

From Restraint to Rage

Black Masculinity and Violence in Ann Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet" and "In Darkness and Confusion"*

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Abstract. This paper provides an intersectional analysis of two black male characters torn between their human potential and their marginalized masculinities in Ann Petry's short stories "Like a Winding Sheet" (1945) and "In Darkness and Confusion" (1947). I argue that despite the subtle interplay of moderation and rage within these characters, they arrive at a form of assumed self-realization by performing their masculine angst in the most unpredictable and violent outbursts. Drawing on Price M. Cobbs and William H. Grier's (2000) concept of 'black rage,' I examine how Johnson and William Jones, the protagonists of the aforementioned stories, perceive violence as a defense mechanism—a way to compensate for their marginalized masculinities. These characters embody African American masculinities constrained by stereotypical expectations that hinder their ability to fulfill socially prescribed roles as providers and protectors. Consequently, they resort to violence in a desperate attempt to confront their marginalized status and assert their masculine power. This paper contributes to Petry's committed literary project of portraying complex and nuanced images of black male characters, challenging the reductive and dehumanizing typecasting of African American men prevalent in the dominant cultural narratives of 1940s American society.

Keywords: African American fiction, Ann Petry, black rage, intersectionality, masculinity studies, stereotypes.

1. Introduction

[T]he Negro was never an individual. He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke.

Ann Petry, *The Street*

Ann Petry's rather bleak speculation about African American men in her 1946 novel, *The Street*, hints at the deterministic life conditions and confining images for black men in midcentury American society. The adversarial effects of these images impede the progress of black masculinities in other works written by Petry, as discussed in this paper. As an African American author, Petry explores themes of race, gender and class in her work, often focusing on the struggles of black women in urban settings. Petry's writing combines social commentary with vivid storytelling, making her a significant voice in twentieth-century American

* This research is based on my PhD dissertation and monograph entitled, *African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Works*. It represents a developed version of the original research, integrating further critical analysis, additional scholarly perspectives and a more comprehensive engagement with the primary texts and relevant literature.

literature (Holladay 1996; Eby 2008; Griffin 2013). This paper shifts the focus to how Petry challenges and subverts the stereotypical depictions of black men commonly found in mainstream literature, an aspect often overlooked in existing scholarship on her work. I regard Johnson and William Jones as black men who harbor violence and practice it as a self-defense mechanism to conceal their feelings of masculine marginalization. By examining the intersection of race, gender and other social categories, the problematic construction of their masculinities is unraveled. The intersection of racism, poverty and white (police) brutality experienced by the black male protagonists of Petry's short stories "Like a Winding Sheet" and "In Darkness and Confusion" culminates in what Price M. Cobbs and William H. Grier termed 'black rage' in their 1968 book, *Black Rage* (2000, xvi). Critics from multidisciplinary fields have discussed it as a defense mechanism formed from a black man's perception of his ill-fated condition. Paul Harris defines it as "a legal strategy which exposes environmental hardships to explain why a person commits a crime" (2001, 34).

Black rage lies at the heart of the protest fiction framework and is the threshold of the failure of its characters in going beyond the stereotypical depictions of black people. The protest fiction is defined according to C. Hugh Holman's classical *A Handbook to Literature*, as a genre of novel which centres "on the nature, function, and the effect of the society in which the characters live and on the social forces playing upon them" (1937, 502). This genre predominated the literary scene of the 1940s and was introduced as the blueprint for other black writers by Richard Wright. Wright advocated employing novels as a tool to express the social problems as discussed in his 1937 essay "The Blueprint for Negro Writing" and showcased in his magnum opus, *Native Son* (1940). Petry's *The Street* is written in the tradition of the protest genre and is regarded as the first bestselling novel by an African American female writer. It focuses on the lived experiences of Lutie Johnson, a black single mother struggling to raise her son in the impoverished streets of Harlem, New York, who lets her black rage out desperately to combat the intersectional impairment of racial injustice and sexual oppression. Accordingly, even a pacifist and moderate black person may develop disparate levels of rage under certain circumstances as it is the case with the male protagonists of the discussed short stories.

