

AFRICAN-AMERICAN URBAN SPACE AND TRAUMA: A PSYCHO-SPATIAL DRAMATIC CORRELATION IN ANN PETRY'S *THE STREET*

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of African-American urban space in Ann Petry's The Street. It lays emphasis on the interaction between literary spaces and literary characters. From this interaction, it emerges that some African-American urban spaces like Harlem, generate trauma. Leaning on Bertrand Westphal's critical literary theory of geocriticism, my analysis specifically shows that some social evils such as racism, violence, discrimination to name a few and that are rampant in African-American urban space in the narrative generate trauma in the minds of characters like the protagonist Lutie Johnson. The article also notes down that behind Petry's sketching forth of Harlem's pauperism, lays her call for improving or changing things in this urban space.

Key-words: *urban space, evils, trauma, literary space, interaction*

Résumé

Cet article aborde la problématique de l'espace afro-américain urbain dans l'œuvre intitulée The Street d'Ann Petry. Il met l'accent sur l'interaction entre espaces littéraires et personnages de la littérature. De cette interaction, il s'en suit que des espaces afro-américains urbains tels que Harlem génèrent du traumatisme. S'appuyant sur la théorie critique littéraire de la géocritique de Bertrand Westphal, notre analyse montre de façon spécifique, que certains maux sociaux: tels que le racisme, la violence, la discrimination pour ne citer que ceux-là, et qui sont prépondérants dans ces espaces afro-américains urbains, contribuent à créer le traumatisme dans l'esprit de certains personnages tels que Lutie Johnson. Notre article note aussi que derrière la description de la paupérisation de Harlem que fait à exubérance Ann Petry dans son œuvre, se cache son appel à améliorer les conditions de vie dans ces espaces afro-américains urbains.

Mots-clés: *espace urbain, maux, traumatisme, espace littéraire, interaction*

Introduction

Representations of spaces in literary works are relevant given that they actually convey meaning. In African-American literature, uploading them with enough meanings is quite recurrent. Ann Petry is among those writers who attach so much sense to the African-American urban spaces she portrays in her novel *The Street*. Broadly

speaking, the book narrates the story of Lutie Johnson, a young black woman, who wants to offer to her little boy and to her a better living condition in an African-American urban space that is Harlem.

In penning the story of the young lady, Ann Petry took pain to establish a correlation between the African-American urban space that is Harlem, a black neighbourhood, and some characters like Lutie Johnson. Specifically, Petry portrays Harlem as having some traumatic psychological impacts upon characters like Lutie Johnson.

The current study falls within the paradigm of the interactions between literary spaces and literary characters. The issue at stake is the correlation between the African-American urban space and trauma. The article aims at showing that African-American urban spaces in Ann Petry's narrative foster trauma.

To reach the above aim, I will resort to Bertrand Westphal's literary theory of geocriticism. This theory is a method of analysis of literary text focusing on geographic space. Westphal argues that "Geocriticism allows us to emphasize the ways that literature interacts with the world"(Westphal, 2011: X). It frequently includes the study of places described in literature by various authors. But it can also study the effects of literary representations of a given space. Justly, it is this latter aspect of the geocritical theory that the current article emphasizes by outlining the interactions between literary spaces and literary characters in Ann Petry's *The Street*. More specifically, thanks to Westphal's literary theory, the article establishes a correlation between African-American urban spaces and trauma in Petry's narrative.

In its first articulation, the analysis focuses on unveiling how eclectic African-American urban spaces generate trauma. Next, the study highlights how, experiencing trauma, Lutie hopes to escape her situation.

1-Macrospace and Nanospace Fostering Trauma

The issue of space mostly the urban one is inserted within the narrative that Ann Petry penned. Though, it does not hold first rank topics, Petry subtly tackles this issue through the numerous and detailed spatial descriptions she inserted in her narrative.

On top of giving detailed account of those spaces, Petry unwraps their traumatic impacts upon her characters such as the main protagonist Lutie Johnson. Indeed, in an interview published in the

American journal *Crisis*, Petry hammered: “in *The Street* my aim is to show how simply and easily the environment can change the course of a person’s life” (Petry Ann, 1946: 49).

