

Analysis on the novel "the curious case of the dog in the night time" essay sampl...

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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time takes place in the year 1998 in and around the town of Swindon, England. The fifteen-year-old narrator of the story, Christopher John Francis Boone, discovers the slain body of his neighbor's poodle, Wellington, on the neighbor's front lawn one evening and sets out to uncover the murderer. His investigation is at times aided, and at other times hampered, by the mild form of autism he lives with. After Christopher hits a policeman in a misunderstanding at the scene of the crime, the police take Christopher into custody. They release Christopher with only a stern warning, under the condition that he promises to them and to his father not to look into the murder any further.

Christopher chronicles his investigation in a book—the book we are reading—as part of a school assignment. Ignoring repeated warnings from his father, Christopher investigates the crime scene and conducts interviews with the residents of his block. He uncovers a more tangled plot than was first apparent when he discovers that his father and the owner of the slain dog, Mrs. Shears, had a romantic affair. He subsequently learns that their affair began in reaction to another relationship, one carried on between Mr. Shears and Christopher's mother, before she disappeared from Christopher's life.

At school, Christopher prepares for an A-level math exam that will enable him to attend a university, a feat no other child at his school has managed. He also continues to work on his book. Upon returning home one afternoon, Christopher accidentally leaves his book in plain view on the kitchen table.

His father reads it, becomes angry, and confiscates it. Later, Christopher searches for the book and uncovers a series of letters, hidden in a shirt box in his father's closet, addressed to him from his supposedly dead mother. The letters chronicle a life that his mother has continued to lead with Mr. Shears in London and contain repeated requests for Christopher to respond. In shock, Christopher passes out in his bedroom surrounded by the evidence of his father's deception. When Father comes home and realizes what has happened, he breaks down in tears. He apologizes for his lies, explaining that he acted out of a desire to protect Christopher from the knowledge of his mother's abandonment of the family. Christopher's father also admits to killing Wellington after an argument with Mrs. Shears, his lover.

Christopher, now terrified of his father and feeling he can no longer trust him, sneaks out of the house and travels to London to live with his mother. During a harrowing journey, he copes with and overcomes the social fears and limitations of his condition, dodges police, and almost gets hit by a train. His arrival at his mother's flat comes as a total surprise to her, as she had no idea that Christopher's father had been withholding her letters. Christopher settles in for a time at his mother and Mr. Shears's flat, but friction caused by his presence shortly results in his mother's decision to leave Mr. Shears to return to Swindon.

Christopher moves into a new apartment with his mother and begins to receive regular visits from his father. When Christopher's pet rat Toby dies, Christopher's father gives Christopher a puppy. At school, Christopher sits for his A-level math exam and receives an A grade, the best possible score. The

novel ends with Christopher planning to take more A-level exams in physics and further math, and then attend a university in another town. He knows that he can do all of this because he solved the mystery of Wellington's murder, was brave enough to find his mother, and wrote the book that we have read.

Analysis of Major Characters

Christopher John Francis Boone

Christopher's defining characteristic is his inability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of other people. In other words, he cannot empathize. Because he cannot imagine what another person is thinking, he cannot tell when a person speaks

sarcastically, or determine a person's mood by his facial expression. This inability to empathize is one of the most prominent features of autism-related disorders, and this characteristic as well as a few others—

Christopher's difficulty understanding metaphors, his fixation on certain topics, and his computer-like ability with numbers—strongly suggest that Christopher has a mild form of autism. This condition has made him extraordinarily gifted in math and science but severely underequipped socially, leading Christopher to frequently misunderstand other people, especially his father. As a result, he greatly dislikes social interaction and avoids it when possible.

Although Christopher does not mention autism by name anywhere in the novel, we see that he recognizes the ways he differs from most people and

feels keenly aware of these differences. He says, for instance, that although most people enjoy chatting, he hates it because he finds it pointless. He doesn't see social interaction as an end in itself, thus talking to another person about an unimportant topic serves no purpose. He lives as an outsider as a result. He has very few friends and doesn't trust other people. He feels content to read in his room by himself, and he even fantasizes about being the only person alive on the planet. Christopher also recognizes and takes pride in the strengths that result from his condition, such as his talent for math and his remarkably accurate memory. His memory allows him to recall an entire event in extraordinary detail, and he uses it to navigate social interactions by memorizing a chart of facial expressions and the emotions associated with them.

