Like a Winding Sheet

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANN PETRY

Born into a middle-class African American family in a predominantly white community, Petry developed into one of the foremost female writers on the subject of race in mid-twentieth century America. The daughter of a pharmacist, Petry attended Connecticut College of Pharmacy in her twenties and worked in the family drugstore for a number of years, while nurturing a talent for writing. She began penning plays and short stories at a young age, and in 1938 she married George D. Petry, a mystery writer. Together the couple moved to New York City, and it was here that she began honing her journalistic skills, reporting for *The People's Voice* and *Amsterdam News*. This time was hugely profitable for Petry as a writer of fiction as well, as the harsh reality of life in Harlem (which she reported on as a journalist) provided her with ample inspiration. In 1939, her first published story, "Marie of the Cabin Club," appeared in *The Afro American* under the name Arnold Petry. In subsequent years she went on to publish a number of short stories under her own name, including "Like a Winding Sheet," which was first published in 1945 in *Crisis* and subsequently collected into Martha Foley's *Best American Stories of 1946*. In 1946 Petry's first novel, *The Street*, was published and brought her national acclaim and a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship. She went on to publish two more novels, *Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1953), as well as her collected short stories in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (1971). Much of Petry's writing focuses on the issues of racial antagonism and gender explored in "Like a Winding Sheet," shining a light on the challenges of life for everyday African Americans. She sums up her own approach in a 1965 essay, writing: "These are people…Look at them and remember them." Petry died in her Connecticut hometown in 1997.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This period in Petry's writing falls at a particularly interesting time in history for African American writers. After the vibrance of the Harlem Renaissance, writers like Richard Wright began to popularize a new naturalism inspired by the austerity of the Great Depression, a time of great economic downturn and austerity for many working-class Americans. The Second World War then arrived, and in its wake came some new opportunities for African Americans. In 1948, for examepl, President Harry S. Truman racially integrated the military and mandated that all men receive equality of treatment and opportunity there. By the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to take shape, ushering in an era in which more and more African Americans would demand a fairer society. Petry's fiction can thus be read as very much of its time, not shrinking from acknowledging the grim reality of life for many African Americans while also hoping that one day, circumstances might improve.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Much of Petry's work focuses on the African American experience. Reminiscent of the social commentary of "Like a Winding Sheet," her novel *The Street* centers on the realistic depiction of an African American woman's struggle as a single mother and her pursuit of the American dream. The protagonist of that novel, Lutie Johnson, believes the secret to success is to blindly follow the example of Benjamin Franklin, but her dream cannot sustain her through the reality of modern American society, which discriminates against her on account of her race, class, and gender. The idea that American society continually fails its most vulnerable members runs through virtually all of Petry's writing and draws on the kind of protest fiction associated with Richard Wright. For example, Wright's *Native Son* (1940) seeks to not excuse the behavior of its black and impoverished protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Rather, it points to how tangibly his behavior is a product of his environment as a means of critiquing the societal pressures he faces, a strategy comparable to Petry's treatment of Johnson in "Like a Winding Sheet." Critics have also drawn comparisons between Petry's work and that of some of her female African American contemporaries, including Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Like a Winding Sheet"
- **When Written:** 1940s
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1945
- **Literary Period:** Post-Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short Story, African American Fiction, Protest Fiction
- **Setting:** The story is set in New York City in the 1940s.
- **Climax:** Johnson returns home and in a fit of blind rage beats his wife, Mae, likely to death.
- **Antagonist:** Systemic racism
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Northern Exposure. While much African American fiction is set in the South, Petry's work is unusual in that it is set in her native

Northeast. She is particularly interested in the racial politics of these northern communities, even tracing this history back centuries with her biography *Tituba of Salem Village* (1963).

Sales Success. *The Street* sold over a million copies, the first book by a female African American writer to do so.

PLOT SUMMARY

Johnson, a working-class African American man, awakes from a bad night's sleep. Working night shifts doesn't agree him, so not only is he exhausted but he has slept through his opportunity to make breakfast for his wife Mae, who also works nights. The couple playfully banter for a time, and Mae says that seeing Johnson wrapped up in their **bedsheet** reminds her of "a huckleberry—in a winding sheet." As the two leave for work Mae realizes it is Friday the thirteenth and wants to stay home, as she believes the date is unlucky. Johnson lovingly persuades her, though he mentally notes that many men would have reacted more harshly. Despite his aching legs, Johnson finally arrives at work at the "plant" and meditates on how his workplace could be reorganized to make the work less tiring. As he is late, Johnson attracts the attention of the white forewoman. She verbally attacks him, spitting out racial slurs. In a moment of anger, he fantasizes about striking her. Instead, he physically intimidates her and insists that she no longer use such offensive language. She backs off uneasily and apologizes.

The night wears on and Johnson becomes progressively more exhausted. As he is leaving work he wants to avoid the packed subway car and stops outside a restaurant. He sees a number of his coworkers in line for coffee, so he enters and waits in line. When it is his turn the white waitress casually tells him that there is no coffee left. Johnson interprets her gestures and tone of voice to indicate casual racism at his expense and has another violent fantasy about attacking her. He leaves in disgust and does not look back. If he had turned back, however, he would have seen that the waitress was genuinely out of coffee and that lots of white people were also turned away.

Now incredibly tired and bitter, Johnson returns home. Here he finds Mae, and sits down on the overalls that she wears for work. She complains that he will wrinkle them and asks him to stand up, but he pays no attention. She begins to playfully needle him, and in doing so unwittingly echoes the forewoman's language and the waitress's gesture. Feeling himself losing control, Johnson violently beats her, hitting her over and over. He feels that he has lost all control of his hands and that he can't stop what he's doing, as if his body is tightly wrapped in "a winding sheet."

