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Humanity's Rejection of Stagnancy: Our Movement Toward Petry's Better World

In his examination of novelist Ann Petry's work, Michael Barry signals to Petry's big question: "is the world getting any better?" (Barry, 141). Ask someone this question in 2020, and many would answer "no" without hesitation. It has been a year of sickness, fear, and uncertainty; the world struck by a virus, Lebanon victim to explosions, black citizens forced to march like it's 1955, and the list could go on. So many of us are simultaneously at our lowest, and I can't bring myself to blame those who don't see brighter days ahead. But this hopelessness—this despondency—is why we need the humanities now, more than ever: without the humanities, we would be stuck in a perpetual stagnation—without improvement, and without hope.

Petry's 1946 novel *The Street* explored her question, specifically examining themes of black poverty, disenfranchisement, and abuse; to Petry's dismay, decades following her novel's rise to fame, these issues still flourished (141). It has now been two decades since Petry's passing, and black men and women are villainized for asserting something that should not be controversial: that *they matter*. And so, sadly, Petry's answer today, to her own question, would still be "no".

Her question becomes indispensable when we acknowledge, that if we ever want our answer to truly be "yes, the world is better", we must listen to those whose answer is "no". When we look to our past, we so easily claim we'd never sit idle while injustice endured like others had allowed—yet injustice and suffering happens at our toes, fat-cats overfed cream exploited from the overworked and underpaid, Indigenous people impoverished by our governments, and black North Americans still forced to march for their livelihood, all with the additional stress of a global pandemic. This vicious inertia goes against everything the humanities represent, and in no way, will lead to a better world.

In this present uncertainty, the humanities allow us look to our past; its art, its literature, its culture, our history. It gifts us the power to learn and become informed citizens; learn from mistakes, but also recognize the successes. We must look to the progress of humanity during times of crisis, and realize that at every point in history, people have endured their own travesties—their own "2020's". Humanity has braved plagues, famines, wars, and unimaginable injustice—yet we survived, and moved forward.

Stagnancy has never been our hamartia, because the humanities have continued to push us forward, toward a better world. We have paintings, poems, elders, and historians guiding us forward, reminding us that travesties have been tamed before, and can be tamed again. It is because of the humanities, that someday, people will look to 2020, witness our endurance, and will learn from our failures and successes, to continue our strive for Petry's idea of a better world.

Work Cited

Barry, Michael. “‘Same Train Be Back Tomorrer’: Ann Petry’s The Narrows and the Repetition of History.” *JSTOR*, "Same Train Be Back Tomorrer": Ann Petry's The Narrows and the Repetition of History.