



## Symbols and the Divided Self in *Janus*

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### Abstract

The paper presents the main theme of American writer Ann Beattie's short novel *Janus*—the divided self. Illustrations are given here on the symbolic meaning of the mysterious bowl as well as the cold house. The relationship between bowl and love as well as connection between house and marriage reveal the true implication of two-faced god Janus. All the work throws light on the divided self resulted from emptiness, confusion and emotional difficulties of middle and upper-middle class.

**Key words:** Janus; Symbolism; Divided self; Bowl; Love

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1947 Ann Beattie was born in Washington, D.C. She grew up in a middle-class suburb and graduated near the bottom of her class in 1965.

She attended American University, where she earned a degree in English in just three years. In 1970 she received a M.A. in English from the University of Connecticut. Although she began work on a Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut, she did not complete it, dropping out after a few of her stories were published. In 1976, she published her first book of short stories, *Distortions*, and her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, later made into a film.

In 1973 Beattie published her first major short story, "Victor Blue," in *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1974 the *New Yorker* published the story "A Platonic Relationship." Beattie became a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*. She has been awarded with the Guggenheim Fellowship<sup>1</sup> in 1978; an award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1980; 2000PEN/Malamud<sup>2</sup> Award for lifetime achievement in the short story form. Apart from these, her works were once selected in works of O. Henry Award and *Best American Short Stories of the Century* compiled by John Updike.

*Janus* first appeared in the May 27, 1985, issue of the *New Yorker*. It was published later in the collection *Where You'll Find Me*, and has often been singled out as one of Beattie's best stories. In her popular novels and short fiction, she continues to chronicle the lives of men and women who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s.

*Janus* is the story of a successful, yet unhappy real estate agent named Andrea. She grows attached to a cream-colored bowl, often placing it here and there in the homes of her potential buyers as a trick to indicate distinction and specialty of the house for sale. She cares about the bowl and is concerned about getting it damaged. Her affection to the bowl proves more than she turns to her husband and it become her personal secret. By the end of the story, readers discover that the bowl was a gift from Andrea's lover, who asked Andrea to make a decision between two men. But finally she is unable to decide and

<sup>1</sup> Guggenheim Fellowships are American grants that have been awarded annually to those "who have demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts."

<sup>2</sup> The PEN/Malamud Award and Memorial Reading honors "excellence in the art of the short story", and is awarded annually by the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. "PEN" is an acronym for Poets, Editors and Novelists and is associated with International PEN. "Faulkner" is a tribute to novelist William Faulkner, one of Settle's main inspirations, who had donated his 1949 Nobel Prize money to fund awards for younger writers.

her lover left her. The story concludes with Andrea gazing at the bowl's surface at night and saw a vanishing point on the horizon near the rim.

In Ann Beattie's stories characters are generally white, educated people born in 1960s or the descendents of that generation, therefore they are all impacted by the cultural and historical contexts of the Vietnam War. The theme of *Janus* has been explored by many scholars under such social influence.

Michiko Kakutani commented *Janus* in the article "books of the times" in October 1, 1986:

*Janus*—which portrays a woman's obsession with a bowl given to her by a former lover—becomes a highly crafted, almost surreal meditation on the intrusion of time past into time present and on the perils of everyday life. Ms. Beattie's people—the battered emotional casualties of the 1960's and the hip survivors of the Me Generation—are teetering now on the margins of middle age, and the aging process has made them somewhat less careless about their lives. Like their predecessors, they're still afflicted by a sense of aimlessness and uncertainty, but now the stakes are higher—cancer, infertility, the death of a child—and they're a little more concerned about the consequences of their actions, a little more appreciative of the connections they do maintain with family and friends.

As Thomas R. Edwards summarized in October 12, 1986 (The New York Times Book Review):

[Ms. Beattie's] people suffer emotional and moral disconnection in a world that has yet been rather generous to them in material ways. They live comfortably enough in New York, the suburbs, the country; they work at business, finance, editing, modeling, writing, the law; they have been to college and sometimes graduate school, and now, as they approach 40, they miss what they remember as the innocence and intimacy of student community. . .

Porter, Carolyn (1985) said, Ann Beattie's writing techniques—absence, emptiness and loss, suit her stories. The main theme in *Janus* is also the emptiness and aimless of Andrea's life.

The meaning of the two-faced god Janus has also been analyzed by critics. Thomas Edwards (1986) singled out "Janus" as being "sufficiently open and worked out to give convenient access to the materials from which they are all made." In *The Explicator*, Philip Miller (1987) links the bowl to the Roman god Janus. He said the story is about beginnings and endings, and thus the title is particularly apt. There are some researches about the symbols in *Janus*. As Jonathan Penner (1986) in *Book World—The Washington Post* points out, "the beloved bowl becomes a psychoanalytical symbol, odd as an archaeopteryx in Beattie's post-Freudian world." Cao Yan (2009) also discussed the symbolism of the bowl. He considered it as emptiness in real life and loses with reasons which give rise to the shortage of sense of belonging in modern society.