Christopher shows a growing desire for independence throughout the novel, and through much of the novel we watch as Christopher gains the confidence to assert himself. He shows his yearning for independence in a few ways, rebelling against his father by disobeying his orders, for instance, and fantasizing about doing whatever he likes and taking care of himself in his recurring dream of being one of the few people left on Earth. He also begins planning to go to college, and to live on his own there. As Christopher overcomes the various trials he faces, he gains confidence in his abilities and gradually becomes more self-sufficient. This process culminates in a difficult journey to London that Christopher undertakes by himself, a feat that represents a significant triumph for him since he has never traveled by

himself. At the end of the novel, Christopher feels he has overcome his challenges, and he feels ready to be on his own.

Christopher's father (Ed Boone)

Christopher's father often goes to extremes when demonstrating his emotions, occasionally blowing up in anger, and he lacks the confidence to work through his "problems verbally. When trying to explain himself he stutters and stops and often has trouble connecting sentences. Like Christopher, he has very few friends— Rhodri is the only one the novel mentions. He also feels emotionally devastated by the way his relationship with his wife (Christopher's mother) ended two years earlier, and because he has no one to help him cope with his emotions, he bottles them up until he explodes in anger during stressful situations.

Christopher's father lovingly and diligently cares for Christopher, yet he also struggles with the frustration he feels as a result of not always being able to understand Christopher's behavior. He carefully prepares all of Christopher's meals according to Christopher's rigid list of likes and dislikes, but he also becomes angry with Christopher when Christopher misunderstands him. Notably, he is extremely protective of Christopher. This impulse to protect Christopher and his desire to punish Christopher's mother for the way she left leads him to lie to Christopher about mother's leaving. As Christopher discovers more and more of the truth about his mother, Christopher's father can see his relationship with Christopher deteriorating. Christopher's father must work to regain Christopher's trust, and the novel's final chapters focus on his efforts to reestablish a relationship with Christopher.

Christopher's mother (Judy Boone)

For the majority of the novel, our only view of Christopher's mother comes through Christopher's memories. He remembers her as loving but impatient, and prone to breakdowns in the face of his tantrums. She also comes across as a dreamer who is unable to cope with the harsh realities of Christopher's condition. But she receives a momentary turn as the narrator—the only instance in the novel when we see a first-person point of view other than Christopher's—when Christopher includes in his book a series of her letters in full. In these letters, she exhibits the patience that she lacked in her face-to-face interactions with him, writing fortythree letters over the course of two years, despite getting no response.

Although she tells Christopher in the letters that she left him and his father because she thought they would be happier without her, this explanation is clearly only part of her reasoning. We also see in the letters the intense frustration she felt with Christopher and her inability to deal with his behavior, as when Christopher threw a tantrum in a department store while he and his mother were Christmas shopping. She felt unable to cope with these fits of Christopher's, possibly because of her depression, which Christopher mentions at one point in passing. When we finally meet her in person, however, Christopher's mother turns out to be strong-willed and independent. Even so, she evidently still finds dealing with Christopher extremely difficult because of his rigid needs and sometimes "inappropriate behavior. She clearly loves Christopher but also has doubts about her ability to take care of him.

The Struggle to Become Independent

Christopher's goal in the novel resembles that of many teenage protagonists in coming-of-age stories: to become independent and find his role in the world. Because of his condition, Christopher cannot be as independent as he would like. Since he has trouble understanding other people, dealing with new environments, and making decisions when confronted with an overload of new information, for instance, he has difficulty going places by himself. When he feels frightened or overwhelmed, he has a tendency to essentially shut down, curling himself into a ball and trying to block out the world around him. Christopher, however, still has the typical teenage desire to do what he wants and take care of himself without anyone else telling him what to do. As a result, we see him rebelling against his father in the novel by lying and disobeying his father's orders. We also see this desire for independence in Christopher's dream of being one of the few people left on Earth, in which no authority figures are present, and in his planning for college, where he wants to live by himself.

