection from the police as far as her business goes. Mrs. Hedges and Junto are partners of sort.



Junto

Junto is a white man in Harlem. Everyone in Harlem knows he owns Junto's Bar and Grill, but they are unaware that he owns many other businesses in Harlem. Junto sees people for who they are on the inside rather than their color. Although Mrs. Hedges is quite unattractive, it seems the he loves her. He and Mrs. Hedges met long ago, and they have a very strong relationship. Junto is attracted to Lutie and he seeks the help of Mrs. Hedges and Boots Smith.

Boots Smith

Boots Smith is a young black man who plays in an orchestra. He seems to have more than enough money to throw around and he owes his success to Junto. Junto has given him jobs and he pays Boots well. Junto also assisted Boots in dodging the draft.

Lutie gains Boot's attention when he hears her singing while she stands at the bar at Junto's Bar and Grill. He finds her attractive and he likes her voice so he invites her to tryout for his band. Even though Boots is very attracted to Lutie, he agrees to help Junto become involved with her.

Granny

Granny passed away before the novel began. However, she played a significant part. Granny is the one who basically raised Lutie. She instilled a strong sense of morals and values in Lutie. However, Granny also filled Lutie's mind with old wives's tales that often pop into Lutie's mind. Even the tales she does not believe still surface on occasion and fill her with wonder.

Mrs Chandler

Mrs. Chandler is the very wealthy woman that Lutie works for in Connecticut. At times it feels as though Mrs. Chandler and Lutie are friends, but Mrs. Chandler always makes sure it is known that Lutie works for her. Mrs. Chandler's mother and friends seem to believe that black women always want to sleep with white men. It bothers Lutie that they judge her without really knowing her.

Jim

Jim is married to Lutie, although they have been separated since Lutie worked for the Chandler family. Jim finds it impossible to find work that will pay any type of decent wages and he feels like a failure to his family. Lutie being away for such long periods of time and Jim's feelings of worthlessness are the key factors in him becoming involved with another woman.



Pop

Pop is Lutie's father. He makes moonshine to earn a little money and he rents out rooms in his home so that he can make ends meet. He enjoys partying. Pop's partying caused Lutie, Jim and Bub some problems. The family had taken in foster children to have a little extra money and when Lutie and Jim were out he had parties. Neighbours complained and the state came and took the children away.

Lil

Lil is Pop's girlfriend. She is one of the main reasons that Lutie and Bub moved to 116th Street. Lutie feared the influence Lil might have with Bub. Lil liked to drink, smoke, and wear clothing that an eight-year-old boy did not need to see. Lil would give Bub sips of gin, and she would get him to light her cigarettes.

Miss Rinner

Miss Rinner is Bub's white schoolteacher. She both despises and hates the black children and their families. She feels the children are hopeless, and she spends most of the class time simply trying to maintain order.

David, The Prophet

David is a root doctor. Min visits his store looking for something to keep Jones from throwing her out. While David sells potions and such at his store, what he best provides the people who visit him is hope and the belief that things will turn out as they wish.



Objects/Places

The Street

The Street in the novel is 116th Street, but it could be any street where the residents are poor and beaten down by life's circumstances. The Street represents the living conditions for the majority of the black people living in Harlem during the 1940s.

Junto's Bar and Grill

Junto's Bar and Grill is one of the few places where the people in the Harlem area can find a certain measure of escape. Junto's place serves as both a social club and a meeting place.

White Blouse

Lutie feels violated when she finds her white blouse in her closet has been crushed by Jones. She washes it immediately, but knows she will not be able to bring herself to wear it for a long time.

The Casino

The Casino is a club owned by Junto. Boots and his orchestra perform there, and it is where Lutie sings with the orchestra.

Kitchen in Connecticut

The kitchen in Connecticut plays a significant part of Lutie's life. While working for the Chandler family, Lutie developed an optimistic outlook that with hard work and careful planning she can succeed in her life.

Min's Table

The table is a very large ornate table with intricately carved claw feet. It was given to Min by a white woman that employed Min as a maid.

Apartment

The apartment on 116th Street is small, airless and dingy. The only window in the apartment overlooks backyards that have turned into junk piles. The apartment demonstrates the environment that poor black people must live.



