

The Test

By Angelica Gibbs

Example Essays

Choose a novel or short story which ends badly for an important character.

Briefly describe what happens to the character and, by referring to appropriate techniques, go on to show how the writer makes you feel the character did not deserve what happened to him or her.

A short story which ends badly for an important character is 'The Test' by Angelica Gibbs. Set during the 1940s in America, 'The Test' is about a 27-year old black woman called Marian who is the housekeeper for the white Mrs Ericson. Marian has sat her driving test once before and failed, it is implied that this was due to her colour. This story takes place as Marian sits her driving test for a second time and once again fails. This is due not just to the racism of the driving inspector but also because she chooses to stand up for herself. I think that Gibbs makes it clear that what happened to Marian was very unfair and that she did not deserve to receive this harsh treatment.

The short story ends with Marian shouting at the driving inspector. This outburst is the climax to everything that has happened up to this point. The inspector has been both disrespectful and racist towards Marian and, as a result she snaps and shouts, "Damn you!" at him. This expression shows how frustrated and angry Marian was with the inspector as, during this period of time, this would have been like swearing at another person. The inspector doesn't take kindly to Marian's outburst and we are told that he makes, "four very black crosses at random" on her driving application. This means that she has once again failed her test. However, through the writer's word choice of "random" we can see that he has no reason other than the fact that she has shouted at him to fail her. He is simply marking off boxes without any specific examples of what she has done wrong. This is totally unfair as Marian should be judged on her driving ability and not on how she speaks to the inspector.

Another reason that Marian does not deserve what happens to her is because of the driving inspector's disrespectful attitude towards her throughout the story. From the very moment Marian shows up to the test centre it is clear through the writer's use of characterisation that the inspector does not treat Marian well. When she is about to start the inspector asks her employer Mrs Ericson if she would like to join them on the test. He says, "Mandy and I don't mind company". This is disrespectful for a few reasons. First of all he doesn't even learn Marian's name, instead calling her by a nickname that he himself has decided on. Secondly, he simply assumes that Marian would be ok with her employer joining them, he does not ask her for her opinion. There is also a link to racism, a theme which is explored throughout the short story, as in years gone by slave owners would change the names of their slaves because they would not be able to pronounce them. Therefore, from his very introduction the inspector is shown to be rude towards Marian.

Not only is the driving inspector rude, he is also more obviously racist towards Marian and makes judgements on her based upon her skin colour. As the test progresses the inspector fires a number of questions at Marian, such as her age. When she replies that she is twenty-seven, the inspector retorts with, "old enough to have a flock of pickaninnies". By saying this the driving inspector is making a judgement about Marian based only on her age and skin colour. He expects that because she is black she will already have a lot of children. The word choice used also reveals his racism since "pickaninnies" is a racist term for young black children and to describe them as a "flock" suggests that they would be like a pack of animals, perhaps out of control or stupid. He also suggests that

Marian only needs a license so that she can, “sneak out at nights to meet some young blood”. Again he is making assumptions about Marian’s morality based upon her colour. Rather than needing the license for work, he suspects that Marian only needs it so that she can sneak off behind her employer’s back and sleep around with young men. The inspector makes a number of comments like this throughout the story and Marian simply has to put up with the abuse, until she can stand it no longer and retaliates.

I feel a lot of sympathy for Marian because of the way the story ends. It is clear that she has been treated unfairly by those who have power over her and that her life is severely limited by the decisions made by others. The theme of racism is dealt with cleverly in this short story and it has shown me exactly how hard it must have been for people of colour to live their lives and achieve their dreams. If I had been in Marian’s position and had to suffer the same level of abuse then I would probably have reacted in a similar way.

Choose a novel or short story in which you feel great sympathy for or intense dislike of one of the characters.

Briefly outline the situation in which the character is placed and show by what means you are made to feel sympathy or dislike.

‘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 instructor 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.

One of the first reasons we feel sympathy for Marian is that it is made very clear that she is a good driver and she deserves to pass her test. There are several indications in the short story that Marian is a careful and considerate driver. On their way to the test centre we are told that Marian, “drove slowly through the shady suburban streets”. A suburban area is usually an area where families live and therefore there may well be children playing in the street. The fact that Marian adjusts her speed to drive through this area shows that she is considering her surroundings and the fact that a child might run out onto the road, something a good driver would be aware of. In addition, her ability is commented on by her employer. Mrs Ericson comments that Marian, “drives beautifully”. This is yet more evidence that Marian is skilled and good at what she does. Therefore, we feel sympathy when Marian fails her test because we know that it is due to something other than her ability, the only thing that she should be tested on.

Gibbs makes us feel particularly sympathetic towards Marian when she encounters the driving instructor. At first we think that he will be different to the driving instructor 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. 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 the unfairness of the situation Marian 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.

Choose a novel or short story or a work of non-fiction which deals with a significant event or experience or issue.

