

Bullet in the Brain



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOBIAS WOLFF

Tobias Wolff, separated from his brother and father after his parents' divorce at age four, grew up in various states across America, traveling with his mother and settling in Seattle, Washington. He would later write about his nomadic childhood and his mother's relationships in his 1989 memoir *This Boy's Life*. At the age of 19, Wolff joined the army as a paratrooper during the Vietnam War, and then went on to receive his undergraduate and master's degrees at the University of Oxford. He then received a fellowship and began his professional writing career at Stanford University in 1978. Afterwards, he taught creative writing at Syracuse University from 1980 to 1997, where he mentored other well-known writers such as George Saunders and Mary Karr. His first short story collection, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, appeared in 1981, followed thereafter by a memoir, an award-winning novella (*The Barracks Thief*), and a short story collection about his time in Vietnam. Wolff was also a productive short story editor and anthologizer from the 1980s to the 1990s, helping to publish works like *A Doctor's Visit: Short Stories by Anton Chekhov*. He then wrote 2003's *Old School*, a novel about plagiarism, and another collection of short stories in 2008, *Our Story Begins*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One scene from Anders's past mentions his attendance at an antiwar rally, an oblique reference to the era of the Vietnam War—Wolff was a soldier in the Vietnam War himself, and his stories often feature this topic.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tobias Wolff's stories are often compared to works by other famous short story writers, such as Raymond Carver or Richard Ford. Stories by these writers are considered exemplars of minimalism and "dirty realism" for their sparse use of language, grim or gloomy subject matter, and gritty characters. Many of the writers linked by the label of "dirty realism" disavow it, but there remains a strong association between the works of Carver, Wolff, and Ford, as well as the poetry of Charles Bukowski. "Bullet in the Brain" itself references Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers," which also features a sudden encounter between violent criminals and an unsuspecting bystander. In both stories, the criminals threaten others when they feel they are being laughed at or disrespected, and ask rhetorical and menacing questions to

further intimidate their victims. Unlike Hemingway's short story, however, Wolff's story ends in a tragic climax, with the protagonist shot dead for his insolence. In addition, when Wolff recounts Anders's past, he makes various references to other literary works and poems, such as John Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. References to these works, which Anders used to memorize in his youth, illustrate how passionate Anders used to be about literature and language. Despite his adult cynicism, some of that literary passion is still evident in Anders's personality, as he cannot stop himself from pointing out a Hemingway reference even in the midst of a robbery.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Bullet in the Brain"
- **When Written:** 1995
- **Where Written:** Syracuse University, during Wolff's residency.
- **When Published:** September 25, 1995
- **Literary Period:** Twentieth century literature
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** The story takes place in an unnamed bank, just before closing time. A key scene from the story also takes place at a summertime baseball game.
- **Climax:** The bank robber shoots Anders in the head.
- **Antagonist:** The unnamed bank robber
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Zeus and Europa. When Anders looks up at the ceiling, he sees a mural of Zeus and Europa, two figures from ancient Greek myth. In the story of Zeus and Europa, Zeus appears to Europa disguised in the form of a white bull. Europa, trusting the bull, climbs on Zeus's back, and is then abducted by Zeus to the island of Crete. In Wolff's story, the mural on the ceiling depicts Europa as a cow and Zeus as a bull, and Anders is struck by the mural's cartoonish style.

Aeschylus the Tragedian. One of the memories that Wolff highlights from Anders's past is a college class. In this class, the professor recites the work of Aeschylus, an ancient Greek playwright and tragedian. This reference to Greek tragedy is an appropriate allusion, as Wolff's story ends in the grisly death of its protagonist.



PLOT SUMMARY

Anders, a book critic known for his temper and his scorn, arrives at a bank gets stuck in line behind two women who are having a “stupid conversation.” The bank teller closes her station, prompting the two women to make sarcastic comments about her. They turn to Anders, expecting him to join in with their mockery. While Anders hates the teller too, he refuses to play along with the women, and makes fun of them instead.