I voluntarily fall into two parts those spaces: macrospace and nanospace. Here, macrospace refer to large space. And nanospace refer to small-sized space. In the narrative, the least I can say is that macrospace and nanospace both generate trauma in the minds of characters like Lutie Johnson. In common parlance, trauma is defined as an emotional response to a distressing event or series of events, such as rape, accidents, natural disasters.

The macrospace that brings about so much trauma is Harlem, a black neighbourhood located between the 7th and 8th avenues in New York City. Petry portrays Lutie’s trauma as resulting from some evils that are rampant in Harlem. From the detailed description of Harlem specifically through its 116th Street where the narrative starts and where most of the plot takes place, it appears that this urban space repletes with manifold evils.

As the story starts, the first evil that the reader is acquainted with is violence. The 116th Street painted by Petry is a space characterized by violence. Petry deepens the perspective of space as a literal and metaphorical force by describing the street through its unrelenting wind. She writes: “There was a cold November wind blowing through 116th Street...it drove most of the people off the street ... except for a few hurried pedestrians who bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault” (1-2). And Petry uses this windy opening scene to herald the subsequent violent scenes that will take place later in the narrative.

Another rampant evil in Petry’s narrative is racism. Indeed, Lutie lives in a racist society. In one of his 1962 speeches entitled “Who Taught You to Hate Yourself”, the boiling black activist and pastor, Malcolm X argues that the most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman. His words could not be truer and could not find a better echo than in the case of *The Street* female protagonist Lutie Johnson.

Being a black woman, Lutie lives in an environment full of racism. She really lives and experiences two types of racism.

In academic discussions, scholars have discriminated two forms of racism: ideological racism and societal racism. The former is a

rationalized racist ideology which gives legitimacy to pre-existing patterns of racial subordination. The latter is the fact that one group acts as if another were inherently inferior.

In Petry's narrative, her novel heroine is really a victim of those two types of racism. Instances where Lutie confronts ideological racism can be found in the story of her son Bub's polishing shoes in the street. When Lutie discovers her son polishing shoes in the street, she gets furious. She gives lots of pieces of advice to him. Among the reasons for her fury, she tells him that she does not want to see him doing this task because white folks believe that this kind of jobs and other petty jobs are fit only to black folks: "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" (70).

As for the other form of racism, the most widespread in the plot, one of the first instances she experiences the second form is, when working as a maid in the Chandlers' family. The chandlers' friends used to come to visit Lutie's employers. Lutie assumes they do not appreciate her as "whenever she entered a room where they were, they stared at her with a queer, speculative look" (40). Lutie claims that this fact is linked to her skin color as one day she overheard them pairing black girls like her with prostitutes: " 'Sure, she is a wonderful cook. But I wouldn't have any good-looking colored wench in my house. Not with John. You know they're always making passes at men. Especially, white men'"(40-41).

Lutie even infers that white people reason in this way automatically: "Apparently it was an automatic reaction of white people— if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute. If not that—at least sleeping with her would be just a simple matter, for all one had to do was make the request" (45).

The other evil reigning in 116th Street is destitution and dirtiness. The destitution and the dirtiness of Harlem are grasped through the picturing of 116th Street and its inhabitants. Talking about Harlem, Petry writes: "the buildings were old with small slit-like windows ... the rooms were small and dark ...It would be hot as hell in summer and cold in winter" (4). Here, Petry does a double portrayal of Harlem. She describes Harlem space as well as its time. She does a spatiotemporal description of Harlem. It is in line with Bertrand Westphal's geocritical concept of spatiotemporality. Indeed, to Westphal, literary texts should

no longer be studied in the light of space and time. Rather, he advocates a joint study of these two elements that he labels spatiotemporality (Westphal, 2011: 26). Westphal argues that the reason for is “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature (Westphal, 2011: 26). Geocriticism invites to spatiotemporal studies of literature given that time and space form a continuum.