This paper borrows Raewyn Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity,' which she defines "as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2005, 77). I utilize this concept to investigate the black masculinities in Petry's short fictional pieces in terms of hegemony for two ends. Firstly, to observe the differentiation between those men who adopt white ideals of masculinity and those who defy the assimilative inducements. Secondly, I consider the black masculinities in this paper as marginalized which "are trivialized and/or discriminated against because of unequal relations external to gender relations, such as class, race, ethnicity, and age" in relation to hegemonic masculinity, according to James W. Messerschmidt (2019, 86-87). Additionally, Cornel West's (1993) conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity supports the analysis of the emotional aspects of the black male characters in this paper. West has made significant contributions to the understanding of hegemonic

masculinity by critiquing its intersection with race, capitalism and moral philosophy. He challenges traditional, patriarchal models of masculinity that equate strength with dominance, advocating instead for a vision of black manhood rooted in vulnerability, compassion and ethical responsibility. Contested by masculine hegemony, black men are left “with a limited capacity to ward off self-contempt and self-hatred” (17). West emphasizes that true strength lies in the capacity for love, critical self-reflection and resistance to dehumanizing systems. Through his work, he exposes how hegemonic masculinity not only marginalizes black men but also distorts their emotional and spiritual lives, calling for a reimagining of masculinity grounded in justice and dignity.

Besides, I adopt an intersectional reading method to investigate the process through which categories such as race take on multiple gendered/classed meanings. In other words, blackness of Petry’s black male characters is of more intricate significance when it is gendered and classed. The intersection of their race with their gender makes their life more challenging and results in a failure to accomplish traditional male roles of fatherhood, providing and protection. Intersectionality emerged originally in the fields of critical race theory and critical legal studies as a way to conceptualize the multiple structural and discursive marginalization. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 to theorize the interaction between social categories such as gender, race and sexuality in subordinating women of color in the US (139). The significance of intersectionality lies in providing a language for conceptualizing the intricate interplay of race, class, gender, sexuality and economics in the formation of masculine identities. In the context of masculine identity, intersectionality helps to reveal how these factors do not operate independently but instead overlap to produce complex forms of privilege and oppression. This framework is particularly useful in unpacking how discrimination functions in layered and often invisible ways. For instance, it disentangles the entwined nature of some race- and gender-based reasonings for discrimination against black women as in the case of Johnson in the following section.

2. Johnson in “Like a Winding Sheet”: From a Moderate Husband to a Mandingo

“Like a Winding Sheet” was published in 1945 and awarded Petry the Houghton Mifflin Literary Scholarship, which funded her writing of *The Street*. It has been the most anthologized piece by Petry and republished along with twelve other short stories in Petry’s collection *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* in 1971, 1999 and, most recently, in 2017 by Northwestern University Press. Despite the success of the collection and its frequent publishing, it has been more neglected than her novels. Gladys J. Washington writes in his 1986 study “A World Made Cunningly: A Closer Look at Ann Petry’s Short Fiction” that “of the few critics who treated Miss Petry’s fiction, almost none have given more than a brief consideration to the short stories” (16). However, there has been an increasing interest in her short stories by African American literature students and critics alike, though not a considerable one yet. A Yemisi Jimoh considers Petry “the second black woman to publish a collection of short stories” after Alice Dunbar’s *The Goodness of St.*

Rocque and Other Stories in 1899 (2002). Jamilah Lemieux reads the collection “as a painstakingly look at African American life since 1940s” and contends that Petry “creates a loosely interwoven world of Black folks striving to make the best of often devastating circumstances” (2017, ix). Hence, studying selected short stories by Petry leads to exploring a more comprehensive viewpoint about her constructions of black masculine identities and insightful evaluation of her writing tradition.

Johnson’s life is introduced in one day, which starts with his failed attempt to “get up before Mae did and surprise her by fixing breakfast” due to his exhaustion (Petry 2017, 198), and ends with his denouncement of beating her brutally due to his frustration in “Like a Winding Sheet.” The story is a dramatization of unbridled violence as the subtotal of the prejudiced humiliations of racial discrimination added to the demoralizing job environments. Johnson transfers his failure to access the patriarchal purgatives naturally granted to white men in his society into deadly violence spilled over his wife. Petry portrays him as a conflicted black man torn between two modes of masculinities: the moderate and nurturing husband and the strictly domineering patriarch. Reading his masculinity from an intersectional perspective reveals how his black race is an explicit element of his psychological rift. When it intersects with his indecisive gender positions, it results in an implicit force that divides his male subjectivity between two poles. As he is looked down upon in stereotypical frames and economically exploited, he is pushed to turn his moderation into a black rage as a compensatory reaction. The transformation in his character from a caring and understanding black man to a dominant and violent one takes place as a piling-up process throughout the narrative.

