

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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2002

Ann Petry: The Narrows

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The Narrows

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Petry, Ann
(1953)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

In 1953, when Houghton Mifflin published Ann Lane Petry's third and last novel, *The Narrows*, the United States was well into the Cold War, stalled in the Korean conflict, and moving toward the early events in the organized Civil Rights Movement. The uneasy domestic calm of the early 1950s, following the turbulent 1940s, would not last long. For Petry, this tense and uncertain social and political environment seemed apt for her story of love across cultural lines in Monmouth, a medium-sized town on the River Wye in Connecticut.

In this novel, which includes vividly drawn characters, a number of sub-plots as well as

several interesting motifs, Petry focuses on the varying classes found among African Americans in segregated neighborhoods such as the Narrows and on the dynamics that exist between the dominant society and these marginalized neighborhoods. Additionally, one of Petry's understated motifs in this novel, and throughout her oeuvre, is gender ambiguity. In *The Narrows*, as in Petry's two earlier novels and in her short stories, she presents characters, especially female characters, that transgress the boundaries of their socially constructed gender roles, thus questioning the efficacy of such categories.

It is 1952 in Monmouth, and the “horrible color” of the red neon sign announcing Bill Hod's The Last Chance bar is an obvious indicator of the changes that have occurred in this town. Its beautiful rivers and trees seem to be at odds with the hard, uninviting brick buildings, the neon sign, and the modern lifestyle that are now found in Monmouth. Through Abbie Crunch, Petry presents a typical African American Race Woman – a striving middle-class black woman with genteel aspirations. Abbie, who is seventy in 1952, and her son Link, who is twenty-six, live at Number Six Dumble Street in a “fine old house” with a

brass knocker at the front door. There is a large maple tree – inexplicably referred to as The Hangman – in her front yard; and her backyard is neatly trimmed. Abbie lives in a part of Monmouth that residents of the town refer to as “The Narrows”, “Eye of the Needle”, “The Bottom”, “Little Harlem”, “Dark Town”, or any variety of names that might have come to a person's mind in the 1950s to describe segregated northern and southern neighborhoods where black people lived.

Abbie rents an upstairs apartment in her house to Malcolm Powther, a well-dressed man with precise speech. Mrs. Crunch is impressed when she learns that he is the butler at Treadway House. The wealthy and influential Treadways own the Treadway Munitions Company. Malcolm's wife, Mamie, and their three children, however, do not impress Abbie at all, and she cannot understand why Malcolm Powther, with his refined appearance, would have married this woman. Mamie sings Blues tunes, which Abbie believes are rough-sounding and monotonous. Malcolm's wife also is having an affair with Bill Hod, the owner of The Last Chance bar, and Mrs. Powther often leaves her youngest child, J.C. unattended.

Abbie Crunch soon decides that Mamie Smith Powther—this character’s name being Petry’s playful allusion to an actual blues singer —“simply did not belong” in the Crunch home. Yet, Abbie also realizes that in all honesty “Mamie Powther was Dumble Street”. As a Race Woman, Abbie Crunch has a steadfast interest in uplifting the image of black people. She takes the view that black people “had to be cleaner, smarter, thriftier, more ambitious than white people.” Through her illustration of Abbie Crunch's over-reaching attitude, Petry locates this character firmly within the concept of double-consciousness, as Abbie clearly accepts the dominant society's construction of what constitutes a proper lifestyle as well as its views on how to position black people within that lifestyle. Abbie takes seriously her role as the social and moral barometer in *The Narrows*. She is a President and only black member of the local Women's Church Temperance Union (WCTU). She is also a widow, as her husband Theodore Crunch “The Major” died of a stroke after she refused to call for help because she thought he was drunk.

Before her husband's death, Abbie and The Major found that they were unable to have children, so they adopted Lincoln Williams.

