



THE TEST



Racism: An Introduction

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCJHJWaNL-g>
- What was the Jim Crow system?

Getting in to the text

- You're about to read a short story. It follows a woman taking her driving test. Before you read the story, think about the following questions.
 - Would you describe yourself as good or bad at passing tests and exams?
 - How do you feel when you have some sort of test coming up?
 - Have you ever been given a test that you felt was unfair?

Meeting the text

- As you read through the story, make two lists:
 1. List all the times the driving inspector calls Marian by the wrong name. Each time, take a note of the paragraph number and of the name he calls her.
 2. List all the times the driving instructor uses what he thinks is a southern accent, or a southern dialect or expression. Each time note the paragraph number and then quote what he says.

Thinking through

- Work out the answers to the following three questions:
 1. When is the first point in the story where we realise that Marian is black and the other characters are white? How do we know this?
 2. Why does Marian keep failing her driving test?
 3. In your opinion, would she have passed if Mrs Ericson had gone along in the car with them?

Let's get to work!

- This story is obviously about injustice, prejudice and racism. The author, Angelica Gibb, doesn't tell us what to think about these serious issues. Instead she puts her message across by showing how the issues affect one person on one day. As we study this story we are going to look at how the author creates the main character, Marian, and at the ways in which Marian relates to and is contrasted with the other characters. Remember that, while Marian is black, everyone else in the story is white.

Setting

- Before we go on to look at Marian and the other characters, it will help you to understand the story if you have a clear idea of the time and place in your mind.
- First of all, answer this question:
 - ▣ Which country do you think the story is set in?



Certain words and phrases scattered throughout the story gave you clues.

1. Which word used in paragraph 5 tells you the story is set in that country?
2. Which word used in paragraph 35 tells you the story is set in that country?
3. Which word used in paragraph 24 tells you the story is set in that country?
4. Which word used in paragraphs 26 and 31 tells you the story is set in that country?
5. Look at paragraphs 30 and 32. Which area of the country is this story set in?

We've dealt with the **place setting** of the story, we also need to work out **the time setting**.

1. Look at paragraph 31. What does Marian do which drivers do not need to do nowadays?
2. Did you spot anything else in the story that helped you work out the place or time setting?

Setting

- Marian is a young black woman living in one of the northern states of the USA. The fact that she has to put out her hand to signal when she turns in the road shows that she is driving a car made before indicator lights became standard. This puts the story in the first half of the 20th century.

Setting

- America was a much more racially divided country in those days. The situation was much worse in the southern states but even in the north, where the story is set, few good jobs were open to black people. Not many black people had any education beyond school. The big civil rights movements of the 1960s, and black leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, were not yet active. Although black people in America were strongly aware of the injustice around them, there was very little they felt they could do about it.

Characterisation - Marian

- All of this makes Marian a very striking character. Nowadays if you met a 27-year-old with a degree who was working as a housekeeper you might think they should be making more of themselves, or following a more challenging career. But Marian has managed to get a degree at a time when it would have been very hard for any black person to do so.

Characterisation - Marian

- University education in America has never been free, so she must have had to work before she was at college, and probably also while she was there, to pay for her studies. Also, in the time the story is set, even white women often did not go on to study after leaving school. Marian must have had to challenge many people's prejudices and assumptions to get as far as she has already. Angelica Gibb wants us to admire Marian, and to dislike the driving inspector. It's part of how she puts across her message about racism in the story.

Characterisation - Marian

- That's one explanation of why Marian deserves our respect. Gibb also presents her as someone who is skilled, and aware. There is lots of evidence throughout the story that Marian is actually a very good driver. Once we know all of this evidence, it becomes even clearer to us that the Inspector is a racist who treats Marian unfairly. He fails her because she is black, and because he is not going to let a black woman get away with snapping at him.

Marian – A Good Driver

- Read through the story. Each time you find a piece of evidence that Marian is a good driver quote the word, phrase or sentence from the story that shows this.
- Then **explain in your own words** why the quotation you have chosen shows us that she is a good driver.

Characterisation - Marian

- As well as being skilled, Marian is very aware of the situation and society she lives in. There are several occasions in the first fifteen paragraphs of the story where Marian knows she is more aware of the situation than Mrs Ericson. Sometimes we can also tell that Mrs Ericson herself realises that Marian knows best.

Marian knows best.

- Read through the story. Each time you find an example of Marian seeming to know best, first **quote** what is written in the story.
- Then **explain in your own words** how the quotation that you have chosen shows that Marian knows or understands the situation better than Mrs Ericson does. Make sure that you explain what Marian thinks.
- Finally, why does the author work so hard at making Marian seem very able, and much more aware than her employer of what the world is like.