CHARACTERS

Johnson – Johnson is the story's protagonist. A working-class African American man, he works nightshifts at an unspecified "plant" and is married to Mae. He begins the story as a loving husband who wouldn't dream of threatening his wife with violence, but as the narrative unfolds, Johnson feels increasingly emasculated by the white women with whom he interacts. For instance, when he arrives late for work, the forewoman Mrs. Scott verbally abuses him, pelting him with racial slurs. Later on, he attempts to buy a cup of coffee but believes the white waitress is discriminating against him because of his race, which fuels his sense of frustration even more. When Johnson finally arrives home, his rage spills over as Mae unconsciously mimics the speech and gestures of Mrs. Scott and the waitress. He succumbs to his anger, beating Mae severely and quite possibly to death. But Petry emphasizes that Johnson doesn't simply do this voluntarily; it is the powerlessness of his socially-ordained position as an African American that makes him feel as if he no longer has control over his own limbs, as if he is tied up in the titular **winding sheet.** The tragedy of Johnson's fate is that he evidently truly cares for Mae; he wishes at the start of the story that he'd made her breakfast, for example. He also appears to want to innovate, imagining more efficient ways for his workplace to operate, but he simply is not afforded the authority to make the changes he imagines. Instead, as he suppresses the desire to lash out at the perpetrators of racial discrimination, the reader watches Johnson's character deteriorate under the intense social pressures of his day. By the end of the story his "nature" has all but vanished, and he has become little more than a vessel for hatred.

Mae – Mae is a working-class African American woman and is married to Johnson. She works at a different "plant," also on the night shift, but is apparently less bothered by the work than her husband is. Mae is characterized as a playful and affectionate woman with a sincere love for Johnson. She is, however, perhaps overly superstitious, refusing to leave the house because it is Friday the thirteenth. Ironically, the house proves to be the most dangerous place for her by the story's conclusion, as in the privacy of their own home Johnson is able to unleash his deep frustration on her. When she inadvertently reminds him of the racism he experienced during the day, he suddenly begins beating her viciously, likely to death. In this way Mae is the real victim of the story, driving home Petry's suggestion that the most victimized figures in such a racist and sexist system are black women, who often suffer abuse at the hands of their partners.

Mrs. Scott – Mrs. Scott is the white forewoman at the plant at which Johnson works. When he arrives late she verbally attacks him, using racial slurs and suggesting that African American workers are the problem with the plant, even though

she also says that "half this shift comes in late." This renders her an unsympathetic character, but there is some suggestion that she is also struggling with social pressures as a woman in a male-dominated workplace. Johnson himself reveals some hostility to the idea of a woman doing her job and responds to her racial antagonism with physical intimidation. Mrs. Scott reacts fearfully to Johnson's intimidation and leaves him alone for the rest of his shift.

The Waitress – Johnson encounters an unnamed white waitress when he goes into a restaurant after work to get a cup of coffee. When he reaches the front of the line, she tells him that there's no more coffee at the moment, which he interprets as a sign of her racism. She also flips her long blond hair in a way that he interprets as contemptuous. However, the narration makes it clear that if Johnson had looked back before walking away, he would have seen that the restaurant really was out of coffee and that the waitress was telling the truth. This interaction represents how discrimination has warped Johnson's perception of the world around him, leading him to assume he is facing racial prejudice at every turn even when it is not present.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACIAL INEQUALITY

"Like a Winding Sheet" follows a single day in the life of Johnson, a working-class African American man. As Johnson arrives late for his night shift at an unspecified "plant," the forewoman immediately disciplines him and pelts him with verbal abuse and racial slurs. After his shift is over, Johnson follows his co-workers into a restaurant, but a white waitress casually tells him they're out of coffee, and Johnson believes this is on account of his race. These events trigger a deep and ultimately uncontrollable anger in Johnson, which erupts at the story's climax, when he returns home and violently beats his wife, Mae, quite possibly to death. But crucially, Petry seeks to present Johnson to the reader as a character worthy of sympathy, or at least pity. While Mae is easily identifiable as the greatest victim of the story, Petry is also interested in depicting the psychological trauma of systemic racism that Johnson must endure. Through "Like a Winding Sheet," Petry illustrates just how ever-present discrimination is in even the most ordinary aspects of Johnson's life, and suggests how damaging this kind of experience can be.

Throughout the story, Johnson experiences racial alienation in even the most intimate corners of his life. One of the most poignant moments showing the pervasiveness of racism comes as Johnson lies in bed, noticing the contrast of his skin with the whiteness of **the bedsheet**. Throughout the story Petry refers to Johnson's exhaustion: "He had to force himself to struggle past the outgoing workers, punch the time clock, and get the little cart he pushed around all night, because he kept toying with the idea of going home and getting back in bed." The bed is in many ways Johnson's place of sanctuary, representing a space in which to escape the drudgery and physical exertions associated with his job. But perhaps more importantly, this is an intimate space, shared only between himself and Mae. The bed in this sense should offer Johnson the opportunity to shut out the outside world and feel loved and accepted, in sharp contrast with the public spaces explored in the rest of the story, such as the plant and the restaurant, in which Johnson is continually the object of scrutiny. Instead, lying in bed, "[Johnson] looked at his arms silhouetted against the white of the sheets. They were inky black by contrast." Petry's interplay of color here suggests that Johnson's experience of social alienation because of his race permeates even this most intimate and everyday space.

