

Choose a novel or short story in which you feel sympathy with one of the main characters because of the difficulties or injustices or hardships she or he has to face.

Describe the problems the character faces and show by what means you are made to feel sympathy for her or him.

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'The Test' by Angelica Gibbs is a short story which makes me feel sympathetic towards its main character, Marian. In this story, Marian is attempting to sit her driving test for the second time, having failed on the first attempt. However, Marian is a black woman living in the US in the first half of the twentieth century. As a result she experiences racism directed against her. In this case it takes the form of her driving inspector failing her because she stood up to his racist assumptions about her. This story is interesting because Gibbs wants us to feel sympathy for Marian to highlight exactly how unfair her treatment is. There are a number of ways she goes about this.

Angelica Gibbs uses characterisation effectively to build up our sympathy for Marian from the very beginning of the story. On the way to the driving test we learn a lot about Marian due to the way she is described by the writer. When she speaks we are told that she has a, 'soft, unaccented voice.' This clearly portrays Marian as a gentle, good-natured woman, the type of person that we should like. The fact that she has no accent suggests that she has been educated to a high standard. She appears clever and kind so we immediately warm to her. Furthermore, we are told that she is a good driver as her employer notices her, 'dark, competent hands' on the steering wheel. This suggests that Marian is obviously a skilled driver and should have no problem in passing her driving test. However, it also hints at the underlying theme of the story, the racism that is directed against her in this setting. Even her employer, who she has a good relationship with, notices the colour of her skin before her ability. And this is the underlying problem in the story. This description of Marian makes us feel sympathetic towards Marian because it highlights no matter how nice she is or how good she is at driving, she is ultimately judged on the fact that she is a black woman in a racist society. As a result she is not given the same chances as a white person might be and this makes me feel sorry for her.

The writer also uses language effectively to build upon the sympathy we feel towards Marian. This is particularly well done when we look at the language the driving inspector uses when he talks to Marian throughout her test. At first we think that he will be different to the driving inspector that failed Marian on her first attempt as he is described as being 'genial' which makes us think he is going to be kinder to her. However, as soon as he opens his mouth this illusion of friendliness is shattered. He immediately calls Marian, 'Mandy' which shows that he doesn't have the decency to call her by her actual name. It

also has racist undertones as it relates back to the days of slavery when plantation owners changed the names of their black slaves. He then goes on to make even more racist assumptions about Marian. He suggests that she only wants to drive so that she can, 'sneak out nights to meet some young blood'. Here he is implying that Marian is the type of girl who only wants to meet and possibly sleep with young men. The only reason he assumes this is because of her colour, it's not the type of thing he would ever get away with saying to a white woman. He appears to think that black women are easy and have loose morals as he also thinks that, at twenty-seven, Marian is 'old enough to have a flock of pickaninnies.' Not only is he using a deeply offensive term for black children, the use of the word 'flock' has connotations of brainless, unthinking creatures as it is usually used to describe sheep. It also highlights that the inspector thinks that she would have a large number of children as well. The language the driving inspector uses is important in creating sympathy for Marian as we feel sorry for her having to suffer this barrage of racial abuse. We know that she is capable of passing her test but when she is placed in the car next to this racist man we see her chances of successfully completing her test slipping away.

The final technique that Gibbs uses to make us feel sorry for Marian is the way she structures the story. The plot builds up to a climax where Marian decides she's had enough of the driving inspector's attitude towards her. She stalls the car and when the inspector comments on it she replies with, "Damn you!" At this point in the story we can completely understand why Marian reacts this way as she's put up with the inspector's bullying throughout her entire test. She's fed up of having to take the racist abuse and we can see her anger. However, Marian actually ends up worse off as the inspector immediately fails her. He makes 'four very black crosses at random in the squares on Marian's application blank.' Here we can see that the inspector doesn't have any real reasons for failing Marian, he has chosen to fail her because of her outburst. The fact that he crosses the boxes at 'random' proves this. He is possibly annoyed that she has had the audacity to speak back to him and he feels that as a black woman she has no right to do this. We feel sympathy for Marian because she has now failed her test but she's only failed because she's stood up for herself. I can understand why Marian shouted at the inspector because if I was in the car I would have done the same.

Angelica Gibbs has used a number of effective techniques to make us feel sympathetic towards Marian. She has portrayed Marian as a kind woman who immediately gets us to care about her and realise the unfairness of the situation she finds herself in, existing as part of a society who judges her only on the colour of her skin and not her skill or ability. The racist language the inspector uses against her makes us feel sad for her, that she has to put up with this abuse and that he can make these types of assumptions based only on the fact that she is black. Finally, we empathise with her when she decides to fight back, realising that when she does so she has sealed her own fate and fails her test. I felt that 'The Test' really highlighted how unfair it was that black people had to suffer this inequality and that they simply had to put up with it when they did.