This is really true in Petry’s description of Harlem. In fact, from the above quotation, it can be inferred that in Harlem, space and time collude to worsen the situation of Harlem. Petry tells us that “the buildings were old”, “the rooms small and dark.” The time period was not friendly too. Given that there is heat “as a hell” in summer and cold in winter. Here, space and time ‘join’ their forces to worsen the destitution of Harlem.

Another instance where spatiotemporality is at play in Petry’s narrative is when Petry talks about Junto’s Bar on 116th Street. Petry writes: “there was always a crowd in front of the Junto Bar ... the surface of the frozen piles became encrusted with bags of garbage, old shoes, newspapers ... the frozen debris and the icy wind made the street a desolate place in winter” (141). From this spatiotemporal description, it can be deduced that Junto’s Bar area looks like a mess. The space, here, is a melting pot of various garbage. The time is also hard for people as it is cold. Here again, time and space collude to make life worse for 116th Street dwellers.

On top of that, Harlem is given a reputation of dirtiness and horror. Petry writes that Harlem repletes with “dark streets filled with shadowy figures that carried with them the horror of the places they live in” (153).

Paralleling the spatial description of Harlem, Petry’s portrayal of Harlem inhabitants emphasizes the dirty image of this urban space. Petry writes in Harlem “most of the children had straight bones” (153-154). And “the few people on the street in cold weather had a desperate hungry look” (153-154).

Here the space description associated with the portrayal of people living in Harlem bears witness to the ugliness of Harlem, an urban space that is nearly portrayed as unsuitable for human being’s life.

On a cosmic level, Harlem is then portrayed as repleting with evils such as violence, systemic racism, and dirtiness. The upshot of this

situation is the trauma generated in the minds of characters like Lutie Johnson and Miss Rinner, a white teaching woman in Harlem.

Lutie's being traumatized by 116th Street is grasped through the complaints she makes about this urban space all along the story. Indeed, as the story sets on, the first thing she complains about is 116th Street, her living place. That is why, early in the plot, she says "the thing that really mattered was getting away from Pop and his raddled woman, and anything was better than that" (4). Here, Pop and his raddled woman live on 116th Street. Getting away from them implicitly means leaving 116th Street. At this level of the narrative, the reader may not know the rationales backing up the want of the young colored woman. As the story goes on, she continues to issue complaint about 116th Street. In chapter eight, Petry writes that Lutie "thought she and Bub had to get out of 116th Street (205-206). And the reason for is that "it was a bad street" (206). Lutie even goes on to extend her complaint: "it wasn't just this street that she was afraid of or that was bad ... It was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side" (206).

Living on 116th Street appears then to be an ordeal in Lutie's life. However, her complaint about 116th Street does not stop at this level. It continues. At the end of the novel, she continues to blame 116th Street for being responsible for everything wrong that happens to her in her life: "all she could think was, it was that street. It was that god-damned street" (436).

The fact of complaining about 116th Street from the start of the narrative till its end bears witness to the great psychological sore that this street has on Lutie's mind. Here, it is the negative psychological impact of trauma.

Lutie's trauma is also unwrapped through the eclectic hideous faces she grants to 116th Street. In fact, Lutie heavily puts the blame upon 116th Street for the troubles that her eight-year-old boy goes through. The young woman endows the street with negative power. Lutie slightly discards her responsibility in her boy's troubles by painting the street as a bad guardian who looks after her boy when she is out, for working: "even if she [Lutie] hadn't talked to Bub about money all the time, he would have got into trouble sooner or later, because the street looked after him when she wasn't around" (426-427).

Additionally, she describes the street as a "vicious mother" and "an evil father" that train people's kids into doing naughty things: "And

while where you were out working to pay the rent on this stinking, rotten place, why, the street outside played nursemaid to your kid. The street did more than that. It became mother and father and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a vicious mother” (407). Here, the young woman equips the street with negative educational competencies that allow it to push people’s kids on the wrong way.