The interaction between Johnson and the forewoman at the plant also highlights how racism seeps into every aspect of Johnson's life, as the forewoman turns the mundane instance of an employee arriving late to work into a racially charged confrontation. The forewoman uses this opportunity to attempt to degrade Johnson, using racial slurs and grouping Johnson with the other African American employees, spitting out: "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—" Prior to this, however, she notes: "Half this shift comes in late." Evidently this is a larger problem at the plant that involves many employees, but the forewoman chooses to focus on the African American workers, alienating Johnson from the rest of his co-workers and suggesting that his race is connected to his performance at work. The banality of Johnson's offence thus is far out of proportion to the lengths to which he is forced to defend himself. "You got the right to cuss me four ways to Sunday but I ain't letting nobody call me a nigger," he says, scornfully repeating the same slur the forewoman used. He is driven to defending his fundamental racial identity over such a minor issue, suggesting again how completely his social alienation has permeated every aspect of his life.

But Petry isn't straightforwardly suggesting that the whole of white society is seeking to punish Johnson for being African American in the same way that the forewoman is. Instead, Johnson's experience of finding discrimination in seemingly every aspect of his life motivates him to assume the influence of racism, even when it is not present. When Johnson goes to a restaurant to order coffee and the white waitress insists that there isn't any more coffee, he assumes that her behavior is

simply racist. However, as Johnson walks away, seething, Petry makes it clear that the waitress was instead being truthful: "When he went out the door he didn't look back. If he had he would have seen the flickering blue flame under the shiny coffee urn being extinguished." At this point in the narrative, Johnson has internalized his racial struggle to such a degree that Petry suggests he is almost blind to reality; it has permeated his existence so deeply that he can no longer identify what is discrimination and what isn't. Petry's point here is tragic in its irony. She is essentially pointing out that the trauma of racism is self-perpetuating. No matter how desperately someone wants to escape it, once they've internalized the idea that everywhere they turn they will be met with hatred, it's hard not to feel that that hatred is ever-present, whether it is or not. Johnson's frequent experiences of genuine racism consume him and lead him to feel that every part of his experience, no matter how small, is dominated by his race.

RACISM, ALIENATION, AND ABUSE

One of the questions Petry is most interested in asking over the course of "Like a Winding Sheet" is that of what causes people behave the way they do. The story's shocking conclusion, in which the protagonist, Johnson, beats his wife, Mae, very likely to death, is in direct contrast to the story's opening. The reader is introduced to Johnson through his loving thoughts of Mae, and when she later annoys him through her reluctance to leave the house, Johnson notes that other men in his position might threaten violence, but that he has no desire to do so. After a day of racial antagonism, however, Johnson returns home exhausted and frustrated. When Mae unwittingly echoes the words and gestures of the abusive forewoman at Johnson's work and a waitress whom he believes discriminated against him, Johnson's anger overwhelms him. In the course of one day, Johnson's character thus evolves dramatically. His transformation suggests that being racially alienated and dehumanized has detrimental effects on the individual, depriving them of their identity and leading them to commit similar (or worse) abuse against others.

The wording of Johnson's thoughts at the opening of the story is crucial to understanding how deep his discomfort with the idea of violence toward Mae runs. Nonviolence is established not just as a shallow belief, but as Johnson's intrinsic nature. It is not merely that Johnson doesn't want to beat Mae—Petry makes it clear that "He wasn't made that way." The use of the word "made" suggests that there is something fundamental to person's a character which isn't derived from their environment, but is instead entirely innate and instinctual. The word choice could even be interpreted as evoking the divine, implying that Johnson's moral fabric has been created by a higher force (presumably God) in a certain manner. His disinterest in violence is not arbitrary and is unchanging. In other words, it is not a choice; he simply could not act any differently than his nature dictates. The significance of this element of his character is further highlighted by Johnson's noting that "a lot of men might have" handled the situation in a more aggressive manner. Johnson is unconcerned with living up to external, socially-conditioned standards of masculinity—instead, he resolves to follow what he intrinsically feels is right and is content in his individuality.

However, Johnson's secure sense of identity begins to collapse when social interactions devalue him and challenge his individuality. This results in a breakdown of the intrinsic nature that has been established thus far in the story, demonstrating the power of a toxic social environment to break down the individual. One of the functions of the forewoman's racist tirade directed at Johnson is to humiliate him, but another is to lump him in with other African Americans, as she spits out, "I'm sick of you niggers." The use of this racial slur is a visceral contrast to Johnson's nonviolent attitude and it completely dehumanizes him as an individual, hinting at just how powerfully the forewoman's words will affect him. Whereas Johnson previously "wasn't made" to beat a woman, his interaction with the forewoman makes it so he merely "could not bring himself to do so." This subtle shift in word choice implies that his nature has been challenged by the forewoman's verbal abuse, demonstrating the swift, demoralizing influence that racial discrimination can have on an otherwise peaceful individual. Petry thus suggests that social pressures, specifically racial alienation, have the ability to deprive an individual of even the most fundamental (and positive) parts of their identity. All it takes is for Mae, the person Johnson loves most, to echo the racist comment made by the forewoman to tip him over the edge and make him feel completely deprived of his individuality. The result of his interactions with the forewoman and Mae is that he falls into pattern of socially-ingrained violence (what he previously referred to as the behavior of "a lot of men"). Being racially alienated and lumped into a defamatory category (rather than viewed as an individual with a unique identity) has the power to change Johnson fundamentally and perpetuate abuse of his own, highlighting the destructive and cyclical nature of racially-charged violence.

Through Johnson's collapse of identity, Petry suggests that societal pressures like systemic racism have the power to erase individuality, which in turn leads to alienation and can ultimately perpetuate more abuse. In Petry's view, the devaluation and dehumanization of the individual can effectively destroy them, and even lead them to harm other people.

