

Comprehension Questions for “When it Changed” by Joanna Russ

Check your comprehension of the following expressions.

In the first scene, Janet describe Yuriko as dreaming about **“all the wonderful guff you think up when you’re turning twelve and the glands start going.”** What does **“the glands start going”** mean?

1. When the child gets excited.
2. When the kid falls asleep.
3. When the kid begins sexual maturation.
4. When the kid has eaten a good meal.
5. When the kid is scared by her mom’s driving.

Janet tells the astronaut: **“This was a delicate point in our history; give us time. There was no need to sacrifice the quality of life for an insane rush into industrialization. Let us go our own pace. Give us time.”** What **“give us time”** mean here?

1. Please come and observe us for a while.
2. Wait and see what we’ll do.
3. Go away and come back later.
4. Give us technology to save time.
5. Understand the pace we’ve chosen.

The narrator says of the astronaut that **“he looked around at all of us with the strangest deference. As if we were invalids.”** What does **“invalids”** mean?

1. Lacking validity as human beings.
2. Terrifying monsters beyond all description.
3. Victims of sickness and physical handicaps.
4. Starving children.
5. Stronger than we should have been as women.

To the astronaut on the porch, Janet says, **“You’re the real one... aren’t you? The other one’s for show.”** She means he is the real...

1. man
2. spy
3. colonist
4. leader
5. danger

To the implied idea that in a lesbian marriage, one of the women must play the “male” role, Janet laughingly states, **“As if we had to produce a carbon copy of their mistakes!”** Here, **“carbon copy”** is a metaphor: what did it originally, literally, mean?

1. A duplicate copy of a text made by a typist.
2. An identically-sized 3D printed scan of an object.
3. A biological copy of a living thing; a clone.
4. A duplicated audio sound, recorded on a magnetic audio tape.
5. A perfect duplicate of something made of stone.

Discussion Questions for “When it Changed” by Joanna Russ

1. How long did it take you to realize the sex of the narrator was female? Why do you think Russ structured the story so that it wasn't evident from the beginning?
2. What do you make of the names of the characters? They seem to be drawn from a variety of cultures, with two of Janet's and Katy's three daughters named in the story: Yuriko Janetson and Betta Katharinason.
3. The male astronauts are impressed by what they see on Whileaway, but feel something is missing. The narrator doesn't seem to feel this way. What is Russ saying?
4. Why do the astronauts repeatedly tell the women of Whileaway that “sexual equality has been reestablished on Earth”. What does this imply about Earth's future history?
5. Janet struggles to describe the male astronauts:
They are bigger than we are. They are bigger and broader. Two were taller than I, and I am extremely tall, one meter eighty centimeters in my bare feet. They are obviously of our species but off, indescribably off, and as my eyes could not and still cannot quite comprehend the lines of those alien bodies, I could not, then, bring myself to touch them, though the one who spoke Russian—what voices they have—wanted to “shake hands,” a custom from the past, I imagine. I can only say they were apes with human faces.
What did you make of the description, and how did you feel reading it? Why do you think Russ wrote the description this specific way?
6. Russ tells us that Katy's lovemaking was “peremptory as usual”: why does Russ include this detail?
7. The ending of the story is wistful and sad: the narrator worries that men are coming back to Whileaway, and that everything she knows will be, as the story's title puts it, “changed.” What do you make of this ending—both its tragic tone, and its apparent inevitability?
8. When Janet offers the astronaut on the porch cells for reestablishing human diversity on Earth, the astronaut says, “That's not how we want to do it.” What does he mean? Why do the astronauts insist they're fixing Whileaway when, secretly, they admit they need fresh DNA to repopulate the Earth?
9. Why do you think Russ included a dark moment of political rivalry between Phyllis Helgason Spet and Janet?
10. Write your own question here: