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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

by

Mark Haddon

2003



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Ray Mescallado

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The story is set in England, primarily in Swindon - a town between Bristol and London - and in....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Christopher John Francis Boone - The book's narrator, Christopher is fifteen years old, gifted in mathematics, and has Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. He lives.....

Ed Boone - Christopher's father, who owns and runs a heating maintenance and

Judy Boone - Christopher's mother, who Ed told Christopher died two years ago when she.....

Siobhan - Christopher's main teacher since he was twelve.

Eileen Shears - A neighbor of Christopher and ex-wife of Roger Shears. Lives at 41 Randolph Street.

Roger Shears - Former husband of Eileen Shears, a banker who moved to London with.....

Mrs. Alexander - Another neighbor of Christopher's who, she is an older woman who.....

Wellington - A large poodle with black fur owned by Eileen Shears, found dead at the.....

Toby - Christopher's pet rat.

Minor Characters

Mr. Jeavons - The psychologist at Christopher's school.

Edward Paulson - A fellow student at Christopher's school.

Mr. Paulson - Edward's father, who died from gliding accident.

Steve - A student who comes to Christopher's school on Thursdays, needs help to eat his food.

Unnamed Policeman - Called to the scene of Wellington's death, is hit by Christopher when he
Additional minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

MAJOR LITERARY OR CULTURAL REFERENCES

Sherlock Holmes - Famous detective character created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Christopher's role model.

Doctor Watson - Companion to Sherlock Holmes and narrator of his stories.

Hound, James Mortimer's spaniel - Dogs that die in the Sherlock Holmes story *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Sir Charles Baskerville - Murder victim in the Sherlock Holmes story.....
Additional references are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The narrator Christopher Boone, who wishes to solve the murder of Wellington and.....

Antagonist - The world removed from his routine: that is, the everyday world of chaos, disorder, absence. The initiator of chaos is the murderer of Wellington, a mystery Christopher chooses to.....

Climax - Christopher discovers his mother isn't dead, as his father claimed, and that he.....

Outcome - Christopher goes to London to be with his mother and they return to

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Christopher Boone is a mathematically-gifted autistic teenager who one night discovers the dead body of Wellington, the large poodle of his neighbor Mrs. Shears. After a misunderstanding with the police that gets him arrested, Christopher decides to solve the mystery of who killed Wellington despite his father's order that he stay out of other people's business. Christopher's mother died of a heart attack two years earlier, leaving Ed the sole caregiver of his son.

Christopher decides to write about this mystery for an assignment at school; the book he writes is the one we read as the novel. He is also preparing for his A-level math exam, which has never happened at his school before. Regarding Wellington's demise, Christopher investigates around the neighborhood and eventually finds out from Mrs. Alexander that his mother Judy had an affair with Roger Shears, Mrs. Shears' former husband. Ed Boone grows angry when he discovers Christopher's book: they get into a fight and Ed throws the book away. Later, Ed apologizes to his son and takes him to the zoo, making sure Christopher knows he loves him.

Christopher wants his book back and searches for it; when he discovers it in his father's bedroom, he also finds letter that seem to be from his mother. With his father unaware, he reads several of the letters and realizes his mother isn't dead but is living in London with Roger Shears. She had run away with.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The search for order and stability is the first major theme of the novel. That is, the entire novel is an account by narrator Christopher Boone of how his world is upended by chaos - the death of a favorite dog, the discovery of a deception regarding his parents - and how he restores order. For Christopher, the desire for order and stability is actually a necessity of living: as he suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism, he needs an ordered and stable life to be happy and safe. Anything that jeopardizes this not only.....

Minor Themes

The minor themes in the novel involve specific ways stability can be found, especially as relevant to Christopher's life. First, there is the stability of family: something which seems evident in.....