GENDER AND RACE

In "Like a Winding Sheet," Petry demonstrates just how closely entangled issues of race and gender

can be. As the narrative unfolds, Johnson, the protagonist, endures a racially antagonistic encounter with his plant's white forewoman, and believes he is denied coffee by a white waitress on account of his race. He ultimately beats his wife, Mae, (possibly to death) for playfully echoing these same racist sentiments. Both of Johnson's interactions with white women produce fantasies of violence that play out in his mind, but which he knows he can never enact. Instead, he takes out his intense frustration on his own African American wife, despite beginning the story as a man who adored Mae and was "not made" to threaten or strike a woman. This desire to exercise his power creates an increasingly fraught scenario revolving around the intersection of gender and race. Petry shows that although Johnson is the victim of racial violence, he himself perpetuates gendered violence. The dissonance between his struggle against abuse from white women and his subsequent violence toward Mae thus suggests that black women like Mae are ultimately the foremost victims of both racism and sexism.

Though Johnson is clearly racially oppressed throughout the story, he also holds sexist ideals and wants to exert power over women. At the beginning of the story, Johnson knows that "a lot of men might have" resorted to threats of violence when dealing with Mae's reluctance to leave the house, but doesn't feel the need to subscribe to this socially-mandated version of masculinity. Yet Johnson *does* feel secure in the knowledge that, as a man, he has the physical strength to beat his wife if he wanted to. He seems to feel a sense of superiority in choosing not to act abusively, and despite not feeling able to do so, he still defines his masculinity by this latent power. He acknowledges that his position as a man means he has the opportunity to act either way, even if his own character dictates that he refrain from threats of violence. This need to feel power over women extends outside the home, as exemplified by his evident distaste at having a female superior at work: "He could never remember to refer to her as the forelady even in his mind. It was funny to have a white woman for a boss in a plant like this one." The fact that he struggles with this "even in his mind" suggests a profound intellectual discomfort with the idea of ceding power to a woman.

This need to feel power over women creates tension in Johnson's interactions with white women, as his position as an African American means that these women can claim power over him on account of his race. The forewoman pelts Johnson with racial abuse in an effort to humiliate him and establish a sense of authority over him, stating, "Every guy comes in here late always has an excuse. [...] And the niggers is the worse." Not only does this racial slur antagonize Johnson, but it also emasculates him since she is a woman, prompting him to resort to the threat of violence by "[stepping] closer to her" with clenched fists. This can be interpreted as an unconscious move to remind the forewoman of the physical power associated with his masculinity. Later on, Johnson explicitly takes comfort and even pleasure from imagining the sensation of beating the forewoman, making specific reference to her femininity by mentally conjuring up "the soft flesh of her face [...] under the hardness of his hands." Petry creates an echo of this interaction in Johnson's later interaction with the waitress. Johnson fixates on the casual way in which she tosses "the length of her blond hair from the back of her neck as expressive of her contempt for him," with the long blond hair epitomizing both her whiteness and her femininity. Once again feeling emasculated, this time Johnson mentally takes even more explicit pleasure at the thought of enacting violent revenge on her femininity: "What he wanted to do was hit her so hard that the scarlet lipstick on her mouth would smear and spread over her nose, her chin, out toward her cheeks." Here, Petry blurs the images of lipstick and blood, creating a fetishized picture of female pain which Johnson relishes as a means of combating his feelings of humiliation and emasculation.

Each of these examples shows how Johnson channels his experience of racism into violent, sexist frustration, which he ultimately unleashes and directs at Mae. Through this chain reaction, Petry emphasizes the heightened misogyny that black women are often forced to endure. While both the forewoman's and the waitress's racial privilege protects them from Johnson's rage in public spaces, as a black woman in the privacy of her own home Mae is afforded no such protection, as Johnson takes out his rage by beating her instead. Mae is effectively used as a safer stand-in for the forewoman and the waitress. As a black woman and in private rather than in public, Mae is vulnerable to Johnson's attack as there are fewer consequences for him abusing her. Since the racism that Johnson experiences throughout the story is presented as socially acceptable, the reader can infer that society would be less sympathetic toward Mae as a black woman than toward the white women whom Johnson really wanted to abuse. By showing how Mae suffers immense violence (and possibly even loses her life) for something as minor as a playful comment, Petry suggests that black women experience both racism and sexism on a level far more severe than black men or white women, respectively.

Through the unjust beating of Mae, Petry illustrates how damaging discrimination can be—particularly when the realms of racism and sexism intersect. The combination of violent masculinity along with racial discrimination creates a completely toxic environment, in which black women have to bear the brunt of a socially-ingrained cycle of violence.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BEDSHEET

The bedsheet in Johnson and Mae's bedroom is a complex symbol of both their love for each other and the way that their society transforms that intimacy into something toxic. At the beginning of the story Johnson is wrapped in a bedsheet and Mae remarks that it looks "like a winding sheet." A winding sheet is a shroud, i.e. a piece of fabric used to wrap a corpse. This is a somewhat ominous comment to make at such a casual moment, and the symbolism of sheet begins to become clear a moment later, when Johnson thinks about how dark his skin looks against the white sheet. Later, that same image of a winding sheet takes on a horrible kind of resonance as the story draws to a close. In the act of beating Mae, likely to death, Johnson feels trapped, as if he is no longer in control of his own body, and he describes the feeling as like being "enmeshed in a winding sheet." While Mae may literally be dying, Johnson feels as if the societal pressures which weigh on him are slowly paralyzing him and preparing him for death as well, as if he is being suffocated by the knowledge of his own oppression. The bedsheet they share, a symbol of the intimate relationship between them, thus becomes a symbol of death and is ultimately transformed into a symbol of a society that slowly murders its most vulnerable members—in part by turning them against the ones they love.

