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IB English Literature SL

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A Guided literary analysis of an extract from Steven Toltz, *A Fraction of the Whole*

Waking up from a coma would universally be considered discomfoting. However, in the extract from Steve Toltz's *Fraction of the Whole*, the narrator, an eight year old boy who just emerged from a four year coma, reveals a rather flippant and satirical tone regarding his traumatic situation. As he describes his especial experience of realizing with his body, reunifying with his family, and building a relationship with his newfound brother, the boy maintains a sardonic and humorous tone, incorporating interesting descriptions and images of his actions. Although written in a 1st person perspective, the passage rarely displays the private emotions of the narrator, and keeps the narrative eye on his surroundings. By using such techniques, Toltz entertains with an absorbing account from a sarcastic boy who is undergoing a rare experience.

The most striking aspect of the passage would be the boy's overall satire tone; the supposedly heavy topic mismatches the dark humor and entertaining descriptions. Though he has awoken from a possibly terrifying experience, he describes it simply as: "I slipped into a coma, [and] I slipped out again" (2), divertingly trivializing a serious situation. He also prolongs the humorous tone when he personifies his legs or describes his eyelids: "Not only could my eyes see, but I used the lids to blink" (2), and "My legs were sad, dead things, so [my parents] dragged me around the room as if I were a drunk friend(...)" (19). He exaggerates his craving for a sweet drink after waking up by a mockingly giving a generic image of a sweet drink: "In real life you think of cocktails with pineapple chunks and little umbrellas." (2) An interesting twist of a common expression: "Even ugly people know beauty when they don't see it" (25) is a good example of the naturally sarcastic tone of the narrator.

The humorous tone, however, contrasts with the frequent imagery of death and loneliness that is implied throughout the text, that may present discomfort about the serious condition of the boy. He uses grim vocabulary as he describes himself as a "corpse" or a

“creepy mummy” with “solidified” eyeballs, or when he expresses his waking as a “resurrection” to the “land of the living.” This vivid imagery is well pronounced when he imagines himself “at night when the moonlight hits [his] frozen face and [his] unmoving eyeballs fixed,” with chilling words like “frozen” and “unmoving,” delineating the image he has of himself during the coma. These images, as well as descriptions like “it must have been spooky” (16) to see his own comatose body, or that he was scared to close his eyes because he was “afraid the coma was waiting” (32), may point to how the narrator, although sardonic and care-free in his tone, is somewhat afraid and fearful of his prolonged unconsciousness.

The narrator also mentions communications with his family members, mainly his parents, and his brother Terry. He maintains the sarcastic tone even while describing the emotional reactions of his mother who “covered [his] hands in wet kisses that I could now wipe on my hands,” and his “jubilant” father to whom he was a “Freak-show stepson, the Amazing Sleeping Kid,” appearing to be reserved and keep his cool, possibly feeling a distance with them. The interactions with his family are kept light-hearted, incorporating comical images like his father “thundering in” or his parents “dragging me around the room as if I were a drunk friend they were escorting out of a bar.”

However, the narrator shifts his tone when describing the relations with his brother Terry. According to the narrator’s depictions, Terry seems to feel a disconnect from his brother due to the long coma, as “[he] was a no-show” (12) when others were there to congratulate his arousing. The narrator also has some consideration about Terry’s perspective, imagining “what it must have been like for Terry’s developing mind to grow up next to a corpse.”(14) It is clear that the boys intend to understand and befriend each other, when the narrator describes that “It was about time we were properly introduced” (26). The interaction with between the two as Terry enters the bed, unlike the rest of the fast-paced passage, is descriptive and dense: “I lay back in the the bed (...) and pulled the covers over me” (29). The anxiety and uneasiness is delivered through the description of their breathing: “I could hear my brother breathing. I could hear myself breathing too—so could anyone; the air whistled noisily through my throat” (29). The narrator uncommonly exposes his feelings when he writes “I felt awkward and ridiculous,” and further tension is built up with descriptions of his eyelids, which “weighed a ton.” However, this tension is suddenly and vacantly released with a single sentence that concludes the passage: “It took an hour for Terry to bridge the distance

between us” (34), implying how unexpectedly easy it was for the two boys to bond, even with such a wide gap.

The narrator, overall, displays a range of attitudes throughout the passage; sustaining a sarcastic attitude, while often expressing fear towards his morbid experience, or slowing down to build the tension of trying to communicate with his brother. This incorporation of diverse emotions amusingly depict the confusing and turbulent situation after waking up from a coma, and shows how a young boy might have interpreted this complicated situation.