Most of the above studies showed the emptiness and aimlessness conveyed in *Janus* and the bowl is the epitome of the protagonist Andrea. But little are involved

with the relationship between the bowl and house. This paper will respectively summarize the symbolisms of her important fetish bowl and the cold house; the link between house and marriage; probe the meaning of title *Janus* and the connection among the bowl.

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## 1. SYMBOLIC USE OF THE BOWL

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### 1.1 Decoration

At the beginning of the "Janus" in the *American Short Stories* (2006), the sentence "the bowl was perfect," (p.235) is striking. "It is not the sort of thing that would inevitably attract a lot of attention as a craft fair, yet it had real-presence" (p.235). It presents a paradox—subtle and noticeable, mysterious and real, still and motional, ordinary and distinct, and also charming and simple. Its glaze was the color of cream and seemed to glow no matter what light it was placed in. Possessing these characters, the bowl is a fantastic decoration so that Andrea often put it deliberately for the benefit of promoting the house. She is obsessed with the glistening beauty of the bowl and always changes its placement for comparison or stares it alone.

Andrea asked her husband to please not drop his house key in it. It was meant to be empty. But it should have been filled with small daily necessities for convenience rather than been left aside only for appreciation. Moreover she does not allow people to handle it in case others damage it. The outside of the bowl is smooth and round, subtle and noticeable, which mean completeness, fullness and perfection, but the inside is an empty space. Though the bowl is absolutely appealing, it has no practical use but only a decoration. Now that the bowl matters a lot for Andrea, it also has symbolic meaning.

### 1.2 Love

Following Ann Beattie's description, readers can find at the end of the story the significance of the bowl to Andrea. It was a gift presented by her lover and obviously the bowl stands for Andrea's secret love and reminding her loss of lover.

Andrea considers the bowl as a friend, and is sure that the bowl bought her luck. She dreamed of the bowl and it can be known that she love the bowl. In the story the perfection of the bowl is referred to many times. Andrea thinks the bowl is perfect for its real presence. The perfection lies in its purity and realness in her life resembling her love. The shining points sparkled form the perfect and charming bowl is like freedom which Andrea believe and pursue. The protagonist's life is empty, unanimated and aimless and can be likened to a pool of stagnant water. Lacking vigor and sense of being, she is rather like a bright decoration which her husband is already accustomed of and an incomplete individual. However it is the pure love that inputs care and affection into her life. She indulged in the fantastic love and felt happiness.

## 2. SYMBOLIC USE OF HOUSE

### 2.1 Practical Belonging

Andrea is a real estate agent and always takes the bowl and displays it deliberately in the selling house. The bowl is a decoration for easy to promote the house to potential buyers. When no business is at hand, she takes the bowl home to appreciate it. Thus compared with bowl which lacks of practical use, for Andrea, the house is a functional belonging with sense of existence and security. With the success in her career, the house provides her stable material life. The earnings ensure the comfortable life and make up for all the lean years when she and her husband were graduate students. Despite of these, the house is cold and spacious for Andrea and in most time, she stays alone. It is actually empty of affection arousing hollow sensation. Furthermore, her marriage does alike.

### 2.2 Marriage

The house symbolizes her marriage which guarantees her steady material demand, social status, the quiet and stabilized life. Her seemingly perfect marriage owns practicability other than charming love. It is apparent that she and her husband are well matched for each other for having congenial characteristics. Moreover, they praise the other's advantages and are proud for each other. On the surface they are affectionate spouses, but actually the love has been fading way gradually.

Between Andrea and her husband, they have somewhat communication disorders. They become less and less interested in the other as time goes on. When seeing the bowl, he just says "pretty" and turned away. While they lay in bed at night listening to the stereo and murmuring sleepy disconnection, she tempted to speak out something about the bowl but finally keep it for secret. "She couldn't begin to explain it," and it proves obstacles existing between them. She once had a relationship with lover, betraying her husband. This secret she bears deepens the rift and becomes emotional crisis between them. The increasingly improved living standard cannot remedy the estrangement and rift in conjugal relation. Though Andrea and her husband buy many beautiful and valuable possessions, it doesn't cover up the underlying dissatisfaction of their life together. In fact her marriage is broken without any substantial love inside, just like the empty house.

## 3. MEANING OF JANUS

### 3.1 The Two-Faced God

In ancient Roman religion and mythology, Janus is the two-faced god of beginnings and transitions, thence also of gates, doors, doorways, endings and time, symbolically looking simultaneously into the future and the past. Actually Andrea is in conformity with the features of roman god Janus.