JOHNSON'S HANDS

Johnson's body symbolizes everything that is natural and internal to him, and it is worth noting that from the beginning of the story, Johnson feels a profound sense of discomfort in his body due to the long hours he works ("Even now just starting his workday his legs ached"). This can be read as a kind of symbolic representation of the external world inflicting pain and unease on Johnson's person. But more importantly, the way in which Johnson loses control of **his hands** over the course of the story is hugely evocative of an internal crisis of identity. Hands are a particularly important body part in literature—they often metonymically represent agency, since they are the tools with which most of a person's actions are carried out. As the narrative unfolds, Johnson's hands begin to feel like they're no longer connected to his body and instead have a mind of their own, for example when he chooses not to beat the forewoman but nonetheless finds his hands primed for the action: "He felt a curious tingling in his fingers and he looked down at his hands. They were clenched tight, hard, ready to smash some of those small purple veins in her face. […] he had the queer feeling that his hands were not exactly a part of him anymore—they had developed a separate life of their own over which he had no control." Johnson is becoming alienated from his own body and his own sense of agency, due to the powerlessness of his position as an African American man in this society. His hands, representing his agency, no longer feel like his own by the end of the story: "He had lost all control over his hands." It's at this point that his hands turn on him completely, viciously beating his wife Mae in a way that Johnson once swore he could never do.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Northwestern University Press edition of *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* published in 2017.

Like a Winding Sheet Quotes

Mae looked at the twisted sheet and giggled. "Looks like a winding sheet," she said. "A shroud—" Laughter tangled with her words and she had to pause for a moment before she could continue. "You look like a huckleberry—in a winding sheet—"

Related Characters: Mae (speaker), Johnson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Mae makes these playful comments shortly after Johnson wakes up at the beginning of the story, as he lies twisted in their bedsheet. The dynamic between Mae and Johnson thus far has been a loving and teasing one, so the tone of this passage introduces a crucial shift. While Mae is clearly still cheerful, indicated by the fact that she has "giggled," the morbid image of a "winding sheet" (another term for a burial shroud) constraining Johnson creates an ominous atmosphere which lingers until the end of the story when the image returns for a second time.

It is also worth nothing Mae's comparison of Johnson to "a huckleberry," an especially dark berry. Like a bedsheet, a "winding sheet" is traditionally white, meaning that Mae is also drawing attention to the blackness of Johnson's skin in contrast to the whiteness of the sheet, anticipating Johnson's later thoughts that his arms are "inky black by contrast." The banality of this interplay of color emphasizes just how deeply ingrained Johnson and Mae's sense of racial alienation goes, and the morbid connotations of the image suggest that Mae intuits on some level that this kind of alienation can be fatal.

> 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.

Related Characters: Mae, Johnson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Johnson's refusal to "talk [...] roughly" or "threaten to strike" Mae while convincing her to go to work is a key marker of the state of his character at the beginning of the story. His patience and "willingness to take time" to "talk persuasively, urging her gently" indicates his sincere attachment to Mae, as he is willing to humor her although he might legitimately become frustrated instead.

Indeed, he notes that "a lot of men" might have acted more aggressively. But Johnson simply "wasn't made that way." By contrast to later in the story when he begins entertaining fantasies of violence against women and when he ultimately beats Mae (quite possibly to death) as a means of reasserting his masculinity after a day of emasculation by white women, at this point Johnson appears completely secure in his masculinity. He has no interest in what "a lot of men" might do, feeling no need to measure up to a socially ordained standard of masculinity achieved by punishing women. Instead, his desire to treat women well feels like some intrinsic part of him that can never be changed. Soon, however, the story will challenge this idea by demonstrating how a hostile environment can strip an individual of their most seemingly intrinsic traits.

> He never could remember to refer to her as the forelady even in his mind. It was funny to have a white woman for a boss in a plant like this one.

Related Characters: Mrs. Scott , Johnson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

When he arrives at the plant, Johnson begins to display some of his ingrained sexism. He evidently has trouble reconciling his idea of femininity with the authority needed to run a "plant like this one," meaning that he struggles to accept Mrs. Scott as his boss. The fact that he can never remember to think of her as the person in charge hints at a deep-seated intellectual discomfort even with the idea of a "forelady" as opposed to a foreman. Johnson's inability to remember the correct term suggests that he is fundamentally uncomfortable with having a woman in that position of power over him.

Johnson also notes Mrs. Scott's race, referring to her as "a white woman." The power struggle between the two characters which emerges effectively pits her whiteness against his masculinity, with each character feeling like they should be the one in control. Johnson's reference to her whiteness can thus be understood to foreshadow that conflict, which fully emerges later in the narrative.

> "Excuses. You guys always got excuses," her anger grew and spread. "Every guy comes in here late always has an excuse. His wife's sick or his grandmother died or somebody in the family had to go to the hospital," she paused, drew a deep breath. "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—"

Related Characters: Mrs. Scott (speaker), Johnson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Scott's tirade directed at Johnson after he arrives late for work at the plant demonstrates the level of racial discrimination in Johnson's workplace. In the first part of the speech she clearly states that virtually all of the plant's employees who are late come up with implausible excuses, frustratedly remarking: "Every guy comes in here late always has an excuse." But then she proceeds to place the blame on the black employees specifically, calling them "the worse," which is evidently unfair given that she has just emphasized how widespread the problem is among all the plant's employees.

