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From the Selected Works of A Yemisi Jimoh

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Ann Petry: Country Place

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The Literary Encyclopedia

Country Place

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Petry, Ann
(1947)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

Ann Lane Petry consistently denied that she wrote as part of a literary school such as that of the social problem novelist – a category in which her first novel, *The Street*, is often placed – or that of the so-called raceless writer, a description that many readers and reviewers used in relation to her second novel *Country Place*. In interviews and essays, Petry has emphatically stated that her objective as a writer had always been to experiment in various forms, to do something different in each novel. In *Country Place*, in fact, she demonstrates that she is not a strict proponent of the sociological novel. The theme and setting of Petry's second novel do seemingly place it

among other novels by African American writers, such as Willard Motley, Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, as well as others, in the 1940s and 1950s, who de-emphasized the issue of race and, most notably, center their narratives on white characters. For Petry, though, the events in *Country Place* are based in her own experiences living in Old Saybrook and in her desire to write about the hurricane that she saw there in 1938 before she moved to Harlem.

Following closely on the success of her first novel, Ann Lane Petry's plot-driven second novel, *Country Place*, which was published in 1947, received mixed reviews. Some reviewers praised it for its purported lack of racial themes, while other reviewers saw it as a solid second novel, though less powerful than *The Street*, her first novel. This is primarily because of a shift in the narrative voice from first to third person, traces of melodrama and soap opera, and what some reviewers saw as a contrived ending, the latter being a criticism that certain reviewers would level – perhaps with some justification – against all of Petry's novels.

The country place, Lennox, Connecticut, to

which Petry refers in this novel is a seemingly obvious contrast to the hustle, bustle, unfriendliness, scandal, and intrigue of the urban metropolis, yet this summer resort town is far from the friendly idyll, the “quiet, sleepy village”, that it appears to be. The “refugees from cities” who arrive in the summer know little of the life that is lived in “country places” such as Lennox.

Readers come to know about Lennox, Connecticut initially through Petry's first-person narrator, the town's pharmacist George “Doc” Fraser, a mature (sixty-five year old) resident with at least three generations in the town, and later through the various points of view – presented via Petry's third-person narrator – of several residents in the town, especially that of the town's taxi driver, Tom Walker, who is referred to as The Weasel by everyone in Lennox. Doc Fraser begins by disclosing his own background, including his prejudices: he doesn't like “the female of any species, human or animal”. He also, as with most people, has his contradictions; he has a female cat. Doc Fraser, then, prepares readers for their encounter with Lennox, Connecticut, which readers soon come to learn is a town where people are bigoted, lascivious,

treacherous, racist, and cruel, yet not wholly so.

The real life of the residents in Lennox is presented to Petry's readers first through Johnnie Roane, a recently returned army veteran who left for the war in 1942 and, upon returning in 1946 (when Doc's story begins), wants to make the best of living in Lennox, even though he would prefer to live as an artist, painting in New York. He returns to Lennox because his wife Glory prefers to live there. She wants to be in a town where she is the only beauty, rather than just another beautiful woman in the city. Her passion for Johnnie has cooled, as she is now having an affair with Ed Barrell, owner of the town's gas station. Glory had been married to Johnnie for just one year before he went to war. After six months of marriage, she "did not see how she could go on cleaning house and washing clothes and cooking meals, year after year. At the end of the year, Glory was so bored it frightened her." Her preference for Ed rather than Johnnie after his return seems based in her rejection of his traditional views on marriage and family. Glory now has a job at the Perkins' store, which she does not want to quit, and, apparently, her affair with Ed Barrell, the town's womanizer,

provides her with the thrilling sexual adventures that she craves.

Glory's mother, Lil, has recently married Mearns Gramby, the only son from the wealthiest family in Lennox. Glory must now refer to her mother by her first name in order to keep appearances. Petry's portrayal of Lil's treatment of the Gramby's foreign cook and Neola, the black maid, illustrates the way race operates in this small town. Bertha Laughton Gramby, Lil's widowed mother-in-law, disapproves of her son's wife; she is especially concerned that, because of Lil's age, there will be no grandchildren. Mrs. Gramby, though a kind-hearted woman and opposed to the bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism in Lennox, nonetheless many years ago used the power that she held over her son to coerce him to remain in the area and work in his father's law firm after he was graduated from Yale. In the wisdom of her later years, she comes to regret that she tried to control her son's destiny.

The town's taxi driver, The Weasel, knows that Glory is not Ed Barrell's only conquest. Lil, Glory's mother, is also having an affair with Ed. The Weasel secretly informs Mearns Gramby that Lil and Ed are lovers. Johnnie Roan,

meanwhile, has found out about Glory's affair with Ed Barrell, and on the day of a major, hurricane he attacks Ed after finding him with Glory. The next day Glory pretends that her husband, Johnnie, attacked her. Johnnie leaves Glory and moves to New York. The day after the storm, Lil, overcome by her greed, steals Mrs. Gramby's insulin and leaves her mother-in-law at home alone. Lil's plan to kill Mrs. Gramby is unsuccessful though, as Neola, the maid, returns to the Gramby house and finds her employer unconscious. After she recovers, Mrs Gramby goes to David Rosenberg and revises her will. She bequeaths land to the Catholic Church. And to her cook, her maid Neola, and her Portuguese gardener Portulacca, she wills Gramby House plus \$500 per year for upkeep on the house along with \$1,000 for each of them. As Mrs. Gramby is returning from filing her will, she, falls down the steps at the Town Hall and dies. For many readers, Petry's ending is far too contrived, yet this writer's investigation of human motives along with her insistence that the general outlines of human character are found even on Whipoprwill Lane in the sleepest of villages continues to be a story that writers will tell.

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