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English 101: Composition 101

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Chapter 17: Summary and Analysis

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* opens on the narrator Christopher discovering his neighbor Mrs. Shear's poodle Wellington pierced with a garden fork and presumably dead. Investigating further he goes into Mrs. Shears yard, and feels Wellington's muzzle to find it still warm. Stroking Wellington's lifeless body, he begins to question why someone would have killed Wellington and ultimately who could have done it.

In the following chapter Christopher introduces himself, giving us some insight into what makes the narrator of this novel so unique. He explains his difficulty distinguishing anything beyond the simplest of facial expressions, which foreshadows not only the difficulties he will face in the upcoming chapters, but throughout the entire novel.

As he removes the garden fork from Wellington, and clutches him to his chest he explains that he like dogs because their emotions can be summed up into, "Happy, sad, cross, and concentrating," as Christopher puts it. Several minutes later Mrs. Shears bursts outside and begins questioning and berating him as to what he has done to her dog, which overwhelms him to the point that he just rolls onto the ground and clutches his ears.

The police arrive quickly, and begin questioning Christopher in relation to the murder of Wellington. Lacking patience with Christopher's attempts to articulate answers to his questions the policeman persists by only piling up more and more questions. This again overwhelms him,

and he again rolls onto the ground and begins groaning. Frustrated the cop picks him up by his arm, and he responds violently by striking him.

Chapter 17 begins with Christopher being arrested for assaulting a police officer, which actually calms Christopher because it is what cops in TV shows and movies do. As they drive to the police station Christopher looks out the window and up at the Milky Way. He explains that though many think of the Milky Way as a long line of stars it is actually a huge disc with stars in every direction. He goes on to contemplate how for a long time scientists couldn't understand why it was dark at night when there were billions of stars all around whose light should be reaching Earth unimpeded, until they concluded that the universe was rapidly expanding in all directions faster than the speed of light. He then maintains that humans would know when the universe had stopped expanding, and begun to shrink when we look at the sky and see nothing but the blazingly bright light of all the stars in the universe being pulled into a singularity. However, he then elaborates that it is unlikely that anyone will see it because humans would have been long extinct, or the light will be so bright that everyone would be immediately vaporized.

This is an interesting chapter for a variety of reasons. The first one being that we see the consequences of how Christopher's autism impairs his ability to communicate with others. On his side we see that his inability to distinguish common social cues makes his responses to certain questions and situations very confusing to others. On the other hand we also see how neither Mrs. Shears nor the police officer ever attempts to facilitate his disability, and instead rush to unnecessary action like calling the police, or as we see in this chapter actually arresting him.

This chapter also plays a big part in showing us how his mind works, and how that differs from a “normal” person. We see that Christopher is usually calm as long as things fit into his version of reality. A clear example being the fact that he is calmed by being arrested, something that would cause any neurotypical person to become very distressed, purely because he has seen cops on TV and in movies arresting people, so that is how he perceives that cops should behave. It is also presented to the reader that Christopher is wildly intelligent through the way he explains concepts that would be difficult for most people to understand, in a clear and concise way. Including the complexity of the Milky Way and why it appears the way that it does. However, paired with this is a distance shown between Christopher and the unpleasantness that most people feel in regards to discussing the end of humanity, as he unaffectedly explains that it is unlikely that any humans will see the universe begin to contract as we would all either be long dead, or killed instantaneously.

Ultimately it is likely that this chapter was included to help push the point that people with autism are more than an illness that needs to be healed. Though they may struggle to communicate certain ideals, they are also capable of vast intelligence and comprehension beyond normal social conventions. Which is relentlessly supported with the constant juxtaposition between his struggles to communicate and his complex and brilliant internal dialogue.