**Chapter 21 Close Read**

The Commander's Wife hurries in, in her ridiculous while cotton nightgown, her spindly legs

sticking out beneath it. Two of the Wives in their blue dresses and veils hold her by the arms, as if

she needs it; she has a tight little smile on her face, like a hostess at a party she'd rather not be giving.

She must know what we think of her. She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and

above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms

of an eccentric chair. Oddly enough, she's wearing white cotton socks, and bedroom slippers, blue

ones made of fuzzy material, like toilet covers. But we pay no attention to the Wife, we hardly even

see her, our eyes are on Janine. In the dim light, in her white gown, she glows like a moon in cloud.

She's grunting now, with the effort. "Push, push, push," we whisper. "Relax. Pant. Push, push,

push." We're with her, we're the same as her, we're drunk. Aunt Elizabeth kneels, with an outspread

towel to catch the baby, here's the crowning, the glory, the head, purple and smeared with yoghurt,

another push and it slithers out, slick with fluid and blood, into our waiting. Oh praise.

We hold our breath as Aunt Elizabeth inspects it: a girl, poor thing, but so far so good, at least

there's nothing wrong with it, that can be seen. Hands, feet, eyes, we silently count, everything is in

place. Aunt Elizabeth, holding the baby, looks up at us and smiles. We smile too, we are one smile,

tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy.

Our happiness is part memory. What I remember is Luke, with me in the hospital, standing

beside my head, holding my hand, in the green gown and white mask they gave him. Oh, he said, oh

Jesus, breath coming out in wonder. That night he couldn't go to sleep at all, he said, he was so high.

Aunt Elizabeth is gently washing the baby off, it isn't crying much, it stops. As quietly as

possible, so as not to startle it, we rise, crowd around Janine, squeezing her, patting her. She's crying

too. The two Wives in blue help the third Wife, the Wife of the household, down from the Birthing

Stool and over to the bed, where they lay her down and tuck her in. The baby, washed now and quiet,

is placed ceremoniously in her arms. The Wives from downstairs are crowding in now, pushing

among us, pushing us aside. They talk too loud, some of them are still carrying their plates, their

coffee cups, their wine glasses, some of them are still chewing, they cluster around the bed, the

mother and child, cooing and congratulating. Envy radiates from them, I can smell it, faint wisps of

acid, mingled with their perfume. The Commander's Wife looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet

of flowers: something she's won, a tribute.

The Wives are here to bear witness to the naming. It's the Wives who do the naming, around

here.

"Angela," says the Commander's Wife.

"Angela, Angela," the Wives repeat, twittering.

**Prompt: How does Atwood use diction to convey the situation of the birthing ritual?**