At the beginning of the short story, there are several indications that Johnson and Mae’s day is not ordinary. While in bed, Johnson exchanges affectionate words and looks with his wife. The latter replies to his remark that “it’s a nice morning,” with “[y]ou mean afternoon, don’t ya?” (Petry 2017, 199). Since they both work night shifts in industrial plants, they sleep after sunrise and wake up around 4 pm. Mae then describes the way in which he is covered in sheets with giggling, “[l]ooks like a winding sheet [...] A shroud.” A comment that makes Johnson involuntarily look at the contrast between the color of “his arms silhouetted against the white of the sheet” (Petry 2017, 199). The contrast between his blackness and the whiteness of the sheets is striking and symbolic. He and his wife are aware of their blackness as a state of inferiority in a white-dominated world. The metaphor of the shroud indicates the futility of Johnson’s life and lack of prospects. He feels that he is entangled in a sheet that keeps reminding him of his limited motivation for a better life and, thus, freeing himself from the sheet and getting ready for work after his wife’s urging reminders that he has been late three times the week before. Mae checks the calendar to find out that it is Friday, the thirteenth. She instantly has a premonition while she and her husband are in the corridor and about to leave the house. Petry uses the first part of this couple’s day as a foreshadowing for the unpleasant events that lurk in the rest of the day in both the metaphor of the winding sheet and Mae’s superstitious belief that something bad is going to happen to them.

Johnson arrives at work late again because he spends “fifteen minutes arguing before he could convince her she ought to go to work just the same. He had to talk

persuasively, urging her gently, and it took time. But he couldn't bring himself to talk to her roughly or threaten to strike her like a lot of men might have done. He wasn't made that way" (Petry 2017, 200). Petry highlights the considerate and gentle part of Johnson in the way in which he argues with his wife. He communicates patiently with Mae despite his inability to force her to change her mind. However, since he is not molded like those aggressive men, he will not consider it an option to treat Mae. His moderation lessens after being exposed to the outer world in the second part of the day. He works in a factory where he has to "walk ten hours a night, pushing a cart" (Petry 2017, 201). It is hard physical labor, and his body grows wearier and feebler each night. The description of the strenuous work and the wretched workers of this plant in New York overshadows the enslavement of black people in the sharecropping system in the Southern plantations. Eva Tettenborn argues that Johnson's "work reinscribes his social position that makes it painful for him to uphold the integrity of his body and soul" (2004, 157). Johnson reflects on his demoralized will and emotional pain of racial subjugation as he desperately envisions more humane work environments for black workers.

In addition, his masculine anxiety intensifies as he is utterly disturbed by having a white woman boss, Mrs. Scott. His psychological rift exacerbates as he observes this woman as a direct threat to his gender as a man. This incident can be further elaborated with reference to the changing gender and workplace roles of the 1940s US consumer society. Michael Kimmel argues that "separate spheres" helped to allow some men "to feel like men, both in homosocial workplace and when they returned to their homes" (2006, 35). In this respect, Johnson is an advocate of the idea of keeping the workplace masculinized and the home feminized and, by default, obeys "the Cult of True Womanhood," which overpowers women in social spheres and grants him power based on the assumed biological power of his gender (39). Johnson defines his black masculinity in terms of his success as a provider, tested by his wife's equal share of work and provisions at home and his female boss's display of hierarchy and degradation at work. That is, this role is challenged on two fronts: at home, where his wife's equal contribution to labor and provision destabilizes his sense of male authority; and at work, where his white female boss asserts dominance and routinely degrades him, further emasculating him in a space where he is already racially marginalized. These intersecting dynamics expose how black masculinity is not constructed in a vacuum but shaped and tested by systemic racism, class inequality and shifting gender roles. Johnson's struggle to assert his manhood reveals the fragile foundations of a masculinity that depends on control and dominance, foundations that are continuously undermined in both his private and public life.

Johnson's black masculinity is challenged in relation to his white female boss as she hegemonizes him in the way in which she observes his identity as an intersection of his race, defined in stereotypical frames, and his lower social rank bound to laborious work. Mrs. Scott is masculinized in terms of Johnson's reference to her by her family name and her parade of hegemony. The boundaries that draw the lines between the male vs. female gender power are somewhat distorted in this man vs. woman relation. In other words, Mrs. Scott represents white hegemony in men and women, limiting his possibility of accessing the

dividends of hegemonic masculinity. Johnson indicates her authoritative voice, which “cut across the machine sounds – harsh, angry,” calling him (Petry 2017, 202). She approaches him and reproaches him for being late. “And the niggers is the worse. I don’t care what’s wrong with your legs. You get in here on time. I’m sick of you niggers” (Petry 2017, 202). Her racist slur shoots a rush of blood to his head, telling her, “I ain’t letting nobody call me a nigger” after he “stepped closer to her. His fists were drawn back in a thin line” (202). Out of intimidation, she steps back from him. As a white woman, she sees him as a dangerous black man whose impulses are unrestrained and unexpected.