After this sarcastic exchange, two masked men enter the bank, and one of them holds a pistol to the bank guard’s neck. The man tells everyone in the bank to keep quiet, or they’ll be “dead meat.” Anders, unable to stop himself from being sarcastic, comments on the criminal’s clichéd words.

The other robber handcuffs the bank guard and knocks him to the floor, and then hands out plastic bags to each of the bank tellers. When the robber comes to the empty window, he asks who usually works there, and the bank teller who closed her position claims it is hers. The robber threatens her personally, and Anders comments to the women he mocked earlier that “Justice is done.”

Anders’s comment gets the attention of one of the robbers, who threatens Anders by pressing his pistol against Anders’ gut. The robber asks if Anders thinks he is “playing games.” Anders says no, but has to stop himself from laughing out of ticklishness. Anders looks into the masked robber’s eyes and finally begins to “develop a sense of unease.” As a result of this intense eye contact, the robber calls him a “bright boy,” asking if Anders is being flirtatious. When Anders responds in the negative, the robber tells him to look up at the **painted ceiling**, which Anders begins to mentally criticize.

Anders silently makes fun of the ceiling’s mural, and the robber asks him what he finds “so funny.” Anders claims it is nothing, prompting the criminal to promise that if Anders keeps messing around, he will be “history.” To make sure Anders understands, he asks, “*Capiche?*” Anders, struck by the clichéd, gangster-movie phrase, cannot stop himself from laughing, and the robber shoots him “right in the head.”

As the bullet travels through Anders’s brain, various unremembered moments from his past play out. One scene involves a college professor reciting Aeschylus in Greek, a moment in Anders’s academic career that moved him deeply. Another involves Anders witnessing a woman’s suicide and shouting “Lord have mercy!”

The last scene, which is the one memory Anders actually recalls as he is shot, is from a childhood **baseball game**. A boy from out of town, Coyle’s cousin, joins the game and asks to play shortstop, claiming it is the best position “they is.” The mispronunciation excites Anders, as he appreciates its “unexpectedness.” The bullet continues to travel through Anders’s brain while this memory unfolds, and the story ends

with Anders suspended between memory and death, thinking of the “music” of those mispronounced words.



CHARACTERS

Anders – Anders is a jaded, cynical book critic, and the protagonist of “Bullet in the Brain.” When he visits a bank that is then robbed by criminals, the robbers’ clichéd speech causes Anders to laugh, leading one robber to shoot Anders in retaliation. As Anders is shot, scenes from his past play out, demonstrating that he was not always embittered and unhappy. He used to be passionate, emotional, invested in poetry and language, and capable of deep respect for other people. In particular, one scene from Anders’s childhood involving Coyle’s cousin illustrates how Anders used to be open to other people’s differences. In fact, in his youth, Anders was extremely moved by the way Coyle’s cousin mispronounced a common phrase. In his adulthood, however, Anders has lost his love for language, and has also begun to resent his job, leading him to become the sour and miserable man in Wolff’s story. He is sarcastic to strangers, and unable to see beyond his cynicism even when he is put in mortal danger. His more redeemable qualities only come to light when he is shot, providing a stark contrast to his death.

Robber – Anders is visiting a bank just before closing time, when two masked men wearing blue business suits enter the premises. They begin to threaten both the bank staff and the customers with guns, using clichéd phrases from gangster movies to intimidate their victims. One robber, who carries a pistol, singles out Anders for rough treatment when Anders’ sarcastic commentary begins to sound disrespectful. As one of the story’s antagonists, the robber clashes with Anders in multiple ways: he physically threatens him with a gun, but he also introduces psychological tension into the story. At the beginning of “Bullet in the Brain,” Anders personality is overwhelmingly cynical, which prevents him from sensing the danger he is in. When Anders looks into the robber’s reddened eyes, however, Anders begins to realize his cynicism has put him in harm’s way. Unfortunately, this insight cannot change Anders’ behavior entirely, and Anders laughs at the robber’s clichéd speech, leading the robber to shoot him. While the robber’s actions force Anders to come to a gradual realization about the cost of cynicism, this realization does not happen soon enough to save Anders’ life.