Boots' Car

Boots' car is long, shiny and expensive looking. Driving the car makes Boots feel powerful. It makes him feel less inferior to the white people.

Shoeshine Box

Bub and Jones build Bub a shoeshine box so that Bub can earn a little money to help out Lutie. The shoeshine box angers Lutie, because she sees it as the beginning of a life of labor for meager wages.

Gold Cross

David provides Min with a gold cross, which she hangs at the head of her bed. It prevents Jones from throwing her out and from harming her physically. Jones imagines the cross everywhere that he looks.

The Dog

Jones has an old police dog that he often kicks. The dog is old in appearance with his worn coat, and ribs outlined against his skin.

Mrs. Hedges Bandana

Mrs. Hedges always wears a bandana around her head. She wears it to hide the scarring she received when an apartment building she lived in caught fire. She refuses to wear a wig, and she has resigned herself to live with the fact she will never have a man in her life. After the fire, she can't even buy herself a man.

The Basement

The basement in the apartment building is a place that Jones spends a lot of his time. He has spent much of his life living in small dark places such as the basement, and it provides him with an odd sense of warmth and comfort.

Social Concerns And Themes

The Street, Petry's best-known work, is often compared to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). While there are similarities between the two novels, particularly in the portrayal of the economic plight of African Americans in northern cities, *The Street* moves in different directions. Both in its thematic concerns and its depiction of a black female protagonist, the novel is unique and significant.

Petry was ahead of her time in focusing on what are considered contemporary social concerns: latchkey children, single parenting, and the way the politics of sex establishes an unending maze of oppression. *The Street* examines the unique role of the African American woman in maintaining sanity amid the triple threat of classism, sexism, and racism.

The novel presents the black woman as the center of the family and the community, as the person who shoulders the moral and ethical responsibilities of a race, and discusses how her relations with whites shapes the nature of interracial dynamics.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Street is often described as a female version of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Lutie Johnson has been called a female *Bigger Thomas*. Petry's first novel is also seen as an example of the naturalism characteristic of twentieth-century African-American fiction.

But to see Petry as a lesser Richard Wright is to slight her achievement.

The Street protests the racism and sexism in the urban North. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is another novel of womanist protest that has an African-American female protagonist. But Hurston's protagonist, Janie Crawford, is rural and southern and transcends her condition through self-discovery and self-definition. The Street presents a poor northern urban protagonist and does not go beyond protest. While Janie protests her condition as black and female and eventually transcends her status, Lutie's story is one of protest and defeat, and she eventually flees the life on 116th Street. Lutie is sexually pursued by both black and white men, and it is this lust based on the conception of African-American females as fair sexual game which ultimately destroys Lutie. Indeed *The Street* is the first novel written by an African-American woman that details the triple oppression of African-American women — race, gender, and class. The novel is a pioneering rather than a derivative work.



Themes

Money

The entire novel is based on Lutie's struggle to overcome poverty and to become financially stable. Lutie has two strikes against her from birth. She is black, and she is a woman.

During the time the novel was written, jobs for black males are very difficult to obtain. When there is work for a black male, the salary is not substantial enough for him to provide for himself and his family. The black females have better luck obtaining jobs, but their absence from the home often leaves their husbands feeling emasculated and eventually results in a broken home.

In order to survive financially, Bub is forced to stay home alone because they cannot afford a baby-sitter. Bub realizes that Lutie must work, so he attempts to be strong. However, he is often frightened at night and sleeps with the lights on. When he does sleep with the lights on, he tries to figure out ways he can earn money to help Lutie.

The shoeshine box is his first attempt to earn money, but it angers Lutie. She does not want Bub to begin a life of labor for meager wages, because she fears if he starts out that way he will end that way. His second attempt is when Jones tricks him into stealing mail from other apartment buildings. It is through the second attempt to earn money that any dreams of a better future for him are crushed.

Junto uses money in an effort to gain Lutie's attention. He instructs Boots not to pay her for singing in hopes that her desperation and need will bring her to Junto. This plan only sparks more anger and hatred in Lutie. Eventually, money brings her again to Boots and Junto when she seeks an attorney to get Bub out of trouble.

Racism

One of the biggest obstacles that Lutie faces is racism. The color of her skin has prevented her from advancing any further than the tiny apartment on 116th Street.