Characterisation - Marian

- All the things we have looked at so far are part of the writer's characterisation of Marian. Characterisation just means all the things an author does to create a character and bring that person to life on the page. So far we have seen how Marian is characterised as being skilful, aware and determined.
- Another way writers build up and create their characters is by showing what they are like in relation to others. In the story, we see Marian interacting with Mrs Ericson and the driving inspector.

Marian and the Driving Inspector

- When you first read the story you looked for examples of the inspector speaking in what he thinks is a southern accent or dialect, and for examples of him calling Marian by the wrong name.
- A lot of this is tied in with the history of slavery in America. From the 1600s onward, thousands of Africans were brought to America against their will to work as slaves. Most of them worked in the southern states, on farms and plantations. Instead of allowing the slaves their African names, their white owners gave them new names, and often chose names for the American-born children of slaves.

Marian and the Driving Inspector

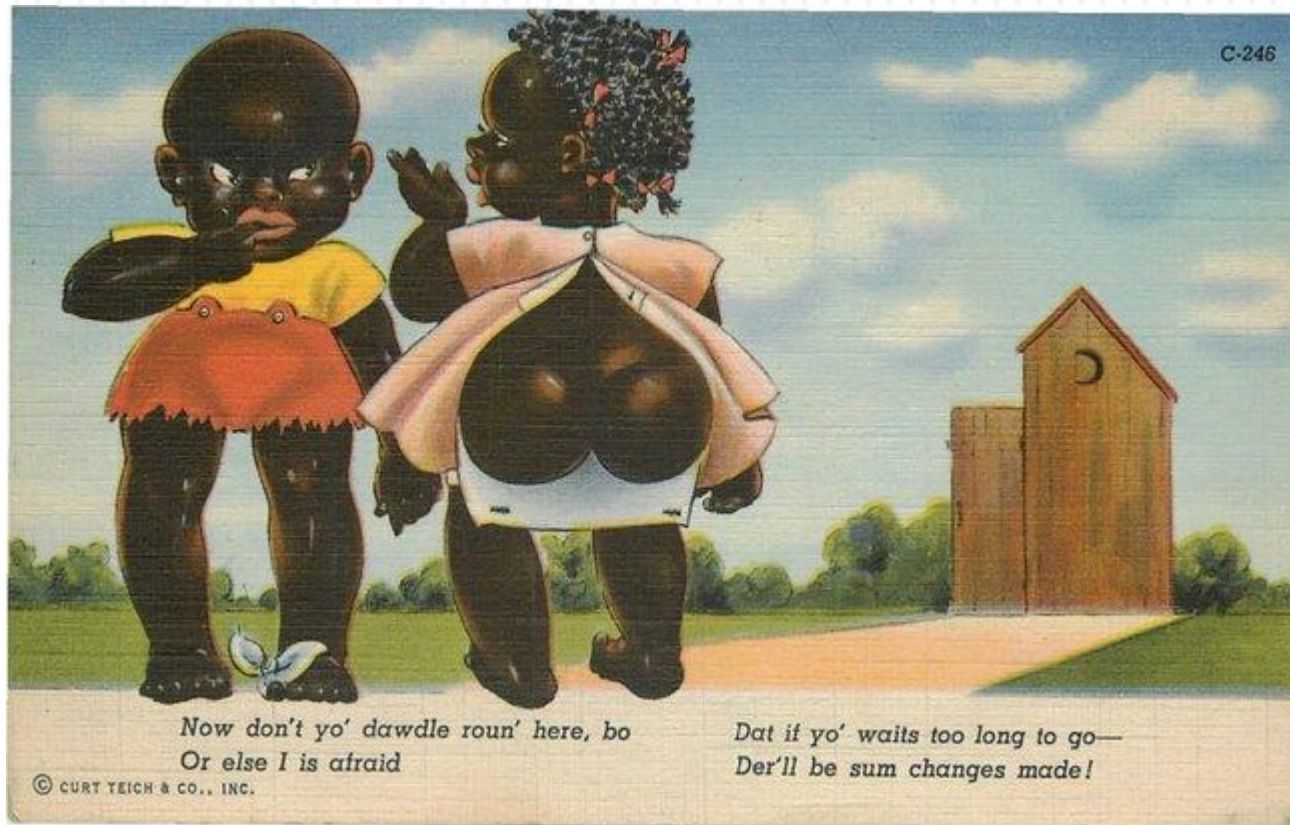
- Slavery came to an end in the 1860s after the American Civil War. This story is set almost a century later. However, by talking to Marian as if she must be from the south, the inspector is showing outdated ideas about the lives of black people in early 20th century America. By deciding to call her by a different name, one he chooses, he is trying to take control of her.
- Look at paragraphs 16-18:
 1. Apart from using the wrong name, how else do we see the inspector trying to control Marian?
 2. How does Mrs Ericson try to correct the inspector?

