Review Your Answer

Anita's Dance

It was a morning fit to convert any pessimist, and a Sunday to boot. Anita spent part of it in the garden virtuously weeding; then she poured enough coffee to float an army into her special mug and brought it out into the garden. Instead of reading, she sat stretching her neck to the sun and thinking how lucky she was; nothing to do but please herself all day. From time to time friends lectured her about being selfish and set in her ways, an old maid. And it was true she was sometimes lonely. She had, however, no reason to feel sorry for herself when she compared her life to theirs. She had a house, a garden, a car, a piano. A good job. A greedy, bad-tempered cat. Two eyes, a nose, and ten fingers, all in good working order. What did she have to feel sorry about? And was happiness selfish?

She mused over her library book. She had never really wanted to get married, except for a brief and embarrassing episode when she was at university. A boy she was very fond of had wanted her to drop her scholarship, marry him and put him through law school. Her fondness had ceased abruptly when he argued that, being male, he had more right to an education than she had. Winning the argument had hurt a lot.

Those days were over, she thought, and if she was wrong, she had no daughter to tell her so in exemplary form. I have company in the form of a bad-tempered cat. What is more, I have a date with Clive this afternoon. I feel good with Clive. The something that is between us is nothing; there is no self-consciousness. All's right with the world.

She had wanted to study literature but on practical grounds had chosen economics instead. She still, however, attempted to keep up with good books and now she was reading a novel by a man in England called Berger.

It was good. It took place in a small employment agency; both characters, the owner and his clerk, were weighing large changes in their private lives while appearing to deal with clients.

She looked up and smiled at the sun. She read on.

A woman came into the agency to look for a housekeeping job. A largish, comfortable, middle-aged woman. The proprietor had an instant vision of the comfort she could provide for him: a sort of comfy English house, fish and chips for tea, a kettle on the hob.

"I could live with that," Anita said to herself. "What I couldn't live with, not ever, is a set-up like this plus a job, plus three children and entertaining for a junior executive now portly and senior. No wonder I'm the way I am."

She frowned at the book, closed it, and put it down. It was cosy, and it was basically English working class, and basically (except for a mob of children) what she had come from.

She had never wanted her mother's life, one of flying elbows and fits of bad temper and aspirations that were a muddle of impulses. Her mother had never seemed to be able to think anything through, she was always anaemic from childbearing and exhausted from scrubbing; crying out "You girls…" Get this,

fetch that, turn off the soup, scrub the sink, do the dishes, iron that. When she was an old woman they had bought her an automatic washing machine with a window in the door and found her sitting on the basement steps watching it like television.

Anita shuddered: that dream of cosy domesticity was a male dream: she'd been living in a man's world too long. The real thing she'd lived through and it was what had made her so happy to get a scholarship to university. Never mind that she'd had to char and work in a grocery store to put herself through.

She stretched lazily. The cat was scowling at her through the kitchen window; he didn't like her to be happy. Too bad for him. She was going to enjoy this day. Clive and she weren't meeting until two and she didn't even have to change.

She heard scuffling footsteps on the gravel, the footsteps of her brother Jack. "Oh damn," she thought. "He's found me."

"Hi Nita, how's tricks?"

"Where did you come from, Jack?"

He was big and he was stupid, something of a bad dream: the one who hadn't succeeded. "Oh well, you know," he said, plunking himself down on the chaise lounge so it clicked and shivered. "I was wondering if you had any jobs for me, like."

"Broke again, eh? Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

She slammed the kitchen door as she went in. The cat gave her a satisfied look, pleased that her moment of glory was over. She poured Jack a coffee, creamed and sugared it, and stumbled as she went out, staining her white summer pants. "Here," she thrust it at him.

He sat up like a patient in bed and began not so much to drink as to inhale it. "What have you been doing lately?" she asked.

"I been doing…well, littla this, littla that. Delivering leaflets. You know."

She knew. He was no good, Jack, and that was that.

"I keep up with the work around here myself," she said. "I don't really have anything for you to do."

"There must be something, the way you lie around reading all the time."