Mrs. Scott also resorts to a racial slur as a means of humiliating Johnson and lumping him together with all the other African American employees, demonstrating her contempt for that entire group and her inability to recognize Johnson as a unique individual. The fact that she

pauses beforehand and takes "a deep breath" further suggests that this is perhaps a calculated effort—not careless racial profiling, but rather a targeted means of unfairly seeking to establish control over him.

"You got the right to get mad," he interrupted softly. "You got the right to cuss me four ways to Sunday but I ain't letting nobody call me a nigger."

He stepped closer to her. His fists were doubled. His lips were drawn back in a thin narrow line. A vein in his forehead stood out swollen, thick.

And the woman backed away from him, not hurriedly but slowly—two, three steps back.

Related Characters: Johnson (speaker), Mrs. Scott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

In his rebuttal to Mrs. Scott's racist tirade against him for being late, Johnson accepts responsibility for arriving late but refuses to allow her to use racial slurs. Here the reader observes him asserting his own individual identity, refusing to be lumped together with other African Americans or to be personally humiliated by her language.

Although he asserts a sense of calm in this speech, interrupting "softly," Johnson nonetheless uses his physical power as a man to intimidate Mrs. Scott. This indicates the internal struggle he is undergoing, wishing to release his rage but aware that his position as both an employee and a black man prohibits a violent response. Thus, his speech adopts a softness which his body, aligned with his instinctive response, cannot, and instead is primed for violence almost without conscious thought. For instance, Petry's use of the passive "His fists were doubled" rather than "He doubled his fists" hints at how instinctive this reaction is. Johnson thus struggles to reconcile his instinctive response with one that is more socially permissible and presumably more in line with the values he expressed at the start of the story.

And he thought he should have hit her anyway, smacked her hard in the face, felt the soft flesh of her face give under the hardness of his hands. He tried to make his hands relax by offering them a description of what it would have been like to strike her because he had the queer feeling that his hands were not exactly a part of him anymore—they had developed a separate life of their own over which he had no control.

Related Characters: Mrs. Scott , Johnson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203-4

Explanation and Analysis

After Johnson refrains from striking Mrs. Scott when she verbally abuses him, pelting him with racial slurs, he fantasizes about what it would have been like to hit her. It is important to recognize that this fantasy is very much a gendered one in which he relishes the thought of forcing the feminine to submit to the masculine, imagining what it would have felt like to experience "the soft flesh of her face give way to the hardness of his hands." Here the hardness of his hands invokes masculine stereotypes (powerful and unyielding) while the softness of her flesh connotes the traditionally feminine (delicate and yielding). This particular reference to softness also mirrors the language used to describe when Johnson beats Mae at the end of the story and registers the feeling of her "soft flesh." The connection between the two passages suggests that for Johnson, beating Mae is directly related to a desire to unleash his anger at Mrs. Scott.

It is also important to note the alienation Johnson feels from his hands at this point in the story, feeling as if "they had developed a separate life of their own over which he had no control." Throughout the story Johnson's hands symbolize his sense of agency and so this suggests that at this point Johnson is feeling increasingly alienated from his sense of autonomy, instead feeling that what he truly wishes to do is totally separate from how he actually behaves.

> He felt his hands begin to tingle and the tingling went all the way down to his finger tips so that he glanced down at them. They were clenched tight, hard, into fists. Then he looked at the girl again. What he wanted to do was hit her so hard that the scarlet lipstick on her mouth would smear and spread over her nose, her chin, out toward her cheeks, so hard that she would never toss her head again and refuse a man a cup of coffee because he was black.

Related Characters: The Waitress , Johnson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

After believing that a white waitress denied him a cup of coffee because he is black (although the narration makes it clear that she did not do so and instead was really out of coffee), Johnson once again relishes a fantasy of striking a woman. This in contrast to the opening of the story in which he feels totally repulsed by the idea of threatening or hitting a woman.

This second fantasy echoes the first, in which Johnson relished the thought of striking his plant's forewoman, in a number of ways. Once again, the violence is particularly gendered, with Johnson mulling over a fetishized image which seems to depict her "scarlet lipstick" looking similar to blood. This again creates the impression of a fantasy of violence that takes pleasure in belittling and harming women specifically. And in addition to this, Johnson's hands once again feel as if they are a totally separate entity, primed for a fight ("They were clenched, tight, hard, into fists"), expressing his desire to express emotions that he does not feel able to act upon.

> "Aw, come on and eat," she said. There was a coaxing note in her voice. "You're nothing but an old hungry nigger trying to act tough and—" she paused to giggle and then continued, "You—"

Related Characters: Mae (speaker), Johnson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

Towards the end of the narrative, Mae seeks to brighten Johnson's mood, and in doing so tries to recreate the teasing tone used by the pair that morning, at the beginning of the story. Her sincere affection for Johnson is suggested through her voice's "coaxing note" and her "giggle," which demonstrate that she intends her comments to be understood as playful. Tragically, however, Mae here unwittingly echoes the racial slur used by Mrs. Scott in her racist tirade against Johnson after he was late for work, which unleashes his pent-up rage.

Here Petry delineates one of the questions the story prompts the reader to consider: that of the nature of the relationship between race and language. While Mae, like many African Americans, re-appropriates this particular slur to create a sense of intimacy between herself and Johnson, due to Johnson's experience of systemic and interpersonal racism that day, he is reminded of that painful experience rather then being comforted. Through this tragic miscommunication, Petry suggests that the effort to re-appropriate racial slurs can never be fully successful until the slurs cease to be used in racist contexts, as otherwise they may simply end up bringing up memories of racial trauma.