After being humiliated by his boss, he feels exasperated insofar as his hands “had developed a separate life of their own which he had no control.” He comforts himself with fantasies of beating her face with his hard fists, but “the only trouble was he couldn’t hit a woman” (Petry 2017, 204). This last sentence becomes a refrain in his mind, reminding him to stay balanced. He is liable to violence but holds back from it as he abhors the idea of physically abusing a woman. Keith Clark draws a resemblance between Johnson and Jack Johnson; the latter was the first black heavyweight champion known for defeating white fighters and thus defeating white society. He writes, “[s]ince dark-skinned Jack Johnson came to embody a quasi-white masculinity through sanctioned violence, wealth, and very public dalliances with scores of white women, perhaps the character Johnson unconsciously imagined a reinvigorated subjectivity through these same hypermasculine though ultimately debasing means” (2013, 66). I infer from Clark’s comparison that Johnson entails one of the essential elements of the pervasive stereotype about black men: the Mandingo. As Jack Johnson came to embody the Mandingo stereotype for the reasons outlined by Clark, his impulse to beat Mrs. Scott reflects the violent, hypermasculine component of this trope. His fantasy of striking his white boss becomes a psychological outlet—a way to assert dominance and symbolically retaliate against a system that emasculates him. Mrs. Scott functions as a surrogate figure through whom Johnson channels his suppressed rage and enacts a distorted form of patriarchal power. As his anger intensifies, it becomes increasingly embodied, manifesting through physical tension and aggression. However, the Mandingo is not the only pervasive stereotype about black men; the ‘black rapist’ myth also looms large in American racial discourse. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Sexual Politics*, such stereotypes as “[t]he buck, brute, the rapist, and similar controlling images routinely applied to African American men all worked to deny Black men the work of the mind that routinely translates into wealth and power” (2004, 152-153). These stereotypical images entail black men as inherently violent and sexually deviant, especially in relation to white women, reinforcing systems of racial and gender domination through fear and criminalization. Johnson’s fantasy of hitting his white boss is his solitary means by which he can avenge himself and verifies his domination over her. Mrs. Scott is a far-fetched medium where Johnson can spill over his black rage and perform his assumed white patriarchal domination. Consequently, rage piles up in him, and his body shows more reflexes of letting it out.

The last stop in his work is lining up before the paymaster to get his wage, another humiliating act that he wishes he could avoid by receiving his money decently in an envelope. On his way home, he comes across a coffee shop where

aperitive cups of coffee are served and decides to buy one before getting on the subway in Harlem. He asks for a coffee after a long wait in line. “The white girl looked past him, put her hands up to her head, and gently lifted her hair away from the back of her neck, tossing her head back a little. ‘No more coffee for a while,’” she said (Petry 2017, 206). The white girl refuses to sell him coffee only because he is a black man, and he is undoubtedly aware of it. His hands start to tingle again, and he forces himself to put them down, repeating his mantra, “he couldn’t hit a woman” (206). Finally, he gets on a crowded subway and is “bursting with pain and he told himself that it was due to anger-born energy that had piled up in him and not been used and so it had spread through him like poison – from his feet and legs all the way up to his head” (208). By the time he gets home, he is consumed with rage after being subjected to agonizing work stress, racial assaults and public humiliation.

Johnson realizes that his compassion has diminished and is too irritable to accept his wife’s usual humorous remarks. After Mae asks him not to sit on her overall and invites him to eat, calling him “an old hungry nigger trying to act tough,” he “sent his fist shooting straight for her face” (210) and continues:

There was the smacking sound of soft flesh being struck by a hard object and it wasn’t until she screamed that he realized he had hit her in the mouth – so hard that the dark red lipstick had blurred and spread over her full lips, reaching up toward the tip of her nose, down toward her chin, out toward her cheeks.

The knowledge that he had struck her speed through him slowly and he was appalled but he couldn’t drag his hands away from her face. He kept striking her and he thought with horror that something inside him was holding him, binding him to this act, wrapping and twisting about him so that he had to continue it. He had lost all control over his hands. And he groped for a phrase, a word, something to describe what this thing was like that was happening to him and he thought it was like being enmeshed in a winding sheet – that was it – like a winding sheet. And even as the thought formed in his mind, his hands reached for her face again and yet again (Petry 2017, 210).

In this gut-punching plot twist, Johnson, the moderate, is transformed into a wild and brutal abuser and feels perplexed about himself. It can be either of Mae’s two remarks which trigger the furious rage inside him—calling him by the ‘N’ word or describing him as an old man. Undoubtedly, the derogatory slur gets under his skin and rewinds the pressures of his day inside his mind. Being called old by his wife underpins another level of his insecure masculinity and aggravates his psychological dilemma to the extent that he erupts with a fury. Johnson feels that he cannot assert his masculinity in the work/public sphere as his race intersects with his lower-class status, placing him on the lowest power grid. He feels as helpless in his private sphere as his age worsens his race and class intersection. As a result, he ends up violating the only kind and loving person in his life as his last frantic effort to alleviate his masculine marginalization.