She comes to believe that the streets are "the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place."

Petry uses the rich Connecticut family, the Chandlers, to contrast the differences between wealthy white people and poor Negroes. Their lifestyle is simply unobtainable for a Negro during that point in time. Mrs. Chandler clearly puts Lutie in her place as an employee and not a friend.

Through experience with Pop and Jim, Lutie determines that African-Americans are dependent on whites for employment. This dependence makes it impossible for them to



ever be on the same level. She begins to blame the white race for the hardships she is enduring.

The author also demonstrates how lacking the public school system is in advancing the black students. She uses Bub's teacher, Miss Rinner, to show the typical view of a teacher in a black school. Miss Rinner actually feels fear, hate and disgust with her students and their parents.

Gender

Since Lutie is a woman, her chances for success are much less than that of a man.

Being a good mother is very important to her, but since she is a single parent she has little choice but to work and leave some of the care of Bub to the street.

Her circumstances are not unlike many of the other black women who live on the street. She sees all the other women coming home at the end of a hard days work while their children play on the street and their husbands lounge around looking for a replacement.

Men, whether white or black, seem to find black females as sexual objects. This is clearly demonstrated through the white men who ogle Lutie on the train, through Jones, through Boots, and through Junto. Jones loses all interest in Min and begins fantasizing about Lutie since Lutie is younger and has a more attractive figure. At one point, Jones tries to take Lutie down to the basement to have sex with her, but Mrs. Hedges interferes with his plans. Neither Boots nor Mrs. Hedges can understand Lutie's lack of interest in Junto because they both believe Lutie will have it made if she treats Junto nicely. Boots also eventually tries to rape Lutie.

Min's relationship with Jones is one of security rather than love and happiness. Min's past relationships have been similar. Her previous "husbands" abused her, took her money, and eventually left her offering nothing in return. Min believes the chances of a woman surviving alone on the street are minimal. However, after visiting David, The Prophet, she finally feels secure enough to leave Jones. Petry suggests Min is going to go through the cycle again when she strikes up a suggestive conversation with the pushcart man.

Style

Points of View

The Street is a classic example of Petry's naturalistic talent. Petry illuminates the anger, frustration, and resignation felt by Negroes during World War II.

The story is written in the third person omniscient point of view. Although Lutie is the main character in the novel, Petry provides powerful insight into the lives of Bub, Min, Jones, Mrs. Hedges, and Boots. Petry also provides the readers with a glimpse into the thoughts and emotions of other characters such as Mrs. Rinner. Each character's point of view weaves together with the others to better show what a devastating impact racism, poverty, and gender had during that timeframe.

The adult male characters in the story show what little respect they hold for women. They see the women as little more than sex objects. The women in the story show how their past experiences and current circumstances makes it virtually impossible for a black woman to ever achieve anything more than what they have managed to achieve thus far.

Mrs. Chandler's friends and Mrs. Rinner demonstrate how their stereotypical views impact the lives of black people, whether male or female. The book is written for adult reading. There are a few situations inappropriate for younger readers.

Setting

The main setting for the novel is Harlem, New York in the late 1940s. World War II has some impact on the characters, but segregation, racism, poverty, and male chauvinism are the prevailing themes.

Lutie and Bub's tiny apartment, Jones' apartment, the basement, Mrs. Hedges apartment, the stairwell in the apartment building on 116th Street, and the street itself are where most of the novel's settings take place. Through these locations, Petry provides a realistic view of the living conditions of the poor black people.

Other key places in the novel include Junto's Bar and Grill, The Casino, Boots' apartment, the house in Connecticut, and Bub's school. Junto's Bar and Grill and The Casino are places where Lutie has a great surge of optimism that gives way to defeat, when Junto tells Boots not to pay Lutie for singing. Boots' apartment is where all of Lutie's hopes and dreams are shattered.

The house in Connecticut is used by Petry to contrast the lifestyles of wealthy white people and the poverty stricken black people. It is also a place where Petry demonstrates the impact of subtle racism. Bub's school is used to demonstrate an even greater impact of racism.