Link's relationship with Abbie, however, is tenuous because she made him “feel as though he were carrying The Race around with him all the time” and because for three months following her husband's death, when her son was eight years of age, she completely forgot about him. During this fragile point in his life, having essentially lost both parents again, Link's only means of survival was Abbie's nemesis Bill Hod, owner of The Last Chance bar directly across the street from the Crunch's house. Link lives with Bill Hod until Abbie remembers that the child exists. Then Abbie and her friend F. K. Jackson, owner of F. K. Jackson's Funeral Home, retrieve Link from Bill Hod.

Ann Lane Petry's main theme in *The Narrows*, prohibited love, centers on Link Williams and Camilla, a wealthy white heiress. Petry's close attention to Link's upbringing and to the relationships he had with the parental figures in his life demonstrates how the complex, and realistically flawed, nurturing he received in *The Narrows* has helped shape his character. Yet some of the peculiar moments of his childhood in Monmouth, especially those that demonstrate the deep chasm between him and the white residents in the town, add to his

character as well.

Petry provides a telling incident in which Link's primary school teacher could not understand why he, then ten years of age, would not want to play Sambo in the minstrel show she had planned as a fundraiser. This event along with the subsequent treatment that he receives from his resentful teacher precipitates Link's staying away from school for one week until Abbie inadvertently finds out that he has been absent. Two years after this troubling incident at school, Abbie allows Link to return to The Last Chance to live with Bill Hod and his cook, Weak Knees. With Bill as his "uncle", Link finds that his situation at school improves. Bill Hod and Weak Knees transform Link. They "re-educate him on the subject of race. [...] After a month of living with [them] he felt fine. He was no longer ashamed of the color of his skin." Lincoln Williams earns a degree in history from Dartmouth before enlisting in the Navy. Link says that he wants to write a history of slavery, but he returns to Monmouth and works in Bill Hod's Last Chance bar.

When Petry constructs a chance meeting and ultimately love between the Dartmouth educated black man Lincoln Williams and

Camilla Treadway Sheffield, a member of the most powerful family in or near Monmouth, this writer – at a time when racial separation was at its height in the United States – exposes the volatility that results from transgressions of the boundaries that were set around race, class, and privilege. She also demonstrates how unacknowledged and perhaps even unknown racialized attitudes find their way even into love. Camilla, who disguises her identity from Link by calling herself Camilo Williams, is a spoiled woman who is accustomed to having whatever she wants. When Link ends their relationship after finding out about her deception and after thinking about the racialized implications that may have influenced Camilla's motives, he finds that she takes revenge on him by making use of the convenient ruse of sexual assault, thus provoking racial tensions in Monmouth. She later regrets her actions, but the damage already is done. Camilla's spurious charges animate her mother, Mrs. John Edward Treadway, who, in an attempt to revive her family's social standing and forestall scandal should the truth be known, manipulates the local paper so that crimes in The Narrows are sensationalized. Peter Bullock, owner of the *Monmouth Chronicle* rationalizes his

succumbing to Mrs. Treadway's threat of lost advertising by saying, "So what difference does it make [...] whether we here in Monmouth hunt down Negroes or whether we hunt down Communists."

Finally, through Malcolm Powther's betrayal of Link to Mrs Treadway, she and Camilla's husband, William P. "Bunny" Sheffield "hunt down" and kidnap Camilla's lover and then attempt to cover-up their murder of him. It is, however, the truth of the love between Link and Camilla, rather than a false confession to rape, that finally condemns Link to death. Except for its ending, which some see as contrived, Petry's *The Narrows* is arguably her most incisive and powerful novel. Her main theme is forbidden love across ethnic lines, yet Ann Lane Petry's resolute desire to remain faithful to human complexity provides her least recognized novel with one of the most coveted literary prizes – timelessness.

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First published 25 October 2002

Citation: Jimoh, A Yemisi. "The Narrows". *The Literary*

Encyclopedia. 25 October 2002.

[<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=57>, accessed 14 April 2012.]

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ISSN 1747-678X