> 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.

Related Characters: Mae, Johnson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

At the emotional climax of the narrative, when Johnson strikes Mae, Petry uses language in quite a specific fashion to drive home her point about the nature of Johnson's abuse of Mae. Ealier, when fantasizing about striking Mrs. Scott after her racist tirade against him for arriving late to work, Johnson relishes the idea of hitting her "soft flesh." Similarly, when fantasizing about what it would have been like to strike the waitress he believed denied him a cup of coffee on account of his race, Johnson takes pleasure in the

image of smearing her lipstick across the waitress's face.

In this passage Petry directly echoes both of these descriptions, suggesting that Johnson's striking Mae is a kind of horrifying wish fulfillment. For him, this encounter is about fulfilling his inexpressible desires to strike white women, like Mrs. Scott and the waitress, whom he felt emasculated him by using their racial privilege in order to unfairly gain authority over him, a man. Thus, his previous fantasies revolve around the idea of making the feminine submit to the masculine, and tragically it is Mae, the women with the most love and respect for Johnson, who is forced to act out this submission. As a black woman in her own home, she is afforded none of the social privilege and protection the two white women are, and she is thus vulnerable to Johnson's desire to assert his masculine authority, even though she herself has never mistreated him.

> 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.

Related Characters: Mae, Johnson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

In the story's final lines Johnson's mind harkens back to the opening of the story. Mae had initially playfully described their bedsheet as "like a winding sheet" (meaning a burial shroud) twisted around Johnson as he lay in bed, and at the emotional climax of the story, as Johnson beats Mae (quite possibly to death), he returns to this image. He uses it to suggest how suffocated he feels, how his experience of systemic racism has left him feeling bound by forces beyond his control, and the realization of this only enrages him further ("And even as the thought formed in his mind, his hands reached for her face again and yet again"). But this image is also intimately linked with ideas of death. Specifically, Petry is perhaps hinting to the reader that this encounter will lead to Mae's death, as a symbol of their marital love, the bedsheet, transforms into a symbol of death, a "winding sheet."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LIKE A WINDING SHEET

Johnson awakes from an uneasy night's sleep. He is disappointed that he has slept so late, as it means he has missed the chance to make his wife, Mae, breakfast. He feels an ache in his legs from the previous night's work, while Mae is already up and appears upbeat.

Johnson's thoughts as he awakens succinctly introduce two key points of his character: his sincere love for his wife, and a sense of unease with the outside world, represented by the ache in his legs produced by his job at the factory.

Mae speaks affectionately to Johnson, giggling about how he's twisted up in their **bedsheet** and looks like a "huckleberry" in a "winding sheet." Johnson reflects that his dark skin does look "inky black" against the white sheet. Johnson enjoys the sounds of Mae's giggles, until she reminds him that he can't be late to work again. He complains that he can't get used to sleeping in the daytime, and that his legs hurt all the time from standing through his shift.

The image of Johnson wrapped up in their bedsheet "like a winding sheet" (i.e., a shroud) creates an ominous atmosphere which lingers to the end of the story, as it transforms the bedsheet, which at first seems like a symbol of their marital love, into a symbol of death. This moment, though light-hearted, hints at the dark turn that the story will take.

As they are about to leave the house Mae remembers that today is Friday the thirteenth. Feeling the date to be inauspicious, Mae decides she wants to stay home rather than going to work. Johnson eventually persuades her to go, but he makes a point of not threatening her or speaking harshly to her, as "a lot of men" might have done in his position.

Petry creates some subtle irony here, as for Mae the date does indeed turn out to be unlucky, but ironically the violence against her ultimately takes place at home, the very place she thinks she will be most safe. It is also worth noting here how much Johnson defines himself by his ability to refrain from cruelty towards women, an ability which, it later turns out, doesn't hold up against his experience of racism.

Johnson arrives at work, already exhausted, and late due to the time he spent convincing Mae to go to work. He imagines how if he were in charge, he would improve things to make the work less tiring. He catches the attention of the white forewoman, whom he notes looks especially bad tempered today, and muses about how he can't quite get used to the idea of a white woman as a boss.

Here it is clear, that given the chance, Johnson could be a highly productive member of society, someone who innovates rather than simply staying in a dead-end job, which highlights how tragic it is that he is instead belittled and oppressed. Petry also introduces some more nuance to Johnson's character in this passage, suggesting that although he is a victim of racism, he still harbors some blatantly sexist views.

When Johnson walks by the forewoman, she grumbles about how everyone in the plant seems to arrive late, especially Johnson. He tells her how much his legs hurt and that he has trouble sleeping during the day, but she doesn't listen. She starts using racial slurs, pinning the greatest portion of the blame on black employees.

The forewoman's speech is overtly uncaring and racist. Her use of racial slurs serves to lump all the black employees together, denying their individuality and instead unfairly painting them as lazy or inattentive workers.

Johnson experiences a flash of anger and fantasizes about beating the forewoman. Instead he approaches her in an intimidating way so that she is forced to back away, and he insists that she is free to insult him but must never again use racial slurs. She appears to be frightened and apologizes hastily. Johnson notices that he is beginning to feel disconnected from his **hands**, which feel primed to strike her. His mind lingers on how pleasurable he imagines it would be to hit her, and thinks that his hands would probably feel much better if he had done it. In particular he imagines how satisfying his hands would feel against her "soft flesh."