Language and Meaning

When Petry describes the weather and character's surroundings, the descriptions also apply to the state of mind the character is in. For example, in Chapter 15 Min walks outside and finds the sky "the color of lead - gray, sullen, lowering." This fits her current frame of mind perfectly. She now realizes that the sense of security is not worth the way she is currently living her life. However, in Chapter 16 when Jones goes outside shortly after Min came inside, "the sun had come out." Min had gotten out of a situation in which she was unhappy. Her sun was beginning to shine again.

In Chapter 1, Petry describes the wind as if it is alive and is trying to prevent people from being outdoors. To do so, she uses words and phrases normally associated with human beings such as, "It found," "Fingering its way," "It even took time to," and "It did everything."

The author uses language suitable for an adult audience, and it is very easy to understand. She also uses the appropriate dialect for the characters being portrayed. For example, in Chapter 9 a woman has just had her purse stolen and people are shouting down at her from their windows, "Go on home, old woman, 'fore I throw somp'n special down on your rusty head."

Structure

The novel consists of 18 chapters averaging in size at about 30 pages. The first chapter begins with Lutie going to look at the tiny apartment on 116th Street and, With the exception of a few flashbacks, each chapter thereafter progresses ahead slowly until the final chapter where Lutie boards the train to Chicago.

The majority of the chapters are written from Lutie's point of view, but Petry does write from the point of view of other characters. For example, Chapter 4 switches from Lutie's point of view to Jones' point of view. This chapter allows the reader to see that Lutie is not imagining things with Jones. The man really is disturbed in his thinking. Another example is Chapter 5, which is written from Min's point of view. This chapter is significant for several reasons. It gives the readers a picture of Mrs. Hedges other than from Jones and from Lutie. The chapter also gives a classic example of the insecurities faced by back women during that time.

The first flashback is in Chapter 2. Lutie is on a train and the advertisement of a sparkling kitchen causes her to recall working for the Chandler family in Connecticut. This flashback is important for two reasons. It shows that working for the family sparked a drive in Lutie to succeed, and it explains how Lutie and Jim separated.

In Chapter 7, there is a flashback to the time when Jim and Lutie took in state children for the money. The readers learn that Lutie felt partially responsible for the state removing the children from her home. This sense of guilt is what sparked her to go and work for the Chandler family.

One final example is in Chapter 10, where Petry uses a flashback to explain how Mrs. Hedges and Junto met. This chapter further explains how their tight bond formed.



Quotes

"It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man."

Chapter 2, Pg 33

"anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough." Chapter 2, Pg 41

"Dear Lutie: You better come home. Jim's been carrying on with another woman. Pop."

Chapter 2, Pg 52

"having solved one problem, there was always a new one cropping up to take its place."

Chapter 3, Pg 59

"Lutie didn't believe it, but like a lot of things she didn't believe, it cropped up suddenly out of nowhere to leave her wondering and staring at the brilliant scarlet color of the meat." Chapter 3, Pg 61

"I'm young and strong, there isn't anything I can't do." Chapter 3, Pg 63

"White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they're fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least." Chapter 3, Pg 70

"If you live on this damn street you're supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights. With nice white gentlemen." Chapter 3, Pg 86

"She made him more aware of his loneliness that ate into him day and night." Chapter 4, Pg 86

"Ain't no point in you lickin' your chops, dearie. There's others who are interested." Chapter 4, Pg 90

"All they saw ere a pair of feet with swollen, painful bunions on them - nigger feet." Chapter 5, Pg 136

"The inside of the Junto was always crowded, too, because the white bartenders in their immaculate coats greet customers graciously. Their courteous friendliness was a heart-warming thing that helped rebuild egos battered and bruised during the course of the day's work." Chapter 6, Pg 143

"A story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died.." Chapter 6, Pg 148

"The act of driving the car made him feel he was a powerful being who could conquer the world." Chapter 6, Pg 157



"Even with cops money makes a difference." "Even if you're colored, it makes a difference - not as much, but enough to make having it important." Chapter 7, Pg 166

"That's what's wrong. We don't have time enough or money enough to live like other people because the women have to work until they become drudges and the men stand by idle." Chapter 8, pg 186

"Unloose me." Chapter 8, Pg 192

"She had lost the ability to protest against anything - even death." Chapter 8, pg 197

'Burly Negro.' "Threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke." "Wench with no morals who would be easy to come by." Chapter 8, pg 199