Johnson’s beating of Mae involves sexual implications as well. Using phrases like Mae’s “soft flesh” and “struck by hard object” (Petry 2017, 210) implies Johnson’s impulse to dominate his wife sexually. This anticlimactic scene grows terrifying and disturbing as Johnson slowly realizes that he is violating her fatally, and yet, goes on. His lack of a language to articulate his brutal act and the

metonymic shifting of his violence into his hands suggest his perplexity about his ability to perform black rage. The multiple anxieties which cause his nervous breakdown keep hunting him throughout his day “like a winding sheet,” igniting more violence every time that he considers stopping. Petry’s portrayal of this domestic abuse in a black family is controversial. Petry delves into the psychic of Johnson to thoroughly cover the unbowed frustrations leading him to a cul-de-sac. She invites the reader to evaluate this representation sympathetically. Petry covers black men’s violent dimension and warns about its destructive consequences. Johnson remains restrained in the stereotypical characterizations of the protest fiction. In addition to their helpless wives, black men direct their rage into other mediums, such as the white world, as in the case of Petry’s subsequent analyzed short story.

3. William Jones in “In Darkness and Confusion”: From a Domesticated Husband to a Rioter

George R. Adams considers “In Darkness and Confusion,” published in 1947, one “of the most noteworthy examples of sociology transformed into art” which “recreates the Harlem riot of 1943” (1972, 54). Beverly A. Smith reiterates Adams’s opinion about this work, classifying it as a novella rather than a short story. She describes it as a “type of document that reflects the attitudes of Harlem’s blacks before and, to some extent, during the riot in the midst of the Second World War” (2001, 3). Petry depicts this historical event thoroughly as it occurred while she was working as a journalist in Harlem. Her skills as a journalist are apparent in capturing this civil upheaval in minute detail. The actual riot “lasted for about twelve hours, cost six lives, and destroyed nearly two million dollars worth of property,” triggered by a white cop gun firing a black soldier who tried to stop the cop from beating a black woman (Smith 2001, 16). Petry fictionalizes the incident as witnessed by her main black male character, William Jones. The first part of the riot is narrated through his perspectives and marks a turning point in his life. I analyze his character in accordance with Petry’s tropes of darkness and confusion in the course of two days as portrayed in the short story. Like Johnson, the narrative centers around William’s transformation from moderate to violent masculinity. I argue that his acquisition of black rage serves as a resolution of his lack of perception about defining himself according to his racial affiliations and his impotence as a marginalized black masculinity.

William Jones embodies multiple roles in this short story: he is a devoted husband, affectionate father, blue-collar worker and frequent daydreamer. He is pushed to the brink in his ongoing struggle against the dark and confusing forces of racial injustice and economic inequality in the context of World War II-era American society. Like Johnson, his psychological struggle worsens when he finds himself failing in performing his many gender roles and, thus, maintaining his masculine prowess. William resides on the top-floor tenement on 125th street in Harlem with Pink, his wife, and Annie May, his niece-in-law. The prospects of William’s family members for better life chances are squeezed in the dark, narrow and dilapidated buildings in their black ghetto. William observes that there is not much life on this street, and even its trees are intimidating: “Even those were a

source of danger, for at night shadowy, vague shapes emerged from the street's darkness, lurking near the trees, dodging behind them. He had never been accosted by any of these disembodied figures, but the very stealth of their movements revealed a dishonest intent that frightened him" (Petry 2017, 260). The street's darkness is more of an abstract construct in William's mind. He dwells in darkness on both literal and metaphorical levels. On Saturday morning—the day before the riot—he feels surprisingly agitated by July's heat and the unknown destiny of his twenty-first-year son, drafted in Georgia. He concerns himself about his overweight wife, who has a heart problem, and the stairs are too steep and tiresome for her. He also worries about the eighteen-year-old Annie May's leaving jobs and late sneaking into the house every night. Finally, he condemns himself for failing to perform his role as a providing husband and father by securing a decent place for his family and stopping his son from joining the army.

His role as a husband and father is a primary source of darkness in his life. As a husband, he feels inadequate—both in terms of income and physical presence—when compared to his wife, who earns a living working for a white Navy family and has a heavily built stature. William contributes to domestic chores, just as Pink contributes to the household income. However, Pink holds the upper hand in decision-making, as William never fully understands why they adopted Annie May in the first place. His indecisiveness and gentle disposition become particularly apparent when he attempts to intimidate Annie May into coming home earlier and committing to a single job. William warns her that she "ain't too big to get ... whipped" and to which she replies with a giggle "[y]ou and who else?" (Petry 2017, 256). Pink's reaction to her niece's remark is a roar of laughter which provokes anger in him, but all he does is bang the kitchen door behind him as he leaves. William's sense of inadequacy heightens when Annie May tells him in another quarrel, "I don't know why auntie Pink married a little runt like you for, anyhow" (271). It becomes clear that he is particularly insecure about any observation concerning his height and looks. He starts to torment himself, thinking: "What'd she have to say that for, anyway, he asked himself. Five feet wasn't so short for a man. He was taller than Pink, anyhow. Yet compared to Sam, he supposed he was a runt, for Sam had just kept on growing until he was six feet tall" (272). His insecurity stems from his worries about not being tall enough to control his family members and compete with his son. Pink's steady income, strong personality and sturdy figure contest William's role as a provider.

