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IB English Literature SL

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A Guided literary analysis of an extract from Julian Barnes, *the Sense of an Ending*

In the extract from *the Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes portrays the peaceful atmosphere of a classroom in which a new student, Adrian Finn, has joined the class, through the adolescent, and partially arrogant voice of the narrator, Tony Webster.

The story, set in a classroom, is principally narrated by Tony Webster, another student in the class. He is referenced plurally, as “us,” “we,” or “our” that indicates the three members of his social group: Tony, Colin, and Alex, which, as the introductory paragraph reveals, has a very close bond: “We hadn’t expected to add to our tight number.” (1) The author uses a simple tone to describe the setting: “On the third morning of that autumn term, we had a history class with Old Joe Hunt,” (9) a typical, peaceful school day. Students are not too interested in the contents of the class, nor participating, as when the teacher asks a question, the three “squinted at one another, hoping that the question wouldn’t be flicked, like an angler’s fly, to land on one of our heads.” (12) The teacher directs the question to a boy, Marshall, who the narrator describes as “a cautious know-nothing who lacked the inventiveness of true ignorance,” (17) whose idiotic answer causes an outbreak of smirking in the classroom. The narrators take an observant stance, carefully describing the scene, rather than taking part; each action of characters are detailed extensively, as when Marshall “searched for possible hidden complexities in the question before eventually locating a response,” (18) or “nodded with slow assent, thought a little longer, and decided it was not time for caution.” (23) Overall, the simple tone, the mundane events, and the magnified description of each occurrence by the narrator sets a peaceful and mellow sight of a typical day of class on an autumn morning.

The description of the few characters that appear in the story take the form of simple outlines of impressions by the narrator. When describing Finn, Webster plainly states: “His name was Adrian Finn, a tall shy boy,” (3) a bare, plain description of a transfer student, somebody that would usually spark more interest from students, and continues that he is somebody “who initially kept his eye down and his mind to himself.” (4) A formal introduction to the reader of the new boy finishes with only a overarching personality type and a stereotypical description, without any details or granularity, although being descriptive enough to hint further characterization later on.

Old Joe Hunt is another example of a simple, yet tasteful case of the characterization techniques of the author. The teacher, aptly named to his character, is described to be “wryly affable in his three-piece suit,” (10)—another short description of the character with a single detail of their appearance—and “a teacher whose system of control depended on maintaining sufficient but not excessive boredom.” (11) Again, the characterization of the instructor is limited to his garments and a single personality trait, but in turn this bare description gives an image of a conventional, and easily conceivable character that can be developed further on. The additional, and slightly humorous detail regarding the classes he teaches provides an insight into the strict, but amiable teacher that he is, and builds a convincing and expressive character with just a few lines.

Most of the characterization is delivered through the the character’s interactions with others, as in the case of Finn and Old Joe Hunt. The transfer student responds to the instructor’s question about Henry VIII that “There is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical events,” (28) revealing his philosophical and acute nature. The sarcastic response from Old Joe Hunt “Is there, indeed? Well, that would put me out of a job, wouldn’t it?,” also shows the easy-going nature of the teacher, previously hinted in his introduction. When the narrator comments to Finn about his answer: “Great line to Hunt,” (35) Finn responds “Oh. Yes, I was rather disappointed he didn’t take it up.” (36) The narrator thinks that “that wasn’t what he was supposed to say;” (37) also, the narrator tells that Finn had not taken up the group’s symbol of affection, wearing their watches with the face on the inside of the wrist; these two incidents show that Finn, although thoughtful and astute, can be dense in social interactions.

The narrator, however, is a character that is described through somewhat different techniques to reveal his egotistic personality. As a student, Webster chooses to use complex sentences to describe rather simple things, such as the atmosphere of the class: “cliques and pairing had happened long before, and we were already beginning to wage our escape from school into life,” (2) or how the class was taught: “Old Joe Hunt pardoned our holiday idleness and filled us in on the polygamous royal butcher.” (32) He also uses particularly detailed but partially distracting similes: “hoping that the question wouldn’t be flicked, like and angler’s fly,” (13) or polysyllabic words that could be replaced by a simpler phrase: “a teacher whose system of control depended on maintaining sufficient but not excessive boredom.” (10) This, combined with the fact that his approach to Finn was due to his intelligence and his expectation that his answer during class was to mock the teacher, evident in his line, “Great line to Hunt,” can be interpreted as a revelation of the intellectually arrogant personality of the narrator, Webster.

The author uses various approaches to communicate the atmosphere of the classroom, as well as the personalities of the character. Through the typical but familiar and flowing plot, the usage of simple, but colorful descriptions of the characters, and the particular characterization of the narrator, Julian Barnes brings life into a scene of a classroom on an autumn morning.