. "When she wasn't there he was filled with a sense of loss." "But when she was in it, it was warm and friendly and familiar." Chapter 9, pg 214

"You could see all of it for what it was worth, and it was never good to see anything like that." Chapter 9, pg 220

"The job's yours, baby. All yours. Wrapped up and tied up for as long as you want it." Chapter 9, pg 222

"Go on home, old woman, 'fore I throw somp'n special down on your rusty head." Chapter 9, pg 229

"You done lived in basements so long you ain't human no more. You got mould growin' on you." Chapter 10, pg 237

"He ain't really responsible. He's lived in cellars so long he's kind of cellar crazy." Chapter 10, pg 240

"Them white guys in the army are fighting for something. I ain't got anything to fight for. If I wasn't working for you I'd be changing sheets on Pullman berths. And learning fresh all over again every day that I didn't belong anywhere. Not even here in this country where I was born." Chapter 11, pg 259

"Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs." Chapter 13, pg 323

"It was the color of lead - gray, sullen, lowering." Chapter 15, pg 351

"Last winter there had been more mornings where the sky was a clear, deep blue and the sun spread a pink glow over the street." Chapter 15, pg 251

"Funny how she got to believe that not having to pay rent was so important, and it really wasn't. Having room to breathe in meant much more." Chapter 15, pg 162



"He hadn't realized how familiar he had become with all the detail of that table until it was gone." Chapter 16, pg 375

"Min had done this to him. And if he went on like this, seeing crosses all about him and never being sure whether they were real or figments of his imagination, he would go to pieces." Chapter 16, pg 379

"And each one of them is left with an uneasy sense of loss, of defeat." Chapter 16, pg 384

"The women work because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families." Chapter 16, pg 388

"a symbol of doom." Chapter 16, pg 388

"if Boots could afford to live here, then lending her two hundred dollars would present no problem to him." Chapter 17, pg 398

"When people are alone, they are always afraid of the dark, she thought. They keep trying to see where they are and the blackness around them keeps them from seeing. It was like trying to look into the future. There was no way of knowing what threat lurked just beyond tomorrow or the next day, and not knowing is what makes everyone afraid." Chapter 17, pg 405

"Perhaps by tomorrow she would be free of this mounting, steadily increasing anger and this hysterical fear that made her see things that didn't exist, made her feel things that weren't there." Chapter 18, pg 419



Topics for Discussion

The author begins Chapter 14 from the point of view of Miss Rinner. Are her feelings of hate and fear validated by some event, or do they appear based on preconceived stereotypical notions? Furthermore, how do her feelings of hate and fear affect the children she teaches?

When Lutie worked for the Chandler family in Connecticut, she picked up the belief that if you work hard enough and plan carefully, you can be successful. Explain any positive impact this belief had on Lutie. Explain any negative impact this belief had on Lutie.

Throughout the novel, Lutie has a fierce determination that she can achieve financial stability. In the end of the novel, she finally accepts her defeat. Discuss whether or not she really had a chance to fulfill her dream, or if she was always destined to fail.

When Min returns from her visit with The Prophet, David, Jones does not throw her out. How does her visit to David prevent Jones from throwing her out?

Mrs. Hedges is viewed by Lutie and by Jones as a nose-y busybody. However, Min views Mrs. Hedges as a wise and worldly woman. Which description best fits Mrs. Hedges?

When Jones helps Bub make a shoeshine box Lutie is furious. What about the shoeshine box is it that angers Lutie? Is her anger justifiable?

Throughout the novel, Lutie is concerned about Bub's well-being. She must work, and he has to spend a good deal of time alone. What exactly is it about Bub being alone that worries her? Are her concerns valid?

When the state people take the children from Lutie's home, she blames the white race. Is it really the fault of the white race? Explain how Lutie came to the conclusion that white people were to blame.

Related Titles

Often seen as a single-work author or a children's writer, Petry published six short stories prior to *The Street*.

"Marie of the Cabin Club" appeared in the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper in 1939; in 1943 "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon" appeared in *Crisis*.

