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Practice exam question

Janine in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Guidance for the question on p. 9 of the magazine.

The middle of an answer

With her weak character established in so many ways, it is fair to say that, for many readers, the first part of the viewpoint is true. Yet such weakness has not been constructed by Atwood for us to simply dislike her character. As Nicola Onyett argues in 'Foiled Again: Moira and Janine in *The Handmaid's Tale*', Janine — along with her opposite, Moira — has an abundance of significance in the novel. Indeed, Onyett goes so far as to say that, through them, 'Atwood invites her readers to consider fundamental dystopian dichotomies, such as rebellion and submission, autonomy and slavery, heterodoxy and orthodoxy, resistance and acceptance.' While readers naturally warm to Moira, the one who represents rebellion and resistance, they are likely to feel antipathy towards Janine, who opts for submission and acceptance. This is enhanced by the first person narrative, which idealised Moira and tends to align the reader with the perspective of Offred, who slights Janine as a 'whiny bitch'. Yet, overall, Janine is as significant as Moira in how she helps reveal the full horror of the Gileadan regime — an invented society that casts light on the horror of real human societies. As Atwood herself explains: 'in *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past'. For example, through Janine, we see the ways in which women can become vilified for abuse they endured at the hands of oppressors and how oppressive societies manipulate other women to reinforce the victims' feelings of shame and worthlessness. In Chapter 13, Janine recalls the trauma of having been gang-raped, yet Atwood presents Offred's tone in narrating this story as nonchalant, with an air of her despising, rather than sympathising with, Janine. This sense builds as humiliating and cruel bullying is related in a matter-of-fact way: 'Her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.' Not only is the pain of oppression shown by handmaids like Janine, but the beliefs of the oppressors eventually become internalised by the oppressed: later Janine doesn't wait for the other handmaids to jeer, but says 'It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain.' Thus, Janine is significant in demonstrating the subtle workings of oppressive regimes.

In addition, Janine is significant in that she is a complex character, whose realistic characterisation and relationships enable readers to suspend their disbelief and accept the parts of Gileadan society that seem more extreme or less credible. As seen in the example above, rather than simply showing evil oppressors and the honourable oppressed, Atwood depicts unpleasant behaviours and attitudes among the oppressed people themselves. Janine is presented, on the surface, as an unsympathetic character, who, for example, is invited to inform on her fellow handmaids in the Red Centre, where she is 'one of Aunt Lydia's pets' and who is smug in displaying her pregnancy and incites the envy of the other handmaids in Chapter 5. Yet she is also a rounded character who develops during the course of the novel, as we see in her progressively worsening mental health and in her enjoyment of moving from being a passive victim to being an aggressor during the participation. Offred sees her

with 'a smear of blood across her cheek, and more of it on the white of her headdress'. Perhaps Atwood suggests that Janine's fervour in attacking the man is the result of a kind of displacement, in which she gains pleasure as a victim who exacts retribution from one she believes to be a criminal who committed the same crime as the one she suffered. It might also show us the consistent behaviour of one who is compliant to the regime, allowing herself to submit fully to its teachings and customs in this violent context just as she submitted to its other teachings and customs for example, surrounding childbirth. Perhaps the incident shows that there is no satisfactory way to escape the effects of the regime. While a rebel like Moira will die or end up as a prostitute, one who is compliant and represses feelings like Janine will end up losing her sanity.

Atwood uses several details to shock the reader while suggesting Janine's fate. Directly after her violent actions, Janine's mood swings to the easy friendliness of the waitress she once was. Atwood's use of jarring juxtaposition of the waitress's words ("Hi there," ... "How are you doing?") and the symbol of violence (the man's 'clump of hair' in her hand) disturbs the reader. This effect is heightened by her 'small giggle' and Janine's broken mental state is underlined by the narrator who states 'she's let go, totally now, she's in free fall, she's in withdrawal'. The isolated incident that Moira was able to slap Janine out of in Chapter 23 has become a permanent state. Perhaps even more chilling is the response of her fellow handmaid Offred: 'Easy out, is what I think. I don't even feel sorry for her, although I should. I feel angry'. While Offred feels no sympathy, the reader — particularly if they have a sense of Janine's overall significance in Atwood's presentation of the regime — can.

Commentary

- This extract of the answer begins having explored the idea that Janine is weak, and goes on to complicate this in an assured and cogent manner, considering Atwood's intentions in creating this weak character and exploring aspects of her significance.
- There is a good range of textual reference from throughout the novel, with comments on sections ranging from Janine's early experiences in the Red Centre and her later pregnancy to the participation towards the end of the novel.
- Many of the textual references are deft. For example, the succinct cross-reference to the incident of Moira slapping Janine suggests that the student knows the text very well and isn't having to waste time flicking back and forth in the text (this is an open book exam).
- There is a good range of analysis, with comments on broader areas, such as the contrast between Moira and Janine, and closer analysis, for example, the exploration of the language when Offred sees and speaks to Janine at the participation.
- The student explores how several methods work together to shape meaning and create effects, considering, for example, Atwood's use of dialogue, tone, symbolism and juxtaposition.
- Critical views are used in the context of the argument and help to lend it complexity and authority. The view from Nicola Onyett is not just cited, but applied to the text.

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