Lutie’s strong want to move away from 116th Street really translates her obsession to leave that area. Indeed, as the narrative starts, Lutie makes know to the reader that she wants to leave 116th Street, the place where she lives. All along the narrative, she never ceases to voice loudly that she wants to leave 116th Street because she deems it as a hindrance to her social uplift. By the end of the novel, she also reveals to the reader that she does not change her mind as far as the matter of leaving 116th Street is concerned. In fact, she says that after the trial of her son Bub involved in a crime, the first thing she would do, would be to leave the street that she deems to train people’s kids into doing bad things. So leaving the street where she lives becomes an obsession to which she sticks to.

Noteworthy to be underlined is that Lutie Johnson is not the only character who is traumatized by Harlem and its streets in the narrative. Miss Rinner, a white primary school teacher teaching in Harlem, is also traumatized by this urban space.

In the narrative, Miss Rinner’s trauma is mostly indebted to the bad smell that Harlem, the place where she teaches, distills. The narrator describes the place as infect and full of odors: “The pale winter sunlight streaming through the dusty windows ... All the classrooms ... were permeated with the same mixture of odors: the dusty smell of chalk, the heavy, suffocating smell of the pine oil ...” (327). As if this bad smell was not sufficient, the unpleasant odors that her black pupils distil contributes to worsen the situation of the white lady: “At first she had thought of the odors that clung to the children’s as ‘that fried smell’— identifying it as the rancid grease that had been used to cook pancakes, fish, pork chops ...” (328).

The surrounding and ambient atmosphere of bad scents has a psychological impact upon the white woman. The narrator tells us that Miss Rinner has the impression that Harlem’s bad smell follows her everywhere: “She [Miss Rinner] was never wholly rid of the odor. It assailed her while she ate her lunch in the ... drugstore, when she walked through the street; it lurked in the subway station ... She

brooded about it at home until finally she convinced herself the same rank, fetid smell pervaded her small apartment” (328). In Miss Rinner’s mind, like a ghost in a thriller film, the bad smell of Harlem seems to follow the white lady everywhere she goes.

The corollary of this fact is that Miss Rinner has the feeling of being haunted and hunted by the bad smell of Harlem. She is emotionally distraught and devastated. She is traumatized by the bad smell of Harlem. In turn, this last fact turns her teaching task into a hell for her. The narrator writes: “Miss Rinner looked at the wriggling, twisting children seated in front of her and frowned. There was ... thirty long unpleasant minutes to be got through before she would be free from the unpleasant sight of these ever-moving, brown young faces” (327). Seeing Harlem destitute children arouses disgust in Miss Rinner. She is really fed up with Harlem. That is why, she secretly prays and dreams to be transferred in a ‘white school’ where children are better well-off. Petry writes: “On Saturdays and Sundays she dreamed of the day when she would be transferred to a school where the children, blue-eyed little girls who arrived on time... They would wear starched pink dresses and smell faintly of lavender soap; and they would look at her with adoration” (329-330).

Miss Rinner’s trauma even leads her to be ashamed of working in Harlem. She even refuses to tell her closest friends the place where she works: “she refused to tell even her closest friends that she worked in a school in Harlem, for she regarded as a stigma; when she referred to the school, she said vaguely that it was uptown near the Bronx.” (332-333)

Thus working in Harlem is regarded by Miss Rinner as a stigma that is a shame. In her mind, she pairs working in Harlem with shame. This denotes that Miss Rinner is both internally and externally ‘hurt’ given that shame is a feeling of inner and outer matter.

Harlem is not the only space that generates trauma in the narrative. Lutie’s apartment, though a nanospace also begets trauma in Lutie Johnson. This fact is real because the young woman’s dwelling is far from being appealing. It is rather unpleasant. Indeed, as the narrative sets on, the apartment where she lives on 116th Street is her second matter of complaint and concern after 116th Street. If the reader can easily notice Lutie’s disapproval of her dwelling, it is because of the bleak picturing of that place in the narrative. Here, through the narrative, Petry takes pain to give a detailed spatial account of the flat

of the young woman. Petry takes the reader through the outward and the inward realities of Lutie's dwelling.