The forewoman's speech attacking Johnson is of course offensive racially, but the fact that she is a woman speaking to him this way makes him feel emasculated as well. He reminds her of his physical strength by stepping towards her and fantasizes about how good it would feel to physically attack her distinctly female "soft flesh." He is tempted to hit her, but this clashes with his distaste for violence against women, which he expressed earlier when he refused to even speak harshly to Mae. This inner conflict between Johnson's sexist rage, his racial oppression, and his desire to do the right thing builds up in his hands, which symbolize his thwarted desire to take control of this unbearable situation.

As the night draws to a close, the other workers appear uneasy and the incessant noise of the machines builds. Johnson collects his pay slip and leaves. Outside he notices what a pleasant night it is and reminisces about how enjoyable he finds Mae's company. He thinks about how they often stay up until dawn instead of going to bed, laughing together, preparing food, listening to the radio or just dozing.

Here, Petry creates a marked contrast between the tension-filled factory, where the moods of the other workers and the maddening mechanical sounds of the machines induce hostility and anxiety, and the warmth and freedom of Johnson's home life, where he and Mae exist harmoniously away from the world's racism.

In order to avoid a busy subway ride Johnson chooses to enter an inviting restaurant he's noticed, where he sees his coworkers purchasing coffee. The thought of the long train ride back to Harlem is an exhausting prospect to him, as he watches his coworkers sip coffee and notices how it seems to revive them. He decides to wait in line for coffee as well.

Petry highlights how Johnson's entire existence feels exhausting, not just his work hours. This makes the prospect of the revitalizing coffee especially appealing, and shows just how badly Johnson needs relief from his grueling day-to-day life.

When Johnson reaches the counter, the girl serving the coffee casually tells him that there is no more coffee, flicking back her long blonde hair. Johnson feels certain that she is lying, and that she's refusing to serve him because he is black. He expects that his coworkers might protest, but they only shuffle awkwardly and say nothing.

The girl's flicking of her long blonde hair, a symbol which unites whiteness and femininity, to dismiss Johnson once again makes him feel emasculated by the influence afforded to white women, and his coworkers' failure to respond makes him feel they are also complicit in this process of emasculation.

Johnson experiences an intense desire to strike her, and again he notices how tension builds in his **hands**. He relishes the thought of beating her and in doing so smearing her lipstick across her face, violently enough that she would never deny a black man a cup of coffee again. He leans towards her, preparing to strike her forcefully. But he instead lets his hands drop with intense effort, as he again feels unable to hit a woman, no matter who she is or how badly she treats him.

The fetishized image of lipstick being smeared like blood echoes Johnson's earlier fantasies of striking the forewoman's "soft flesh," as he again relishes notably gendered thoughts of violence. But he still feels unable to violate his principles, once again producing a crisis of agency, as represented by his hands.

Johnson leaves without looking back, thinking about how the waitress seemed contemptuous of him as she tossed her hair. If he had looked back, however, he would have seen the waitress turning away the other people waiting in line for coffee and tossing her hair again as she started to make a fresh batch.

Here Petry suggests that Johnson's experience of racism, while genuine, warps his perception of reality. He feels himself to be so greatly alienated that even when someone behaves innocuously towards him, he's capable of misinterpreting their action as a racist one. Johnson's belief here, though inaccurate, is thus understandable; he experiences racism so often (at work, for example) that it's only natural he would see it even when it's not there.

While he is on the subway, Johnson's bodily discomfort increases as his pent-up frustration mounts. He feels tension expanding through his whole body and building up painfully as he struggles to contain it.

Throughout the story Johnson's physical discomfort reflects his social discomfort, and on the crowded train it nears a breaking point. It's still clear that Johnson wants to control himself, but it's also becoming increasingly likely that he may not be able to do so.

Johnson arrives home and finds Mae. She is cheerful but quickly irritates him by cracking her gum, and she unwittingly adds to his pent-up frustration by flicking her hair in the same way the waitress did. Johnson tries not to start a fight, however, as he feels genuine affection for her. Exhausted, he sits down on her overalls for the next day. She complains he will wrinkle them and insists he move, but he refuses.

The lengths Johnson is prepared to go to in order to avoid arguing with Mae demonstrate his sincere love for her. But the sight of her flicking her hair the way the waitress did again highlights how prone Johnson is to connect innocuous actions with racially charged ones, and this moment also reminds the reader of how Johnson's frequent experiences of racism wear on him.

Mae tries to coax Johnson out of his bad mood, but her playful repetition of the same racial slur the forewoman used unleashes his fury. Instead of taking pleasure in her laughter as he has done in the past, Johnson doesn't even really hear her as his hands begin to tingle. He strikes her and notes the feeling of her "soft flesh" and how her red lipstick is smeared across her face. He feels as though he has lost all control over his body, powerlessly watching as he hits her over and over again. He feels totally suffocated and bound up by something greater than himself, as if wound up in "a winding **sheet**." The thought appears to only spur him on to more and more violence.

Mae's sincere love for Johnson is demonstrated by how much she wants to improve his mood; it's clear that in just about every way, this is a loving couple. But her use of the same racial slur triggers his anger, suggesting that racism can turn even caring, private relationships between people of color into traumatic experiences. Johnson here reaches the peak of his crisis of agency, as he feels totally divorced from the actions he is committing; it seems that racism has alienated him so deeply from himself that his actions don't feel at all meaningful anymore. At the same time, Petry's repetition of "soft flesh" and the image of smeared lipstick drive home the idea that Mae is an innocent stand-in for the forewoman and the waitress. Johnson's sexist perspective essentially causes him to lump Mae together with the women who have offended him, even though he loves her. This prejudiced inability to see members of a marginalized group (in this case, women) as distinct individuals mirrors the way that the racist forewoman lumped together all the black workers at Johnson's factory, showing how different kinds of discrimination can play off each other to disastrous effect.

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