

Literature review on ann beatties janus

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In Ann Beattie's "Janus," Andrea, a talented real estate agent, experiences a great deal of anxiety and unhappiness, despite her success. This success seems to be entirely dependent on the strategic placement of a bowl within the home she is selling. This bowl is inextricably tied to Andrea's life and her sense of fulfillment – always empty and perpetually plain. Like Andrea, the bowl is "a mutt who has no reason to suspect he might be funny" (Beattie, p. 64).

These issues are related to her marriage; despite having a husband, Andrea has a lover, from whom she got the bowl; she tries to have it both ways, continuing the affair and having her marriage, but she simply cannot, as her lover maintains (p. 68). The lover leaves her, leaving her with just the bowl as the symbol of his presence and his impact on Andrea's life. As a result, she holds onto it, pretending that he is still a force in her life, and deciding not to let go of the past. The emptiness of the bowl is a cutting symbol of Andrea's obsession with her old lover; she dare not put anything in the bowl, as that would mean that she would move on from him, something that she refuses to do. This lack of choice leaves her empty inside, just like the bowl.

It is a little unclear why Andrea is unhappy in her marriage; there may not be a real reason, despite the obvious ennui and angst that comes from having a somewhat ordinary, routine life. Her affair is an attempt to shake that life up a bit, even though it ends in disaster. She does not want that excitement to end, and so she holds on to the bowl, something that seemingly everyone finds appealing – 'the bowl was both subtle and noticeable – a paradox of a bowl' (p. 65). This is just like Andrea, someone who has it all and yet is

unhappy. Therefore, she overextends herself and continues to be unhappy in her marriage and financial success, merely because she has it.

This secret that Andrea has (the bowl's true meaning for her) haunts and delights her, and she cannot seem to release herself from it. She makes it a preoccupation for herself, finding a unique and strategic place to put it in order to have better luck selling a home – this seems to be merely a device to keep her thinking about the bowl, and by extension about her former affair, which she misses.

The title of the short story is quite fitting for Andrea's story – Janus is the “two-headed Roman god of doors and beginnings” (Lendering, 2011). He is the master of transitions, and something that Andrea is in dire need of is a transition. The two heads of Janus constantly look at both the past and the future at the same time, being trapped within two worlds. This is indicative of Andrea's refusal to let go of her bowl (as well as the affair), and her own desire to feel that way again. He is also a god of endings, and Andrea realizes that her attachment to the affair needs to end. In these ways, relating Janus to Andrea is a very fitting analogy.

Works Cited

Beattie, Ann. “Janus.” *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. 4th edition. 1990

Lendering, Jona. “Janus.” *Livius. Articles on Ancient History*. Web. 18 May 2011.

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