MOOD

The primary mood of the novel is serious, reflecting Christopher's own seriousness as narrator and character. He actually writes early on, "This will not be a funny book," which isn't exactly

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Mark Haddon was born in Northampton, England in 1962. He earned a BA in English at Oxford University in 1981 and later studied for an MSc in English Literature at Edinburgh University. As a young man, he worked with autistic individuals, an experience which helped shape *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

A writer and illustrator with many magazine publication credits, Haddon's first

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The most important literary reference in the novel is Sherlock Holmes, who functions as a kind of role model for narrator Christopher Boone. Sherlock Holmes was the creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who serialized stories of the detective in English magazines - primarily *The Strand* - starting in 1887. In all, Doyle

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Note: The story is divided into chapters using prime numbers as the chapter title.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

Christopher is outside at seven after midnight when he sees Wellington, Mrs. Shears' dog, dead in the middle of the lawn. A garden fork is sticking out of the black poodle and Christopher goes through the Shears gate to kneel beside the dog. Wellington's muzzle is still warm and he wonders who killed him.

Notes

What Christopher is doing out in the middle of the night is explained in the following chapter, where we discover he enjoys the idea of being the only person in the world.

CHAPTER 3

Summary

Christopher introduces himself, mentioning also that he knows all the countries of the world and their capitals, as well as very prime number up to 7,057. Eight years ago, Siobhan used simple pictures of faces to indicate sad - which he feels now for Wellington - and happy, which is when he walks around in the middle of night and feels like the only person in the world.

Siobhan tried to show him other faces with more complex emotions and Christopher tried to use them when he didn't understand what people were saying. He told Siobhan this, who was amused. He tore up the paper and Siobhan apologized; now, when Christopher doesn't know what someone is saying, he asks what they mean or walks away.

Notes

The use of ideograms - basic visual images - begins in this chapter, with a variety of faces. Visual iconography is a key part of this novel, further emphasizing the limitations of language.

CHAPTER 5

Summary

Christopher pulls the fork out of Wellington and hugs the dead dog's body. He likes dogs because they have only four moods, are faithful, and tell no lies since they cannot talk. After four minutes, he hears Mrs. Shears screaming and running towards him from the patio. She wants to know what Christopher is doing with dog and demands he lets go. Scared of people shouting and touching him, Christopher backs away. Mrs. Shears checks on the dog's body and starts screaming again, so Christopher covers his ears and closes his eyes and rolls forward, until he's hunched up against the grass.

Notes

Describing how he rolls himself into a ball and blocks out the world around him, Christopher concludes, "It was nice." This shows how he is so sensitive to outside stimuli that being able to limit it is not only important, but also pleasurable.

CHAPTER 7

Summary

Christopher tells the reader that this is a mystery novel. Siobhan suggested he should writing something he would read himself, but he reads mostly science and math. He also does not like proper novels, which he finds difficult to understand. However, he does like murder mystery novels because they are puzzles that can be solved - and if it's a good puzzle, can be solved before the book ends. Siobhan also suggested he should begin with something that would grab people's attentions, which is why he started with the dog. Siobhan then added that people are usually the victims in murder mystery novels, which Christopher counters by saying that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* features two dead dogs. Siobhan responds that the main victim is a human, Sir Charles Baskerville. However, Christopher wants to write something real and doesn't know anybody who's been killed, except Mr. Paulson who died from a gliding accident and not murder. Further, dogs were sometimes better than humans, such as Steve from school.

Notes

Though Christopher later professes to not telling jokes, inadvertent humor often occurs due to his unique view of the world. The comparison between a dog and Steve is an example of this.

CHAPTER 11

Summary

The police arrive at the Shears home, a man and a woman. The policewoman leads Mrs. Shears away while the policeman talks with Christopher, trying to ascertain what happened. The questions are too many and too fast for Christopher, however, and he rolls back onto the lawn and starts groaning, which is like white noise used to block the outside world. The policeman grabs his arm to lift him up. Christopher does not like being touched, so he hits the policeman.

Notes

Christopher compares his thinking to a slicing machine in a bakery: this shows how the mind works by certain processes and his own mind processes at a different rate than other people.

CHAPTER 13

Summary

Christopher emphasizes that his book will not be funny. He uses a joke that his father likes and explains how its humor is drawn from playing with three different sets of meanings. For Christopher, having to deal with all three meanings at the same time hurts, like having three people talking to him at the same time.

Notes

Jokes are built on linguistic ambiguity, which Christopher's mind cannot properly process. Other examples of complex linguistic ambiguity also hurt Christopher, and he sometimes deems them "lies" since they are not straightforwardly true.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

As the protagonist, Christopher is the character we most expect to grow and develop in the course of the novel. However, it's sometimes difficult to measure how much Christopher has matured as a character, if only because his thought processes are so different from other people.