Coyle’s Cousin – Although unnamed, this character is vital to understanding Anders’s personality. When Anders was young, Coyle’s cousin came from Mississippi to visit his neighborhood, and participated in a baseball game. He chose to play shortstop, believing it to be the best position on the field. When discussing his choice with the other players, Coyle’s cousin mispronounces a few words, and Anders is struck by the way these mispronunciations sound. To Anders, the mispronunciation

sounds almost musical, and he runs on to the field while repeating the words. In Anders's adult life, he would likely criticize the boy for the mistake, but in his youth, he considered such errors novel and interesting. Coyle's cousin helps illustrate how dramatically Anders's personality has altered, as he changes from a fascinated, passionate young man into a cynical, isolated adult.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CYNICISM AND RESPECT

An armed bank robbery at the climax of "Bullet in the Brain" results in the death of Anders, a deeply cynical book critic. Anders is partly responsible for his own grisly end, in that his contempt for the world leads him to treat everything and everyone with mockery—even the criminal pointing a gun to his head. When one of the armed robbers threatens him using clichéd speech, Anders laughs in response, leading the robber to shoot him. Before he dies, however, Anders remembers a childhood moment when he respected others in spite of—and even because of—their simple way of talking. Wolff contrasts Anders's current cynicism with a memory of childlike admiration as a cautionary tale, warning readers that cynicism can breed isolation and further contempt, while cultivating respect for other people—and the world itself—can be redemptive.

Anders's self-centered and self-defeating cynicism both starts and frames the entire story. Anders arrives at a bank just before closing time, and gets stuck in a line. Two women in front of him are having a "loud, stupid conversation" that puts Anders "in a murderous temper." This is a normal reaction for him, as he is "never in the best of tempers anyway," and is even known, in his career, "for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything." Anders views every situation, even if it is minor, in a way that conforms to his cynical outlook, meaning he largely bears responsibility for his own frustration and unhappiness.

This pervasive cynicism prevents Anders from interacting civilly with others. When a bank teller leaves her station despite the long line, the women in front of Anders comment on the teller's thoughtlessness and expect Anders to complain with them. Although "Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller," his contempt for the women leads him to make fun of them instead. These contemptuous responses continue even as the situation turns dangerous. When robbers

enter the bank and command the thoughtless bank teller to fill the robbers' bag with money, Anders is not sympathetic. He turns to the women he mocked before and says, "Justice is done," taking the time to crack a sarcastic joke.

Anders's cynicism continues to manifest as the story progresses, and often leads him to show off his intellectual superiority. When one robber calls Anders a "bright boy," for instance, Anders points out a textual allusion, highlighting that it is "right out of *The Killers*" by Ernest Hemingway. When one of the armed robbers tells everyone to stop moving or they'll be "dead meat," Anders continues to respond cynically, saying, "Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes." Similarly, upon glancing at the bank's **painted ceiling**, Anders distances himself from the situation at hand by scoffing at the apparent ineptitude of the artist—an objectively ridiculous concern in the moment, with a gun pointed at his head. It's clear that he considers himself above the grotesqueries of the world, but such thinking only isolates him further; his cynicism blinds him to the fact that he is in mortal danger.

Anders's contempt eventually grabs the attention of one of the criminals, who uses another cliché to threaten him—asking, like the stereotypical Italian gangsters of the silver screen, "*Capiche?*" Anders laughs at him, and the robber promptly shoots him in the head. As the bullet travels through Anders's brain, Wolff lists events from Anders's life that further reveal how his cynicism has long been eroding his relationships, even with those he once "madly loved."

