

KEITH CLARK, *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2013), 264 pp.

Clark begins his latest literary study, *The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry*, with a claim that calls for a complete reframing of Petry's oeuvre: that Boston University's Ann Petry archive demonstrates, through Petry's letters and records, that she was much more politically minded and involved than previous critics have acknowledged. Clark argues that Petry's writings should not be pigeonholed in the genre of Naturalism, nor should she be endlessly compared and subordinated to male writers such as Richard Wright. Unlike many of her contemporary male writers, who were interested in representing African American male protagonists as equally masculine to their white counterparts, Clark argues for what he terms a "radical aesthetic agenda," which includes questioning "essentialist definitions of gender for male protagonists" (4) and demonstrates how the lives of WASPs "can be as nightmarish and pathological as those blacks confined to a plantation" (5). This is just one among many new looks that Clark takes at Petry's fiction that makes his study a must-read for students and scholars of American literature, particularly those interested in the understudied works of authors publishing between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.

To date, Hazel Arnett Ervin's 2005 *The Critical Response to Ann Petry* contains the most comprehensive collection of reviews of Petry's work and criticism on her fiction from the 1970s to the early 2000s. Ervin's collection captures the development in Petry criticism over several decades. Early Petry criticism focused on the inability of black, often female, characters to achieve the American Dream. Petry critics such as Vernin Latin, Richard Yarborough, and Bernard Bell analyzed *The Street* against its contemporary texts *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Native Son* to assert that it was another example of a naturalist text but one authored by a woman writer and with a female protagonist. Later critics, such as Marjorie Pryse and Calvin C. Herton, began analyzing Petry's black female characters in *The Street* in contrast to Lutie, the novel's black female protagonist, addressing failures of Lutie's and, more general, black women's motherhood. More recently, Nellie McKay, Kimberly Drake, and Heather Hicks place Petry back in conversation with Wright,

Himes, and Ellison claiming that, through her female protagonist, Petry demonstrates the complex meanings and double standards of women's lives and experiences. Although *The Street* is by far Petry's most analyzed text, some critics have examined *Country Place* and *The Narrows* for their critiques of whiteness as a race and therefore also a part of the social constructions of racism (Ervin). Unlike the critical essays in Ervin's collection, Clark's *The Radical Fiction* is one of few works that takes on Petry's short fiction, specifically placing it in conversation with her longer works, and also analyzes Petry's male characters.

Scholarship such as William Scott and Meg Wesling's 2006 articles and Clare Virginia Eby's 2008 article concentrate on the trope of the American Dream and Benjamin Franklin themes that are found in *The Street*. Though recent, their analyses do not challenge conventional readings of Petry's work. Clark claims that what previous critics have argued as naturalism can instead be read as part of the American gothic genre. This again is the importance of Clark's study: it takes Petry studies into a new direction. *The Radical Fiction* broadens our understanding of Petry's writing by including the much-discussed *The Street* with less-known Petry texts. Clark analyzes Petry's canon through a biographically focused lens, elevating the reading of her private papers by giving them as much import as *The Street*, her most famous novel. Elizabeth Petry's 2009 *At Home Inside: A Daughter's Tribute to Ann Petry* contains Petry's biography and letters, and by analyzing this material in his book as well, Clark adds to our understanding of how Petry's personal life informs her literary work. Clark examines Petry's personal writings, her political activities, and her relationship with her father for a better understanding of her fictional work. Additionally, and delightfully different, is that in this study Petry is not reduced to a mid-century black female writer who may have been influenced by Richard Wright. Instead, he situates her as a precursor to writers such as Ralph Ellison, especially in her use of jazz elements in her fiction to connect to a larger tradition of black art.

Overall, Clark's study is a rereading and refocusing of Ann Petry's collective works of fiction against interviews, letters, and records from her life. In the first three chapters, Clark analyzes Petry's male protagonists. Unlike critics who typically focus on Petry's female characters, Clark chooses to analyze Petry's

portraits of black masculinity (9). In Chapter one specifically, Clark connects Petry's literary past to her ancestral past and uses Petry's descriptions of her father to explain that her black male characters defy categorization. Clark argues that Petry's fiction challenges head-on prevailing paradigms of race and masculinity: "Her men transcend the drawing notion that white masculinity is the sole touchstone for black male subjectivity" (17). Although Wright and Ellison are commonly discussed in conjunction with Petry's work, she can also be compared to Hawthorne and Poe, authors Petry places in the literary education of *The Street's* Lutie. Clark highlights gothic elements in *The Street* and *The Narrows* as the "black community's failure to address the psychological health of its male children" (22), which Clark labels "Afro-Gothic." The third chapter continues the constructed gothic lens with a look at Petry's short stories. Here Clark demonstrates how Petry challenges perceptions of masculinity while also critiquing what he reads as Petry's portrayal of gay men in an overtly stereotyped form as a way of challenging gender norms. Chapters four and five work more in depth with the gothic themes Clark begins developing in the first chapter. Here it is worth noting that his chapter on *The Street* follows what previous critics have demonstrated as naturalism in Petry's work, and that the chapter has an unclear distinction between naturalistic and gothic genres that Clark more strongly argues and develops in his earlier chapters.

The final chapters move away from the gothic argument developed in the first chapters. Chapter six analyzes why Petry moved from a race-based first novel in *The Street* to the raceless, or white, *Country Place*, and here Clark compares her to Richard Wright's departure from *Native Son*. Clark argues that the absence of race "enabled [Petry] to focus her artistic lens almost singularly on those

who are denominated as raceless—the always normative, always unmarked, always aproblematical: whites" (163). This permits Petry, as a black woman writer, to critique white hegemony through her invisibility as the author, rather than having a black character visibly finding fault with whites. The final chapter argues that Petry's "In Darkness and Confusion" demonstrates domesticity and terror differently than Petry's white authorial counterparts. Clark argues that Petry's writing serves as a critique of white female authors' depiction of The Cult of Domesticity, portraying the home as a "dungeon-like enclosure" (182). Similarly, black female authors "have fictionalized the miseries of patriarchy and untrammelled phallogocentrism" but have done so "in decidedly raced ways" (182), situating black women's domestic terror within black female authors' canon.

Clark concludes with a brief examination of Petry's 1960s short stories. Despite Petry's lack of overt political involvement in the 60s, her later works still reflected "black sensibilities" (203), such as how "black identity in the mid-1960s was still laden with agonizing contradictions that too often proved psychically debilitating" (204). The immense value of Clark's book is clear. He seeks not to discredit previous critics' analyses of Petry as a naturalist writer. Instead, he works to broaden the scope and study of Petry, focusing on how her writing successfully analyzes and defends broad ranges of gender identities. Moreover, Clark works with both Petry's fictional work and the archive at Boston University to argue that the full range of Petry's work should be included in the main of American literary study, and in doing so Clark reveals how the personal is indeed political in the life and work of this revered, though little understood, American writer.

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