As the story opens, Lutie lives in a flat in a building on 116th Street. In the building, the path to Lutie's apartment is described as being filthy as there are "Dark hallways, dirty stairs, even roaches on the walls" (5). On top of that, it is full of darkness. The narrator reveals that in the hallway, Lutie "thought if you dropped a penny, ... you'd have to get down on your hands and knees and scabble around on the cracked tile floor before you could ever hope to find it" (6). This means that there is not electricity supply in the hallway. And every tenant has to cope with darkness to lead his way through his flat. With such a hallway filled with filthiness and darkness, it is not astonishing that the reader will soon discover that the inward of Lutie's flat is no more better. Indeed, the place is destitute. The reader is firstly introduced to the pauperism of the young woman's flat through its furniture at the start of the narrative. In fact, Lutie's flat is filled with "broken beds, worn-out springs, old chairs with the stuffing crawling out from under, chipped porcelain-topped kitchen table, flimsy kitchen chairs with broken rungs"(11).

Here, the reader is amazed by Lutie's questioning about the very nature of the furniture. The young woman does not agree with labeling the items listed in the above quotation as furniture. That is why, she asks herself "if ...[she] could call those things furniture"(11). Through both her question and her questioning, it can be inferred two things. Firstly, it shows that she is fed up with this furniture. But, she is powerless to change her situation by affording convenient furniture. Secondly, it denotes the young woman's weariness and her disgust for those furniture. But taken as a whole, her disgust is fully extended to the whole apartment. She hates her flat. She does not feel at ease in it. She is traumatized by the ambient darkness and dirtiness that surround her living place. That is why, as the story opens, she wants to leave her apartment and she is looking for another flat. Leaving her flat is a matter of top concern in her mind given that it brings trauma in her psyche. This is the reason why, though she does not have lots of financial means, she takes pain to move to another apartment.

In a nutshell, the darkness and dirtiness that surround Lutie's flat push the young woman to move out from her flat as she feels uneasiness and trauma. Like 116th Street, Lutie's flat contributes to instill in the young woman's mind trauma. The spatial binomial made

up with 116th Street and Lutie's flat colludes to create and install the feeling of trauma in the young woman's mind. In order to escape this predicament, she finds shelter in transgressivity.

2-Transgressivity as a Way-Out for Lutie's Trauma

Transgressivity is one of the three central concepts dear to geocriticism. Bertrand Westphal assumes that it derives from the word 'transgression'. Westphal states that transgression is a "process that accompanies movement and motive" (Westphal, 2011: 46). Transgressivity encompasses the dynamic space, the process of mobility, and movement (Westphal, 2011: 46). It is justly this latter aspect of mobility and movement that I focus on in this section of my article.

When the afore-mentioned aspect of transgressivity is applied to Petry's *The Street*, I find that the main character Lutie Johnson uses transgressivity as a way-out for her trauma.

The least I can say is that throughout the narrative, Lutie is on the move. As the story opens, Lutie is renting an apartment on 116th Street. The rationale for renting an apartment of her own is that she and her eight year-old boy are living with Lutie's father Pop. Lutie's father lives with his girlfriend Lil. Lutie feels uncomfortable in her father's home. But above all, she considers Lil to be of a bad influence upon Bub. In fact, Lutie worries about her son's education. She does not want her son being influenced by Lil. She does not like Lil's lifestyle. In fact, Lil, her father's girlfriend is an alcoholic and cigarette smoker. About Lil, the narrator writes "she [Lil] was always swallowing coffee in the kitchen ... drinking beer in tall glasses ... drinking gin with the roomers until late at night (10). More terrifying is that Lil sometimes gives her only 8 year-old-son Bub a drink on the sly and gets him to light her cigarettes for her (10).

Lutie fears that her son becoming alcoholic and cigarette smoker only at 8. Neighboring a person with such a lifestyle is harmful to her son. By the way, Lil and her lifestyle; Pop and his making of liquor, turn her father's home into a hell. Lutie feels traumatized by all these bad things which prevail in her father's home. The narrator writes that Lutie "thought of where she lived now. Those seven rooms where Pop lived with his girlfriend. A place spilling over with Lil. There seemed to be no

part of it that wasn't full of Lil (10). The above lines show that the young lady is fed up with her father's home.