In his past, Anders had grown irritated by his first lover's "unembarrassed carnality," and "exhausted" by his wife's "predictability." Both instances position contempt as a destructive, alienating, and ultimately useless emotion. Contempt and cynicism were not, however, the dominant emotions of Anders's youth; in fact, other scenes from Anders's past demonstrate a deep sympathy and respect for others, in sharp contrast to his current behavior. Wolff rapidly summarizes various scenes that prove Anders used to be a more sensitive man. Anders once saw "a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own," and shouted in response, "Lord have mercy!" Anders also once felt "surprise" at "seeing a college classmate's name on the dust jacket of a novel" and felt a deep sense of "respect" after finishing the book. As he grew older and more cynical, however, Anders began to forget "the pleasure of giving respect."

The last memory Wolff highlights is one Anders himself recalls before his death, a **baseball game** he played as a child with the neighborhood's boys. One of the boys, Coyle, brings his cousin along, and Coyle's cousin claims the position of shortstop, arguing that it is "the best position they is." Anders, surprisingly, does not mock him for the mispronunciation. Instead, Anders finds himself "elated" by the words and their "unexpectedness and their music." In his youth, it seems, Anders was once excited

and surprised by others' perspectives, and did not make fun of, but rather celebrated, common mistakes.

Though Anders is, in his adulthood, a meanspirited character defined by his contempt for everything, Wolff lists these various scenes from his past to demonstrate how Anders used to be understanding and respectful of others and their differences. Wolff seems to contrast Anders's ill-fated death with his childhood wonder as a warning, showing how it is easy—and dangerous—to lose sight of other people's humanity.



NOSTALGIA AND INNOCENCE

When Anders is shot, various scenes from his life—both remembered and not—begin to play out in his mind. These scenes illustrate Anders's past emotional innocence, showing how he used to be the type of man to attend antiwar rallies, memorize poetry, and wake up laughing. In contrast, Anders's death is the final, unhappy culmination of his now joyless life. Wolff illustrates how Anders gradually lost his innocence and his passion, suggesting that time's passage can erode even the most energetic and dynamic of people. In the story's final memory from Anders's youth, however, Wolff demonstrates how nostalgia allows Anders to "still make time" to return to these lost days of innocence, even if his life is almost over.

When Anders is first shot, Wolff describes a list of characters from Anders's life that he does not remember. These selected characters illustrate Anders's past emotional engagement with the world, and sometimes serve as parallel examples of people who have, like Anders, lost their innocence. For example, Anders used to "madly" love his first girlfriend, Sherry, for her "unembarrassed carnality." He also used to love his wife, though over time, she began to bore him. A clear pattern in Anders's life begins to emerge: as time passes, his passion for others repeatedly cools to indifference and weariness.

In addition to Sherry and his wife, Anders does not remember his daughter in his final moments. Still, Wolff makes a point of mentioning how she is "now a sullen professor of economics." In emphasizing what his daughter is like "now," it is implied that Anders's daughter, like her father, has lost her sense of passion. Wolff then strengthens this comparison between father and daughter: Anders once stood "just outside his daughter's door" while she lectured her stuffed animals about their "naughtiness," listing the "appalling punishments" they "would receive." Like her father, the unnamed daughter once had a sense of innocence that helped her imaginatively engage with the world, in contrast to her current "sullen" behavior.

More scenes from Anders's past emerge, demonstrating his innocent enjoyment of and engagement with the world. When Anders was younger, he memorized "hundreds of poems," though Wolff emphasizes that in the moment of his death, Anders does "not remember a single line" of them. Anders had

committed these poems to memory to be able to "give himself the shivers at will," but they are now irrelevant and forgotten. Anders's past dedication and emotional connection to poetry is in clear and sharp contrast to his current lack of passion. Similarly, Anders used to be equally engaged by other people's poetic devotion. One of Anders's professors once taught a lesson on "how Athenian prisoners" could be freed "if they could recite Aeschylus." The professor then recited "Aeschylus himself." Hearing the poem, "Anders eyes had burned," as if he was moved to tears by his professor's poetic appreciation.