She refused to rise to the bait.

"Lanie's poorly," he said. "I was there yesterday."

He must be making the rounds again, she thought, borrowing from all of us.

"She's got cancer," he said, almost with satisfaction: the voice of the child at school announcing family bad news for current events class. "She looks awful, and she can hardly move."

"She's doing all right," Anita said.

“Gotta get worse before you get better, eh? I don’t think she’ll get better. Ross is scared out of his wits. You should take the kids.”

“I can’t. I go out to work, remember?”

“I remember,” he said and continued to stare at her, trying to put her in the wrong before he asked her for money.

“I wrote to Rosie but she’s just had an operation. Kit’s on the sick list too. Bill won’t open the door to me.”

Look, I have to go out and see a man about a dog. If ten dollars would do you, I could see you on your way.”

“Drop me off somewhere?”

It wasn’t the clothes he was wearing, it was the condition he was in: tousled and dirty. “Ten bucks and a subway ticket. That’s it, Jack.”

“You always were a tight old broad.”

She went inside again, slamming the door. She dashed upstairs and changed into another pair of trousers. As she went down again she made sure the front door was locked, then the back. “Here,” she said, handing him ten dollars and a ticket. “You can stay and finish your coffee. I have to be off.”

She was meeting Clive at the end of the subway line and they were going out in the country to browse through antique shops.

She had known him for only a few months and hadn’t taken him seriously at first. Indeed there was nothing special about him except the fact that they got on together, very well indeed. He was divorced, and he had made it plain he wanted to set up housekeeping with someone again. She didn’t know whether she wanted to live with anyone else: it had been so long since she hadn’t had the morning paper and the morning clock and the morning coffee to herself that she was afraid she would resent an intruder.

She saw him swing into the parking lot and smiled to herself. An intruder! “Hi,” she said, and ran towards him. “Marvellous day.”

“Wonderful.” He put her into the car like the gentleman he was, said, “Belt up, now,” and headed north.

Ordinarily, this act of merely strapping herself in beside him made her happy, but today it was different. Jack niggled and danced in her mind. Being mean to Jack made her feel like the mean, ignorant child she no doubt had been, that Jack still was.

“What’s the matter?” Clive said. “You’re twitchy.”

“I’m mean-tempered today,” she said. “As bad as Martha the cat. My brother Jack turned up. The no-good one.”

“I was having such a good time,” she said. “reading in the garden. Then in stomped Jack, and I still feel shattered.”

“Look, about your brother, you’d better tell me about him and get it off your mind. No use having a day in the country if we’re not in good spirits. Was he mother’s blue-eyed boy?”

Suddenly she heard her mother yell, “You girls, Nita, Rosie, look after that Jackie and make sure he don’t fall in the well.” She hunched herself and said, “First, you have to understand we were small-town people and not what you’d call well off.” She had used the genteel phrase for so long it didn’t surprise her any more.

“Born with a plastic spoon?”

“Tin. My father was a sergeant in the army.”

“Powerful influence?”

“When he was there. There were four girls, then Jackie and Bill. Jackie tore the wings off flies and drowned our kitten in the rain barrel; we hated him. I’m sure he was disturbed or something, but I don’t bleed for him; he was an awful kid and he’s an awful man.”

“Where is he now?”

“In my backyard on the chaise, I suppose. I gave him ten bucks and a subway ticket. But there’s no real hope he’s gone yet.”

Clive looked at her and slowed the car down. “I think,” he said, ‘that we’d better go back…”

“Clive, I don’t want to spoil your day in the country.”

“You’re more important than a day in the country and you’re miserable.”

He turned the car and drove very fast down the half-empty Sunday highway into town. They were home in twenty minutes.

They went in the front door and found Jack reclining with his work boots on the white corduroy sofa.

“Jack!” she roared.

“Snob,” he said with an impish smile. “So you caught me, you and your fine feller here. Nice coat he’s got on. You’re coming up and up and up in the world, aren’t you, girl? Ma would be proud of you.” But he swung his boots off the chesterfield.