Christopher's struggle to become independent primarily involves him gaining the self-confidence needed to do things on his own and moving beyond his very rigidly defined comfort zone. Solving Wellington's murder figures into his efforts to be independent in that it forces Christopher to speak with a number of people he doesn't know, which he finds uncomfortable, and it gives him confidence in his ability to solve problems on his own. The A-level math test also represents an avenue to independence for Christopher. By doing well on the test, Christopher can use the test to eventually get into

college, allowing him to live on his own. Finally, Christopher's harrowing trip to London serves as his greatest step toward independence. The trip epitomizes everything Christopher finds distressing about the world, such as dealing with social interactions, navigating new environments, and feeling overloaded with information. By overcoming these obstacles, he gains confidence in his ability to face any challenge on his own. Subjectivity

Christopher's condition causes him to see the world in an uncommon way, and much of the novel allows the reader to share Christopher's unique perspective. For instance, although the novel is a murder mystery, roughly half the chapters in the book digress from this main plot to give us Christopher's thoughts or feelings

on a particular subject, such as physics or the supernatural. To take one example, he tells us about the trouble he has recognizing facial expressions and the difficulty he had as a child understanding how other people respond to a given situation, explaining his preference for being alone that we see throughout the novel. As the story progresses, the book gradually departs from the murdermystery plot and focuses more on Christopher's character, specifically his reaction to the revelation that his mother never died but rather left the family to live with another man while his father lied about the situation. Throughout these events, the reader typically understands more about Christopher's situation than Christopher does. When Christopher discovers the letters from his mother hidden in his father's closet, for example, Christopher invents different reasons to explain why a letter from his mother would be dated after her supposed death. The reader, on the

other hand, may recognize immediately that his mother never died and Christopher's father has been lying to him.

Although the reader recognizes that Christopher has an uncommon perspective of the world, the novel suggests that everyone, in fact, has a subjective point of view. By giving detailed explanations of Christopher's thoughts, the novel allows the reader to empathize with Christopher.

Moreover, by pointing out the irrational behaviors of so-called normal people, such as Christopher's father's habit of putting his pants on before his socks, the novel implies that Christopher's eccentricities are actually typical to a degree. As a result, the reader is able to take on Christopher's perspective as his own and to understand Christopher's reasons for behaving as he does. Christopher's point of view loses its strangeness and seems merely unique.

The Disorder of Life

Christopher has an urgent need to see the world as orderly, and he has a very low tolerance for disorder. He obsesses over schedules, for instance, and even describes the difficulty he had going on vacation with his parents because they had no routine to follow. Moreover, because Christopher has such difficulty connecting to people on an emotional level, he relies heavily on order and logic to understand and navigate the world. The narration, as a result, frequently veers away from the main storyline to discuss topics, such as physics or even the rate of growth of a pond's frog population, that have clearly defined and logical rules. When the narration moves back to Christopher's life, the messiness of the social and emotional lives of Christopher and those around him becomes even more apparent.

Over the course of the novel, Christopher experiences a series of increasingly destabilizing events, such as learning of Mother's affair and Father's deceptions,

revealing that Christopher's narrow focus on order at the beginning of the novel actually keeps him—and the reader—blind to the complex tangle of relationships within his family. This disorder grows increasingly prominent as the story progresses. When Christopher leaves Swindon to find his mother in London, he becomes literally paralyzed at times by the disorder of the massive urban landscape he passes through, which symbolizes the disorder he faces in his family. The novel concludes with the various characters resolving some of their issues, but with their lives remaining essentially as untidy as ever. Coping with Loss

Each of the major characters endures his share of loss in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. The novel opens with a death: Wellington's murder, which prompts Christopher to think back on an earlier moment of loss in his life—the death of his mother. At the time, he coped with his mother's death by accepting that his mother was gone and moving on, in spite of the fact that he could not say goodbye before she passed. Later, he often remembers her in his writing, sharing detailed memories of her manner of speaking, dress, and temperament. Father also copes with the loss of his wife, Christopher's mother, though he does so by breaking off contact with her and cutting her out of his—and Christopher's—life, telling Christopher she is dead. Father's feelings of loss arise again when Mrs. Shears ends their relationship, and he works through his loss violently by

murdering Wellington, effectively setting the events of the novel in motion. Ultimately, the book ends as it began, with a death, this time of Christopher's pet rat, Toby. Christopher copes by acknowledging that Toby lived a very long life for a rat, and he rejoices in the arrival of a new puppy, Sandy. Motifs