In order to escape this situation, Lutie resorts to transgressivity that is being in mobility and being on the move. Here, Lutie's transgressivity manifests itself through her decision and her act of leaving her father's home for another apartment more convenient for her and her son Bub. She decides to move from her father's home to another flat out of her belief that the new flat would be more beneficial to her and to her 8 year-old son.

Another instance in the narrative where transgressivity is at play is linked to Lutie's move to Lyme in the State of Connecticut. In fact, having lots of problems in getting a job in Harlem, Lutie accepts a job of maid and nanny in the Chandler's family, a white wealthy family. The young woman's decision to leave Harlem for Lyme is motivated by some twofold factors. The first is that working in Lyme will give her some means to provide for her and her son. The second is that she is fed up with Harlem with its daily routine of pauperism. That is why, she shows so much admiration to her room, a maid room in the Chandlers' home. She even contrasts her maid room with the ones she had lived in till now: "she [Lutie] looked at the room, thinking there wasn't any way she could what this bedroom looked like to her when all her life she had slept on couches in living rooms, in cubicles that were little ..." (38). Leaving Harlem for Lyme is a means for Lutie to flee away from 116th Street and its corollary of trauma.

Being on the move continues in the narrative for Lutie. The closing scene of the novel is still about Lutie's transgressivity. Indeed, after killing Mr. Boots accidentally, she buys a one-way ticket to flee to Chicago. The plot of the novel ends with her embarking on a train to Chicago. Here, I see in her act of buying a one-way ticket instead of a round-way ticket as her will not to return anymore to Harlem where she experiences lots of trauma.

3-Petry's Forceful Picturing of Harlem's Pauperism: a Call for Improving the Living Conditions in African-American Urban Spaces.

Beyond everything, *The Street* falls within the paradigm of protest novels. So much like Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's

Invisible Man, Petry's book is originally meant to denounce the bleak conditions of her fellow black people.

In performing this task, the reader can notice at ease the tremendous efforts she makes in sketching forth the pauperism of Harlem. Indeed, Petry portrays Harlem's bleakness not for the sake of picturing bleakness. She does it out of an implicit purpose. That is one of calling the American Government to have an eye upon the holistic conditions of Blacks everywhere in America. Through Petry's protagonist Lutie Johnson's complaint: "it wasn't just this city, it was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that the black folks were crammed on top of each other" (206); Petry is denouncing the segregation that rules out in Harlem. She does it given that she finds it unrightful. Behind this denunciation, lays her implicit call addressed to the US Government for improving the conditions of black people.

Here, Petry's empathy towards black people needs to be celebrated. Petry does not share the same fate with her Harlem characters. Lutie Johnson is a protagonist significantly different from Petry, although both author and character are black and female. Petry was raised in a comfortable home in a predominantly white New England town. Her parents were well-educated professionals. After her graduation, she worked as a pharmacist in her family's drugstore for seven years. Though, she was not born and does not live in a neighbourhood like Harlem, and does not experience in real life the life of her protagonist Lutie Johnson, she feels pity for her black community. A community facing sordid social inequities.

So much like John Steinbeck who, through depicting the plight of itinerant migrants in his novels *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, wants the US Government to have an eye upon the situation of those migrants; Petry also wants the American Government to look upon the situation of black people living in urban spaces at a cosmic level. She wants the Government to bring solutions to the social evils that she takes pain to reveal in her picturing of Harlem.

Conclusion

In *The Street*, Ann Petry highlights the correlation between African-American urban space and trauma. My analysis shows that a macrospace like Harlem and a nanospace such as Lutie's flat generate

trauma in the female protagonist Lutie Johnson's mind. In order to escape this predicament, the young woman resorts to transgressivity that is always being on the move. The article ultimately notes down that behind Petry's forceful spatial picturing of Harlem, is her unvoiced call addressed to American authorities for bringing solutions to the problems that African-American urban spaces face in general in America.

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