Other stories preceding *The Street* were published in so-called "Negro Journals." These were written during Petry's stint as journalist. In 1944 "Doby's Gone" was published in *Phylon*, the scholarly journal associated with W. E. B. DuBois and Atlanta University. In 1945 "Olaf and His Girlfriend" and "Like a Winding Sheet" appeared in *Crisis*. In each of these stories female characters figure prominently.

The *Narrows* As in Petry's first novel, female characters are prominent in her last novel, *The Narrows* (1953). African American women are both major and minor characters, and they move the plot and shape the themes. Abigail Crunch is very much a New Englander, and strives to uphold that image. The major difference between Abbie and other New Englanders is her race: she is an African American. However, Abigail is out of touch with the real world, and lives vicariously through the men in her life: her late husband, the Major, and her adopted son Link Williams.

Link, a focal character, is killed at the end of the novel because of his involvement with Camilla Treadway, the white heiress of a gun factory. A boarder in Abbie's house, Malcolm Powther, is a butler to the Treadways and is indirectly responsible for Link's murder. Powther is almost as stiff as Abigail Crunch, and they both feel distant from the blacks who live in "the Narrows" section of the town.

Malcolm Powther is the opposite of saloon keeper, Bill Hod, who is having an affair with Powther's wife, Mamie.

Mamie Powther is a sensual being in love with life. She is almost a stereotype of the whorish black female. Nevertheless, she is arguably the most interesting character of the novel.

When Mamie is compared to Camilla Treadway, who is also involved in an extramarital affair, one can see the role of history and racial politics in the shaping of images of the African-American female. Also evident is the significant element of race when gender oppression is at issue. A minor character, F. K. Jackson feels herself an anomaly for being female and black.

The Narrows explores the intersection of race and class, and its destructive effects on a New England community.



A subplot concerns an affair between a black man and a white woman which bears some resemblance to the tragic story of Romeo and Juliet. The novel also develops themes of violence and materialism in American culture.

Country Place Petry's second novel, *Country Place* (1947) is almost a direct opposite of *The Street* in its setting, characters, and themes. The novel is set in Lennox, Connecticut, a place similar to the town in which Petry grew up. The narrator is a white male druggist and the major characters are all white; a housekeeper is the only character of color. Petry's major themes are the prevalence of provincialism and materialism and how these societal ills destroy the town's moral fiber. This seemingly idyllic village contains many of the same problems as urban areas.

Human frailties in Lennox are fueled by the townspeople's search for happiness in materialism and their spiritual poverty. It is a time of the collapse of traditional values following World War II and of a stifling routine existence with little room for creativity. The inhabitants, especially those women and few men who remained during the war, are trapped in a tortuous and empty life.

The novel opens with the return of Johnny Roane, an army veteran, and ends with his departure to study art.

Although the story traces Johnny's relationship with his wife Glory, Lil, Johnny's mother-in-law, and Glory, mother and daughter, are the central characters. Both women have affairs with Ed Barrell. Lil marries Mearns Gramby, the son of the wealthiest woman in Lennox, but does not find fulfillment with him or the things he can give her. Mearns controls and manipulates his wife, for he knows she does not love him and that she thinks she will be rich after his mother dies.

The single character of color is Neola, the housekeeper and maid, who is loyal to Mearns' mother. Neola is contrasted with Glory and Lil early in the novel. Lil, although from humble beginnings, scoffs at Neola and feels superior to her not because Neola is a maid, but because she is black. She makes derisive comments about Neola's getting a divorce, asking whoever heard of "a nigger divorce." The irony is that Lil remains trapped in a loveless marriage and Neola is freed from hers.

In the contrasts between Neola and the white women, Petry shows that although women experience sexual oppression, gender discrimination is not necessarily a unifying factor for all women; race is a stronger source of conflict.

It is Neola and Portulacca, "Portugee," the Gramby gardener, who represent hope and moral justice in Lennox. The two plan to marry and are willed the Gramby mansion and a lifelong maintenance allowance.

Described by some as a "race free" novel, plot as well as character are often secondary to descriptions of the "country place" of Lennox. The town is presented as a commonplace town with calm and commonplace citizens. Petry summons the violence of nature to reveal the reality of the town. The hurricane that whips the water, thrashes the vegetation, and damages the buildings, also rips the veneer from the violent,

greedy, and immoral lives of the major characters. Petry focuses on the physical details of the damage done by the storm.



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