Pink is not the only woman who subdues him; the memory of his subjugation by two white women lingers in his mind. The first one is the inhuman and indifferent reaction of the nurse who helped Pink deliver her late child. "You people have too many children anyway," this is how the nurse consoles the grieving parents. "It's too bad your eyes ain't white, too" (265) is all that William could say to her before walking out of the hospital. The second incident is with the school principal, who tells him that Annie May is "a slow learner" and that is why it is for her good to quit high school. William listens to her silently and feels enraged after he leaves the school. He blames himself for not being able to defend Annie May. "If he could only have found the words he could have explained that Annie May was bright as a dollar" (265). These two figures embody the everyday instances of bullying black people based on racism. They also embody the

institutionalized racism in Harlem's educational and medical systems. In such instances, Petry represents the confusion element in William's characters as he feels bitterly disturbed by them but cannot articulate or analyze them. Like Johnson in "Like a Winding Sheet," William feels frustrated and furious for not being able to refute the humiliation. Unlike Jonson, though, he cannot let his rage out in his female-dominated household. In this respect, he can be regarded as an antithesis of Johnson. His anger, thus, piles up and leaves him in darkness about his lack of access to (black) rage. William fails to live up to his society's sanctioned paradigms of patriarchal masculinity to physically intimidate his niece, wife and other white women.

William adopts white masculine models to define his male subjectivity and follows white ideals in relation to work. He, as a waged worker, lives in confusion. He works as a porter in a drugstore owned by a white druggist in Harlem. While wiping the drugstore's floor with a mop, he gets fully and deeply engrossed in his thoughts about his son. He has not received any letter from him for a while, and there was nothing in the mailbox today before leaving for work. It saddens him that his son, born in New York, a high school graduate, a basketball star and his last hope to climb the social ladder, is stationed at a military camp in the heart of the segregated Jim Crow South where lynching of black men is still prevalent. William's fears about his son being drafted into the South are not only his manifestation of the black soldiers' state there. "Although segregation followed black soldiers from the draft boards, to the battle fields, and even to the veterans' hospitals, the worst effects of racism were felt in the Southern training camps where white military police and red-neck sheriffs used violence and intimidation to enforce Southern standards of race relations on blacks, many of them raised in the North" (Smith 2001, 7). He also recalls the great expectations that he and his wife had for Sam who "wasn't going to earn his living with a mop and a broom. He was going to earn it wearing a starched white collar and a shine on his shoes and a crease in his pants" (Petry 2017, 258). Seeing the profit that Mr. Yudkin, his employer, makes, he thinks, "maybe when the war was over Sam ought to study to be a druggist instead of a doctor or a lawyer" (263). Adams describes "William's introjection of white middle-class values in his plans for Sam" as one way by which Petry "subtly points out the unreality of William's vision by counterpointing to William's 'white' illusions the Black reality which William is subconsciously aware of" (1972, 55).

William's confusion about the reality of the limitations of being black in a highly racist society and his rejection is apparent in his reaction to his hostile and prejudiced white boss. Mr. Yudkin notices William's recurring distraction while working and addresses him as follows:

The man who owned the store would say to him sharply, "Boy, what the hell's the matter with you? Can't you keep your mind on what you're doing?" And he would go on washing windows, or mopping the floor or sweeping the sidewalk. But his thoughts, somehow, no matter what he was doing, drifted back to Sam (Petry 2017, 259-260).

His passive stance to his boss's degradation reflects his developing a cold reaction toward the racial discrimination that he has been subjected to daily. In addition, he somehow consoles himself by relying on his dreams for Sam as his way out of