Frustration with Christopher

Many of the characters in the novel become irritated with Christopher at one time or another because of the difficulty they have communicating with him. Christopher has trouble understanding metaphors, such as the dog was stone dead. He also has difficulty with nonverbal forms of communication, such as body language, facial expressions, and even the tone of someone's voice. He tends to take statements literally and requires very specific instructions in order to follow a command. He says, for example, that when people say "Be quiet" they don't specify how long he should be quiet for. As a result, we often see characters struggling to make Christopher understand them since their ordinary way of speaking fails to communicate their meaning to him. These exchanges underscore

how Christopher's condition affects his social skills, and they emphasize for the reader the difference in perspective that Christopher experiences compared to the average person.

Science and Technology

Christopher's frequent asides about science and technology, such as his fantasies of astronauts and space shuttles and musings about alien life forms and the workings of the human mind, recur throughout the book. Christopher

feels most comfortable with subjects that he views as logical, such as physics and math. As a result, he thinks about these topics continually. But Christopher also displays a fascination with subjects that appear to him vastly greater in scope than human life, such as the relationship between time and space or the nature of stars, which he breathlessly describes as “the very molecules of life.” These subjects appear to allow Christopher to put his own life in perspective, helping him to cope with the difficulties he encounters on a daily basis.

Animals

Christopher often finds solace in interacting with animals and displays great consternation when he sees them harmed. He engages with animals so readily because he finds them easier to understand than people. An animal expresses its wants and needs plainly. Dogs, for example, growl when they feel threatened and wag their tails when they feel happy. Christopher can understand these simple visual cues. He even praises the nature of dogs early in the novel, saying they’re faithful and honest and more interesting than some people. Consequently, animals often serve as a foundation for trust between Christopher and other human beings.

Christopher speaks with Mrs. Alexander in part because she cares well for her dachshund, Ivor. Later, after Father hits Christopher when he finds Christopher’s detailed record of his investigation, he takes Christopher to the Twycross Zoo to apologize, because he understands that Christopher will find the environment comforting. Animals also provide Christopher with the companionship he doesn’t find in other people, particularly Toby,

Christopher's pet rat, which serves as Christopher's constant travel companion. When Toby dies, Father buys Christopher a puppy, hoping to rebuild his trust with Christopher and to provide Christopher with a new companion.

Symbols

The Murder Investigation

Christopher's book begins as a mystery novel about the murder of his neighbor's dog, but as Christopher's investigation progresses, it comes to represent

Christopher's search for the truth about his mother and father. As Christopher searches for clues about Wellington's murder, he finds evidence revealing that his father has been lying to him about his mother's death. Investigating Wellington's murder becomes an excuse for Christopher to uncover the secrets that Father has kept from him, and Father's deception acts as a crime in itself. Ultimately, we learn that Wellington's murder and Father's deception constitute separate parts of the same investigation. Father lied to Christopher in large part because of the feelings of loss and anger he felt when Christopher's mother left him. When Mrs. Shears broke off her affair with Father, those same lingering feelings of loss and anger caused him to lose control and kill Wellington. Christopher's search for the truth about Wellington essentially leads him to the truth about his mother and father.

Logic Puzzles, Math Problems, and Maps

Logic puzzles, math problems, and maps symbolize to Christopher the part of the world that is ordered and logical. Accordingly, Christopher uses these items as tools to organize his thinking, like when he uses the so-called Monty Hall problem to explain why his intuition regarding Mr. Shears has been wrong, and they serve as Christopher's primary means of achieving a sense of security. These items recur continually throughout *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, but they appear most often when Christopher encounters new information that he has not fully processed, or when he experiences a particularly confusing or disturbing event.