Marian and the Driving Inspector

- The writer does other interesting things with the inspector's speech style too. As well as the features of his speech that we have looked at already, there is also a **contrast** between the way he speaks and the way Marian speaks. The inspector often speaks in **assumptions** that show his own opinions and prejudices about black people. Marian tends to speak in **facts**.

Pickaninnies

- *Noun offensive*
- A small black child.



Swanee River

- Written in the first person from the perspective of a black slave (at a time when slavery was legal in half of the states of the US), the song has its narrator "longing for de old plantation," which has long drawn criticism as romanticizing slavery

Marian and the Driving Inspector

- Tackle these tasks to help you examine their speech styles.
- 1. Read through the story. Each time you find an example of the inspector making an assumption, first **quote** what he says. Then **explain in your own words** what he assumes or thinks about Marian.
- 2. Read through the story. **Copy down** each example where Marian speaks to the inspector using only a fact.
- 3. **Answer these questions:**
 - Why do you think Marian only speaks in facts?
 - Is there ever an example of her speaking to him in a different way? Quote it in your answer.
 - What happens the only time she speaks in a different way?

Marian and the Driving Inspector

- The different ways they speak are just part of a whole collection of differences between the inspector and Marian. One of these is their education. Marian has a degree, and it's not her fault but her society's fault that she has not been able to get a good job. The inspector is a white man in a racist, sexist society. If he's in the job he's in he almost certainly doesn't have a degree, Marian must be better educated than he is.

Marian and the Driving Inspector

- To round off our work on Marian and the driving inspector, create a mind map of **all** the ways that Marian and the driving inspector are different from each other.

Marian and Mrs Ericson

- Marian is in the car with the inspector for most of the story, but at the start and end we see her with her employer, Mrs Ericson.
- Read paragraphs 1 & 2
 1. The writer calls Marian by her first name but calls Mrs Ericson by her title and surname. What differences between the characters can we see from this?
 2. How can you tell from the way the story is written that Mrs Ericson is Marian's employer?

Marian and Mrs Ericson

- Despite the differences between them, and despite the fact that *Marian* works for *Mrs Ericson*, the two women seem to have a close relationship.
- Look at the following statements. Copy each one down. Beside each statement, note down a quotation from the story to prove the statement. For some of the statements, you should actually be able to find more than one piece of proof.

Marian and Mrs Ericson

1. Mrs Ericson thinks Marian deserves to pass her test.
2. Mrs Ericson is able to accept that Marian knows best.
3. Mrs Ericson wants to help Marian stay calm.
4. Mrs Ericson encourages Marian.
5. Mrs Ericson relies on Marian.
6. Mrs Ericson appreciates Marian.
7. The two women are fond of each other.

Marian and Mrs Ericson

- This all sounds good, but it doesn't mean the relationship between the two women is perfect.
- Read the first section of the story again, up to the point where they arrive at the driving test centre. Look especially at what Marian says. Can you find any suggestions that Marian might think that her employer is just slightly taking advantage of her?

Marian and Mrs Ericson

1. Does Marian think there is any chance of Mrs Ericson giving her a pay rise? How do you know this?
2. List as many reasons as you can think of to explain why Mrs Ericson feels she cannot raise Marian's wages.

Other language techniques

□ Word choice.

- There are several interesting examples of **word choice** in the story.
- There's only one example of explicitly racist word choice in the story. It comes in paragraph 22 when the inspector describes Marian as:

“Old enough to have quite a flock of pickaninnies”

- The word *pickaninnies* is a very offensive and racist term for black children.
- In fact, the inspector's words quoted above are actually even more offensive. How and why does the word *flock* make this statement even more insulting?

Other language techniques

- When Marian arrives at the driving test centre, we see this passage of description:

Two cars with official insignia on their doors stopped across the street. The inspectors leaped out, very brisk and military in their neat uniforms. Marian's hand tightened on the wheel. 'There's the one that flunked me last time,' she whispered, pointing to a stocky, self-important man who had begun to shout directions at the driver at the head of the line. 'Oh Mrs Ericson.'

- Look at the words underlined:
 1. What kind of word choice would you call this?
 2. Why do you think the writer chose to use this sort of word choice to describe what is happening at the driving test centre?