The subtleties of Christopher's inner development - that is, his emotional growth - are not as evident as they would with other first person narrators, in part because he explicitly denies the importance of this aspect. He states time and again that the brain is as mechanistic as a computer and that

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Reflecting the themes of the book, the structure of the plot is based on order, a disruption of the order, and a re-establishment of a new kind of order. The novel begins as a straightforward whodunit, as Christopher tries to solve the death of Wellington. A second mystery is also in the process of being solved, which he initially does not realize. When he does, the seemingly simple problem of a dog's death takes on a new dimension. Then, the mystery narrative is disrupted in the middle of the novel: both mysteries, the overt and

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

It is difficult to discuss the two major themes of the novel - the search for order and stability and the role of absence in life - because the search for order in this novel often involves the acknowledgment and filling of an absence. The theme of the search for order and stability in life develops subtly but is changed radically when the presence of the second mystery is revealed - an absence. While it seems that the story is about the search for Wellington's murderer, most all the clues that Christopher discovers also seek to answer an absence he isn't even aware exists: the status and whereabouts of his mother Judy. This is the true "curious

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

AUTHOR'S STYLE

As the story is narrated from the perspective of a mathematically-gifted autistic teenager, the style reflects this experience. The descriptions are often straightforward and factual, though when he becomes involved in a particular idea or is describing a stressful experience the writing becomes more convoluted, with long run-on sentences to indicate the excess of sensory or intellectual stimuli that he cannot fully

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

Early in the novel, Christopher gives his opinion on dogs:

I like dogs. You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating. Also, dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk. (3-4)

Christopher seems to be describing how he sees himself: someone who is transparent in his moods and meanings, and who does not lie. The novel begins with many straightforward, detailed descriptions - things we would often take for granted, but which Christopher feels obliged to explain in order to keep clear in his mind as well as his readers. Thus, we have this surprising statement:

This is a murder mystery novel. Siobhan said that I should write something I would want to read myself. Mostly I read books about science and maths. I do not like proper novels. In proper novels people say things like, "I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist with which those clench who do not depend on stimulus." What does this mean? I do not know. Nor does Father. Nor does Siobhan or Mr. Jeavons. I have asked them. (4-5)

Rarely does a novel tell you what genre it inhabits - the reader is supposed to understand it from the beginning. And ironically, this work is *more* than a murder mystery novel - if anything, the murder mystery becomes a MacGuffin for the family drama in the second half of the book. With the quote that Christopher uses, Haddon subtly pokes fun at.....

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Many of the motifs in the book represent either controlled order or chaotic excess, as these are the things which most concern Christopher as narrator. Mathematics is the most prevalent motif in the book, as it's the means by which Christopher best understands the world around him. There are many passages devoted to seemingly esoteric issues of math and science, sometimes confounding the reader with its complexity. For Christopher, however, they provide mastery: of his intellectual capabilities, as well as of the outside world. Mathematics is a way for Christopher to set himself apart in a positive way from other people, and fuels his Additional examples of symbolism / motifs and imagery are discussed in the complete study guide.

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

Author: Mark Haddon.

Date Published: 2003.

Meaning of Title: A reference to the Sherlock Holmes story "The Adventure of Silver

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUIZ

1. Why is Christopher taken to jail?

- a. Wellington's blood was found on his hands.
- b. He asked for a small enclosed place to feel safe.
- c. He hit a policeman who touched him.
- d. None of the above.

2. How does Christopher determine whether a day would be good or bad?

- a. He rolls a twenty-sided die.
- b. The number of clouds he can count in one minute.
- c. He asks Siobhan what she thinks.
- d. The number of cars of the same color.....

Thirteen additional multiple-choice questions are listed in the complete study guide.

ANSWER KEY: 1.) c 2.) d 3.) b 4.) a 5.) c 6.) c 7.)c 8.) c 9.) a 10.) d 11.) a 12.) c 13.) a 14.) d 15.) c

ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. How important is the voice of Christopher as the narrator of this story? How would this story be different if it were written by a different character - Ed Boone or Siobhan, for example? How would the story be different if written in a third person omniscient voice? What would be lost in such changes, what would be gained?.....

Ten additional Essay Topics and Book Report Ideas are listed in the complete study guide.

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