### 3.2 Divided Self of Andrea

The protagonist Andrea is two-faced in front of her husband and her lover. The divided self makes her to be an epitome of Janus. It poses a dilemma to choose which side and be a complete individual. For her, the bowl is a reminder of what she is missing, and she is fragmented when facing outside world and her inner world. From view of outsiders including her husband, she is a successful real estate agent, quite and happy woman and has a fine aesthetic sense which also functions well in the real world. Oppositely deep in her inner mind there hides a woman who is unhappy, confused, aimless, lack of security and unsuccessful in emotional matters. All of these are like tricks she plays when promote houses to potential buyers and it is these tricks her proficient in that shape her two-faced character and lead her to live in both ways.

#### 3.2.1 Success and Satisfaction in Material World

Externally Andrea is successful and satisfied with her seemingly perfect life. The house signifies marriage which has given her almost everything except love. As the paper presents above that the bowl symbolizes love she pursues—realness, mysteriousness and beauty. In the story, Ann was once confused her relationship with the bowl. We can read the sentence in "Janus" of *American Short Stories* (2006) "There was something within her now, something real, that she never talked about" (p.239). If the bowl and her thoughts about it are only real things in her life, then how inauthentic the rest of life must be. When one of her customer, a woman, let a couple of days pass, and then called back to say the bowl had been a present. She pretended that she did not know what the woman was referring to. This is a world full of tricks which everyone is familiar with, including Andrea, who used them in business and family.

In the material world she maintains the marital relation as being a good wife facing outside. She keeps the superficial conversation with her husband at table which is virtually scarce in essential emotional exchange. When she deals with business, she is used to employing tricks and paying no true feelings. The entire thing is flashy, happy and blissful in appearance, and in the circle Andrea is surrounded.

#### 3.2.2 Emptiness and Loneliness in Spiritual World

Andrea feels insecure, lonely in the deep heart. She cares and love the bowl so much that the affection she pours into the fetish is more than anything else. In addition, she even just wanted other things out of sight. In anthropological terms, "fetish"<sup>3</sup> refers to an object which

<sup>3</sup> In psychology, the word fetish means, according to The American Heritage Dictionary: "an object or body part whose real or fantasized presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratification and that is an object of fixation to the extent that it may interfere with complete sexual expression." Using this background information, the reader can view "Janus" as a psychoanalytical exploration into lover of the main character.

the bearer believes that the object has magical powers that both protect its owner and lead the owner to success. The morbid or sick relationship is also the evidence that the spiritual world of Andrea is empty and lonely. It is lacking of care and love that trigger transferred attention to the fetish. And Andrea's extreme emptiness is caused by her self-sealing, emotional disconnection with her husband, her loss of lover.

She calls for love in the spiritual world and the bowl proves it. Apart from love the bowl symbolizes, it also indicates Andrea's inner world. "She asks her husband to please not drop his house key in it. It was meant to be empty" (Ma, 2006, p.237). The bowl need no ornaments or something imposed in it, like the key. It suggests the bowl refuses anything interfering and is only handled by her. This kind of thing resembles Andrea's inner world which does not open to outside, even her husband and lover. She does not share her constant secret with her husband, for instance "she never talked to him about the bowl," and don't have close emotional contacts with others.

The missing love intensifies her affection to the bowl even to such a degree that she cannot help being worried about it. "The horror was the possibility of the disappearance. That was what mattered" (Ma H.Q, 2006, p.240). The worry and insecurity of Andrea is vividly revealed. Her lover bought many things for her, including a sweater with a pouch pocket, which enables her could hold her own when he could not be there. So she must be insecure and lonely. Form her lover's words, she was said to be always too slow to know what she really loved. Until the end, she did not make a decision, which to some content, means her inability to feel love. Therefore the lack of her husband' care and loss of her lover's affection are responsible for her insecurity and incapability of love.

At the end of the story, Andrea gazes fixedly at the bowl whose world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty. It is same with her world, cut in half. The bowl is suffused with her secret affection and that's her whole emotional world where she hides and alienates herself from outside.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this brief paper, only a part of analysis of *Janus* has been stated. However, some conclusions can be drawn.

- The bowl is a beautiful decoration of house and symbolizes love that complement the deficiency of affections in Andrea's marriage.
- The house is a practical belonging but cold enough and implies the marriage which lacks love but can guarantee her stabilized material life.
- Janus, the two-faced god of beginning and ending, hints the story's protagonist, Andrea, a woman with divided self, who has success and satisfaction in material world and yet suffer emptiness as well as loneliness in spiritual world.

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