Other language techniques

- **Literal and figurative language**
- **Literal language** is language which is actually true. **Figurative language** has a deeper, wider meaning, or helps us to come to an understanding by using comparisons or mental pictures.
- Look at the title of the story. Though it seems simple it's actually very clever because it is both literal and figurative.
 1. Explain how the title literally fits the story.
 2. Explain how the title has a deeper, more figurative meaning too.

Freytag's Pyramid

Diagram of short story plot structure

Typically, a short story plot follows this pattern:

Rising action: Tension increases as the initial incident or conflict gets worse.

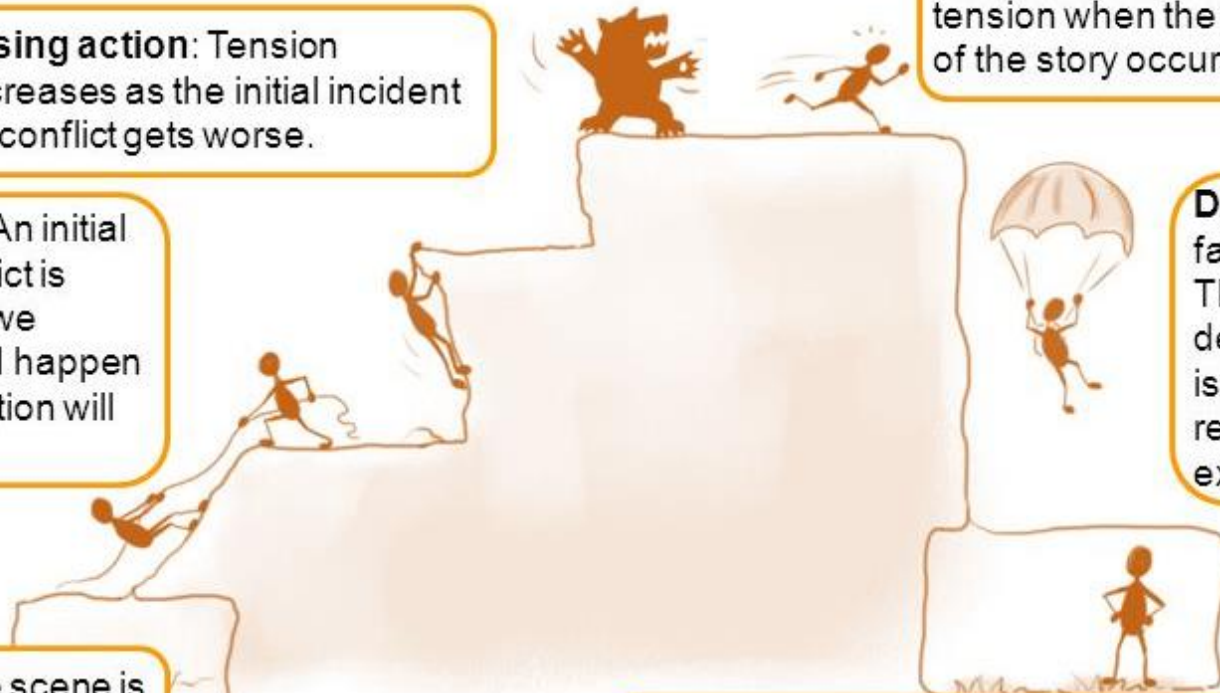
Complication: An initial incident or conflict is introduced and we wonder what will happen or how the situation will be resolved.

Exposition: The scene is set and the characters are introduced.

Climax: This is the moment of greatest tension when the most important event of the story occurs.

Denouement (or falling action): The tension decreases as issues are resolved or explained.

Resolution: The reader gains understanding of the central conflict and its outcome. Often the character(s) learns something new or finds new ways to carry on.



The theme

- The **theme** of a story (or of a novel, play, film or poem) is the big idea behind it. The theme is something which the writer wants you to think about or learn about. It may be an idea that the writer is trying to explore. A theme should be something that you can express using just one or two words.

The theme

- The important theme in this story is **racism**. The driving inspector is determined not to let a black woman pass her driving test, and when she makes one small driving mistake and then snaps at him for commenting on it he takes his chance. He marks four random mistakes on her form and fails her. We also know from the way she describes her first driving test that she has been unfairly failed before.

The theme

- Quite often in the literature exam you will find a question about how a writer handles a certain theme or issue.
- Working with a partner, decide what the author Angelica Gibb is trying to say to us about racism. What does she want us to realise or understand?
- You should try to make your answer as full as possible. You might want to collect your ideas on a spider plan.