humiliation. William is entirely emasculated by his boss, who belittles him as a “boy.” His black masculinity is brought down to the lowest levels of marginalization in relation to his white middle-class employer. Mr. Yudkin maintains his sense of hegemony over William based on the latter’s inaccessibility to power and resources. In this short story, approaching discrimination against him as a black male character intersectionally leads to perceiving how the racism directed against him is stereotypically gendered and historically significant. The gendered aspect of racism directed against William is evident in his being dismissed as a boy. According to Kimmel, ‘manhood’ as a term “was synonymous with adulthood. Just as black slaves were ‘boys’ as one strategy to make them ‘infantilized and thus emasculated’” (2006, 14). Petry brings the plantations of the old South to the modern North to reflect on the different forms of racial injustice throughout US history: slavery until the late nineteenth century and disfranchisement in the 1940s. William’s many passive attributes and pacifist stance associate his image with stereotypes like Uncle Tom in Mr. Yudkin’s mind. His blackness is defined not only through racialized assumptions but also through his gender and class, both of which are often interpreted through narrow, stereotypical frames that regulate his perceived access to power. As bell hooks argues in *We Real Cool*, black men are frequently caught in a double bind—expected to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity rooted in aggression and control, while simultaneously being denied access to those very forms of power due to systemic racism and economic disenfranchisement. She posits that “[i]n an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy black males are socialized to be rage-oholics” (2004, 58). William’s rejection of violence and his quiet demeanor unsettle these expectations, marking him less a man in the eyes of white authority figures like Mr. Yudkin, who equate masculinity with dominance and view any deviation from that model as weakness or subservience.

Being racialized and economically exploited, William is pushed to perform his gender as a reactionary category to make up for his lack of race recognition and economic payoff. However, Pink does not allow him to let out his violence and dominates him in different ways. After his long and tiresome day at work, he decides to go to the barbershop to get his hair cut and get distracted. The men have had a special bond with barbershops as a homosocial space where they can enact their gender and express themselves. “Traditionally, it has functioned as an unmonitored venue where they can verbally enact an unfettered masculinity, holding forth in subjects from sports to war to women” (Clark 2013, 193). The liveliness of the place and the men’s chatter juxtaposes with William’s work’s stifling atmosphere. It is the reason why William and other black men abhor jobs as bell hooks refers to as “less desirable” and that “performing jobs society deemed menial with bosses and supervisors harassing and persecuting them was not fulfilling” (hooks 1992, 93-94). In the barbershop, William feels free from the restraints of his tedious job and the domestication of his wife. He starts getting engaged in talks with other customers. He avoids the violent discussions as “he knew he would be violent, and he always avoided those discussions because he didn’t like violence” (Petry 2017, 266). He enjoys the peace of mind he wished for until he meets Scummy, a black soldier in the South, there. Scummy informs him that Sam,

“got shot by a white PM. Because he wouldn’t go to the nigger end of a bus. He had a bullet put through his guts. He took the MP’s gun away from him and shot the bastard in the shoulder.” He put the newspaper down and started toward the door; when he reached it, he turned around. “They court-martialed him,” he said softly. “He got twenty years at hard labor. The notice was posted in the camp the day I left.” Then he walked out of the shop. He didn’t look back (Petry 2017, 268).

William’s fears about the South become a dreadful reality, and his ideal dream for his son cannot motivate him anymore. Sam’s being racially segregated in the South, shot and detained, is a form of state violence directed against black people. William experiences different forms of violence: he is violated by white people in his daily life and by the government, whom he holds responsible for his son’s misfortune. The state violence is more subtle and oppressive than being violated on a personal level, which increases William’s confusion as his helplessness increases. He struggles with telling Pink of this misfortune, which is why he pretends to be asleep in bed when she arrives late from work. He lies in darkness, sullen by the heavy burden, yet confused about what to do for his son.

On the morning of the next day, while Pink is at church, William decides to grab a drink at some bar in Harlem. The first beer that he takes gets so hard into him that he starts to daydream; he engages in a loud monologue with himself as if another William is responding to his concerns and questions. Nevertheless, William’s moderated version of masculinity prevails until he witnesses the shooting of a black soldier at the hands of a white cop in the lobby of a hotel next to his bar:

He stood still, watching them. The anger that went through him was so great that he had to hold on the bar to keep from falling. He felt as though he were going to burst wide open. It was like having seen Sam killed before his eye. Then he heard the whine of an ambulance siren. His eardrums seemed to have been waiting to pick it up.

“Come on, what you waiting’ for?” He snarled the words at the people milling around the lobby doors. “Come on!” he repeated, running toward the street.

The crowd followed him to the 126th street entrance of the hotel (Petry 2017, 281).

William becomes a vessel for black rage; not only does he spill it over the very deterministic street which has confined him for years, but he also passes it to other Harlemites and leads them into a protest. Driven by anger complied and never resolved, he turns it outward to gain his individuality and free will back. Although he feels confused about the sudden power that he displays as a leader of the mob, “[i]t frightened him at first” (Petry 2017, 282). He gains power from his black fellows, and his psyche as a black man is changed. He walks out of the darkness and confusion that has clouded his visions for his entire life. Finally, it dawns on him to realize the power of communal ties and the necessity of adopting black values in defining his experience as a black man, even if it means black rage. This awakening marks a critical shift from internalized individualism—rooted in white, patriarchal ideals of self-worth through domination and material success—toward a collective consciousness grounded in shared struggle, cultural resilience and emotional authenticity. Black rage, in this context, is not simply a destructive emotion but a form of political clarity and resistance. It is rather a response to the

dehumanizing conditions that have shaped his sense of self. It becomes a vehicle for reclaiming agency, forging solidarity and redefining masculinity not through domination, but through survival, truth-telling and communal responsibility.