“I think you’d better go,” Clive said. “You’re bothering Anita.”

“Do you think so, Mr Prettyboy? What are you doing hanging around our Nita? Don’t you know she’s our Educated Woman, too good for a man? Why, all she cares about is white velvet and books and doilies. She don’t even go to visit the sick and the dying.”

“Jack,” she said. “Get out.”

“And why would I want to get out, with a fine house to come to and a fine sister to look after me?”

“You should go,” said Clive, being reasonable, trying, being also, Anita thought, very sweet and middle class, “because your sister has asked you to go.”

“Oh, I never did nothing Nita told me. It was Rosie had the good left hook. Nita was nothing, all skin and bone and no bust.”

On the one hand, Anita wanted to laugh because he was being a self-defeating grotesque, asking for punishment, exile, anything; he had always been like that. But she was also very, very angry. The rest of us reclaimed ourselves, she thought, as Mother wanted us to. We got out of misery and brutality. We stopped swearing, read books, got at least a smattering of education: cleaned up the family act.

Clive balled his fists. Nita looked at the two of them and sized them: Clive was taller, but Clive was nervous. Clive had never had to punch anyone out.

Nita took his measure and lashed out, one two, one two, and bang bang bang on his falling head with her fists. Jack went down like a lamb.

Nita sat down on the sofa and started to cry. Clive sat down beside her and put his arm around her. Jack came to.

“Nita, you shouldn’t ought to have done that. Nita, you damn well broke me false teeth.”

“Get out, Jack,” she said. “Get flaming well out of this house and don’t come back. If you don’t, or if you ever come back. I’ll flaming well…I’ll call your probation officer.”

Jack stood up, holding his head, trying again. “Nita, you’re a hard woman.”

“Shut up, Jack, and go and tell your government psychiatrist you’re persecuted by your sister,” Nita said. “Get out. Get on with you.”

He went.

Anita sat trying to pull herself together. She sat up and sighed. She looked at Clive.

“Well,” she said. “Now you know.”

“Look,” he said, “there’s something I should tell you, but I want to know first how you did that?”

“What?”

“That’s wonderful kayo; I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I wasn’t born a lady and a scholar,” she said. “I was born on the outskirts of Camp Borden. I was one of six children. Circumstances were not good. But in addition to being a sergeant, my father was a fighter, and when he got a beer or two into him he’d spar with anyone he could find. We saved my mother a lot.”

Clive disappeared for a moment. She looked at herself in the mirror, smoothed down her hair. Thought desperately: now he knows. It’s over.

Clive reappeared.

She managed to look up at him and smile.

“I don’t care what happens between us; I know it won’t bore me. But if we ever do take up living together and things get all sedate and cosy, would you…”

“I’d do anything for you,” she heard herself say, not believing she had said it, but hearing it anyway.
—by Marian Engel

The writer's shift in name reference from "Anita" to "Nita" is **best** explained as a

a	signal that the story is referring to past events	b	method of identifying Jack as the person speaking
c	subtle hint that the childhood character has emerged	d	signal of mood shift between contentment and misery

5

Lessons(Outcomes) Related to this Question

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Solution

Up until Jack's arrival, the protagonist is identified by the author as Anita or "she." However, beginning with Jack's opening comment "Hi Nita, how's tricks?" any time he speaks to or about Anita and any time Anita reflects on her childhood or is drawn into a confrontation between siblings such as when she fought Jack, she is identified as Nita. As a diminutive of her full name, there is an implication that "Nita" represents the child if not the "childish" Anita. Certainly, when Clive speaks of her or to her, he addresses her as Anita. The fact that Anita is identified as Nita by her mother who supported her, and during neutral moments in the story when a content or miserable mood is irrelevant, points to the alternative a "subtle hint that the childhood character has emerged", as the best explanation for the name shift. Anita is transformed into Nita most conspicuously during the fight scene, where not only Jack but the narrator as well, identifies

the young female scrapper by her childhood name. This would seem appropriate since the “educated woman” who rose up in the world would be far less likely to “duke it out” than the daughter of a drill sergeant fending for herself.

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