When his thoughts become jumbled in the train station in Swindon, for instance, Christopher thinks of the visual riddle called Conway's Soldiers to pass the time. He also regularly uses maps to navigate and achieve his goals. He uses a map when he searches the neighborhood for Wellington's murderer, again when he attempts to find the train station in Swindon, and yet again in his effort to find Mother's apartment when he arrives in London. In essence, these different items provide Christopher with a strategy to follow when a problem involves too many variables for him to reach a clear solution. The A-level Test in Math

For Christopher, the A-level math test represents a way for him to validate and feel proud of himself. Because of his condition, Christopher is socially inept and attends a school for children with disabilities. But Christopher does not feel that the other children in the school are really his peers. His condition, while a handicap, doesn't limit him to the extent that the other

children's disabilities limit them. Christopher recognizes this fact and also knows that he is exceptionally gifted in math and science, causing him to feel generally superior to his classmates. Christopher, however, seeks to prove this superiority, and the A-level

math test gives him the opportunity. His preoccupation with the test in the later sections of the novel shows how much he wants the opportunity to prove his ability.

Context

Mark Haddon was born in Northampton, England, in 1962. He graduated from Merton College, Oxford, in 1981, and later returned to his studies at Edinburgh University, where he received a Master's degree in English Literature. After school, Haddon took a number of odd jobs, including one working with children who had physical and mental disabilities, including autism. He also worked as an illustrator and cartoonist, contributing to a number of prominent British publications. In 1987, Haddon published his first book, *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, about a piece of candy that, over the course of fifty years, gets bounced around the world until it returns to Gilbert, the boy that dropped it (he is an old man by the time it returns). Haddon followed with more than a dozen works for children over the years, many of which he also illustrated, and became involved in writing for children's television. For the British children's show, *Microsoap*, in particular, Haddon won multiple awards, including the Royal Television Society's honor for Best Children's Drama.

In 2003, Haddon published *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, his first foray into adult fiction. The book follows Christopher John Francis Boone, a young boy whose symptoms and behavior suggest he has a mild form of autism, perhaps Asperger's Syndrome. The book came out in England in two imprints, one aimed at young adults, and one at adults, though no differences separate the two editions other than a slight change in the cover artwork. Haddon's novel immediately won fans in each group, quickly selling more than a million copies in both markets, in no small part because of the unique voice of its narrator.

The book earned critical acclaim as well, receiving praise from outlets like the *New York Times* and from noted authors including Ian McEwan. To date, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* has been published in more than thirty-five countries and has become an international best seller. In the United Kingdom, Haddon's book has sold more than 2.6 million copies, making it the third bestselling book of the decade. Had *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* come out ten years earlier, it might have had a difficult time finding grown-up readers. In the early 1990s,

few novels about young protagonists found success with adults. But the immense popularity of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, and to a lesser degree Phillip Pullman's "*His Dark Materials*" series, both of which featured young protagonists coming of age against the backdrop of a dramatic storyline, helped change the way audiences received stories about young adults. Both series achieved popular as well as critical success, with Rowling's books in particular becoming some of the biggest sellers of all

time. Even though Rowling and Pullman wrote their books for younger audiences, while Haddon wrote his for adults, Haddon's novel found the same kind of crossover appeal. Reflecting this success across age groups are the numerous awards the book has won, which include the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and the Booktrust Teenage Prize.

Despite his work with autistic children, Haddon staunchly asserts that he is not an authority on autism and claims to have done very little research on the subject before writing the novel. In an interview with Powell's Books, Haddon said that when he worked with autistic children, "autism wasn't a term that was even used much at the time, and only in retrospect do I realize that some of the people I worked with had autism, although they had it much more seriously than Christopher does." Although the novel never mentions autism, Christopher, the novel's protagonist, displays several of the symptoms that characterize the disorder, such as difficulty reading facial expressions, preoccupation with certain topics, and behaviors like rocking back and forth. Additionally, many of the press releases put out by the publisher, as well as the packaging of certain editions of the book, describe Christopher as autistic. The autistic community has criticized the book for offering an inaccurate depiction of the condition. Haddon, however, says he intended his book only as a work of fiction and not a medical treatise on living with autism.