William's feelings of self-achievement and black communal power are momentary when he is verbally abused by his wife, who also joins the mob. The first thing that Pink tells William, directing the riot, is, "[w]hat you doing out here in this mob?" He finally tells her about the injury and detention of their son in Georgia. Pink starts wailing and leading the protest herself by throwing a "big bottle of soda high in the air" mightily, which "made a wide arc and landed in the exact center of the plate-glass window of a furniture store. The glass crashed in with a sound like a gunshot" (Petry 2017, 287). She starts vandalism and looting acts, and other protesters follow suit by smashing the windows of other stores and taking other material possessions from stores. Nonetheless, he and other rioters seem to redress their multiple racial and economic inflicted problems. In Hillary Holladay's words, the riot is their "pathetic reaction to an institutionalized racism far beyond their control" (1996, 120). This serves as a justification for the Harlem Riot, one of Petry's main concerns behind her depiction. William's assertive masculine power is challenged and shifts into a follower position in Pink's presence. His sudden political enthusiasm during the riot revives his sense of masculine power, which remains valid until his contact with his domineering wife. "The feeling of great power and strength left him. He was so confused by its loss that he decided this thing happening in the street wasn't real. It was so dark [...] he almost convinced himself he was having a nightmare" (Petry 2017, 288). The riot becomes a material manifestation of the confusion in William's mind, and he gets delusional about the reality of it as his power diminishes. He gets discouraged and less rebellious after being exposed to much violence. He convinces his wife to return home as he can no longer bear seeing blood oozing from his wife and other rioters' hands while looting.

In the short story's conclusion, Pink falls on the pavement and dies while William watches her helplessly. Then, finally, he urges her to get up and speaks to her hysterically.

She didn't answer. He leaned over and touched her gently. Almost immediately afterward he straightened up. All his life, moments of despair and frustration had left him speechless – strangled by the words that rose in his throat. This time the words poured out.

He sent his voice raging into the darkness and the awful confusion of noises. "The sons of bitches," he shouted. "The sons of bitches" (Petry 2017, 295).

Petry implies William's moderation as black masculinity in her choice of diction. Adverbs like "gently" are omnipresent in the short story in describing William's various actions, especially concerning his treatment of Pink. He transforms into a rioter but does not seem to be fully recovered from the violence that he has suppressed. Only after Pink's death, thus, the demise of her power over him, he feels enraged again and breaks out into a new mode of his existence. William's cursing is the most unexpected act from a man who has stayed silently passive and confusingly delusive about his life. He becomes aggressive after all. Petry suggests that it is unavoidable for black men not to turn to violence even if they

were interested in it the least, which is a key element of social protest fiction. For one thing, his black rage—his defense mechanism—is a white hegemonic masculine value. There is a sense of inauthenticity in his conceptions of sanctioned masculinity and prospects for life betterment as they are acquired from his white oppressors such as Mr. Yudkin. As a performer of black rage, William's race links his masculine power to structures of domination in a way that oppresses him subtly.

4. Conclusion

Black rage transforms the protagonists of Petry's selected short stories from moderate, considerate husbands into explosively violent black men. Each of them channels his suppressed anger through a different outlet, shaped by the pressures of race, class and gender. Johnson ultimately turns his anger inward, fatally assaulting his caring and gentle wife in a tragic attempt to reclaim control and compensate for his inability to confront his true oppressors. William, on the other hand, redirects his pent-up rage outward, igniting in him a riotous force that erupts onto the streets of Harlem and targets white-owned establishments. Yet, like Johnson, William remains confined within the violent stereotypes historically imposed on African American masculinity. The complexities of these two expressions of enraged black manhood become more fully illuminated when analyzed through an intersectional lens. This approach reveals the entanglement between the explicit marginalization of their race and the subtler, but equally oppressive, expectations surrounding their gender. Both men ultimately fail to transcend their social inferiority because they internalize a white, patriarchal model of masculinity rooted in dominance and aggression. Still, Petry does not portray them as one-dimensional. She brings to light the nuanced, often contradictory dimensions of their masculine identities that are shaped and constrained by the unrelenting forces of systemic racism, economic exploitation and cultural stereotyping. Ultimately, Petry highlights the intricate and subtle sides of their masculine identities confined beyond dispute by the relentlessness of a racially discriminatory and economically oppressive environment.

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