Give a brief account of the significant event or experience or issue. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how it is important to the text as a whole.

A short story which deals with a significant issue is 'The Test' by Angelica Gibbs. This story is set in the first half of the twentieth century in America. This is significant because there was still a lot of

racism and racist attitudes displayed towards black people who did not have the same rights as white people. This theme of prejudice and racism is explored to great effect in 'The Test' where Gibbs tells the story of a young black woman, Marian, who is sitting her driving test for the second time. It is implied in the story that Marian failed her first driving test because of her colour and in this story we see a similar situation occur. The text deals with a significant issue because through Gibbs' use of characterisation, language and structure it becomes shockingly clear how prejudiced characters are towards Marian.

One of the first ways in which this prejudice is shown is through the characterisation of Mrs Ericson, Marian's employer. Mrs Ericson appears, on the surface, to have a good relationship with Marian. She is accompanying Marian to the test centre and is trying to ensure that Marian is not too nervous about sitting her test for the second time. However, Mrs Ericson is actually racist in her own way. She is not obvious about it but Gibbs gives us subtle clues in the language to show that even Mrs Ericson, someone who values Marian as an employee, is prejudiced towards her. This is shown when Marian is driving and Mrs Ericson notices her, "dark, competent hands". Gibbs has structured this observation in an interesting way – by having the word "dark" appear before the word "competent" it implies that Mrs Ericson sees Marian's colour before she sees her ability. This is upsetting as it makes me think that even someone who likes Marian is prejudiced towards her and views her as a black person before she takes account of the skill Marian has. It is sad to think that this is how black people were viewed in American society.

Prejudice towards Marian is shown more explicitly through the interaction between Marian and her driving inspector. At first the driving inspector appears to be happy and friendly. He is presented as a contrast to Marian's first driving instructor. However, appearances are not what they seem and through the dialogue that Gibbs uses we see how he is actually hugely prejudiced against Marian. He makes a number of horrible and upsetting racist assumptions about Marian. After asking her age he replies that she is, "old enough to have a flock of pickaninnies". The word "pickaninnies" is a racist and derogatory term for black children and Gibbs has obviously used it to show how the driving inspector is fine with using such terms, probably because he sees it as acceptable. This says a lot about the type of society which allows such terms to be used. The inspector also implies that Marian, as a black woman, is not trustworthy or that she has loose morals. After she explains that she wants to drive in order to help her employer he asks, "Sure you don't really want to sneak out nights to meet some young blood?" By saying this he is indicating that he thinks she has other motives for wanting to drive, that she wants to run off to meet men behind her employer's back. It also suggests that she is only interested in men and spending time with them, rather than holding down the responsible job she has. This is a shocking assumption to make as he does not know anything about Marian and it is a horrible thing to say to anyone. However, the inspector feels he can say such things because he is a white man with all the power and she is simply a black woman.

The climax of the story is where Marian finally fights back. After putting up with the inspector's sly digs all the way through her test she reaches breaking point. As the inspector teases her about stalling the car and about her level of education Marian snaps and shouts, "Damn you!" This exclamation shows that Marian has had enough of the driving inspector's prejudicial assumptions and is finally speaking back for herself. However, what happens next is truly upsetting. The inspector fails Marian as he "made four very black crosses at random in the squares on Marian's application blank." He has failed Marian, not on her ability, but on the fact that she dared to react against him.

Because Gibbs tells us that he made the crosses “at random” it suggests it was not something that he had to think about, he is not tying them to any mistakes that she made. Instead he is simply ensuring that she has enough marks against her to fail. As a white man in a position of power he has the ability to punish Marian simply for doing what anyone else would do in that situation. It clearly shows how unfair life was at the time for black people living in such a racist society.

It’s clear to see that Angelica Gibbs has written a powerful and moving story about what it was like to be a black person in an overwhelmingly white society in America. The experience of Marian shows that she is mistreated by all of the people around her, even those who appear to like and respect her. The impact of this story comes from the sympathy I felt towards Marian and how unfair I felt it was for her to be treated this way. She should have passed her test but because she stuck up for herself she didn’t. As a black person she had very few rights and there was nothing she could do about it. This is a truly shocking situation for anyone to find themselves in.

Choose a novel or short story in which you feel great sympathy for or intense dislike of one of the characters.

Briefly outline the situation in which the character is placed and show by what means you are made to feel sympathy or dislike.

A short story which makes me feel great dislike for one of the characters is 'The Test' by Angelica Gibbs. Gibbs makes us feel a great deal of dislike for the character of the driving inspector. In this story Marian, a black woman, is taking her driving test for the second time. Despite being a good driver, the racist driving inspector fails her because she had the cheek to answer back to his racist assumptions. Gibbs uses a number of techniques to make us dislike the inspector, including characterisation, word choice and theme.

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Gibbs makes us feel particularly sympathetic towards Marian when she encounters the driving inspector. 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. 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.

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