In addition to his once-fervent love for poetry, Anders used to be so energized and passionate that he acted with recklessness. When he was younger, he "deliberately" crashed his "father's car into a tree," and got into trouble at an "antiwar rally," where he had "his ribs kicked in by three policemen." It seems that in Anders's youth, his emotions were so overwhelming that he needed to seek outlets for their expression, like fighting for a different world, or acting dangerously.

After this list of unrecalled past experiences ends, Wolff finishes the story with the one scene Anders does remember, which gives Anders the ability to return, indefinitely, to the innocence of his childhood. When Anders is first shot, the bullet starts "a crackling chain" of "neurotransmissions," which prompts him to remember a specific "summer afternoon" that has long been "lost to memory." This nostalgic memory of a childhood **baseball game** occurs "under the mediation of brain time," allowing Anders plenty of time to "contemplate the scene" and get absorbed in his past.

Before the baseball game begins, a neighborhood boy, Coyle, brings his cousin to the field. Coyle's cousin asks to play shortstop because it is "the best position they is." Anders, struck by the words, wants to hear the phrase again. Although he does not ask the boy to repeat the words, Anders repeatedly recites "them to himself," a harbinger of the innocent appreciation he will have for poetry later in life. Still, as this innocent memory continues to play out, the bullet is still traveling in Anders's brain, and it "won't be outrun forever." But before then, "Anders can still make time." His recollection of this childhood scene gives Anders time "to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant," like poetry, "they is, they is, they is."

By listing a series of memories and characters from Anders's past, Wolff provides readers with the trajectory of Anders's personality, illustrating how he turns from an emotional, passionate young man into a discontented adult. Anders's final memory, a scene from a childhood baseball game, delays his death and returns him to his innocent days of wonder. Wolff seems to indicate that through nostalgic memory, innocence can still be regained, even if it is too late to completely save one's life.



THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Anders is a jaded and unforgiving book critic, known for his distaste for everything he reviews as well as his bad temper. Yet Anders was not always so judgmental: Anders's past is filled with scenes that illustrate his past appreciation for language in particular. Language, in Anders's youth, had the power to deeply affect him, and was a means of connecting him to the world and other people. Anders slowly lost the ability to appreciate language, however, and that loss seems to coincide with his turn towards bitterness and isolation. Anders's youthful respect for language, in contrast with his current lack of enjoyment, demonstrates how language has the power to shape one's engagement with the world.

In Anders's adult life, his relationship to language is dominated by dissatisfaction, particularly with the books he reviews. Still, even in everyday situations, Anders's relationship with language is mainly defined by negativity. For example, when he gets stuck behind two women in a line, their "stupid conversation" puts him in "a murderous temper." The women's perceived misuse of language, more so than the tedium of being stuck in a line, provokes Anders's anger.

This isolated incident of dissatisfaction is compounded by the fact that Anders now resents having to critique writers' language, and, in general, views "the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread." In fact, his career dissatisfaction is so thorough that he has become resentful and "angry at writers for writing" the books he is meant to review. This deep-seated anger illustrates a larger, psychological problem: Anders's inability to register novelty or to feel excitement. Anders has not recently experienced anything exciting and new; he does not "remember" how long it has been since "everything began to remind him of something else." To Anders, books and language have become repetitive and uninteresting, and his life reflects this monotony.

In describing scenes from Anders's past, Wolff makes clear that Anders's current lack of engagement with language is uncharacteristic. He used to be deeply affected by language, and found language to be a catalyst for his passion. When Anders was young, he committed "hundreds of poems" to memory, so he could "give himself the shivers at will." In fact, one of the lines Wolff highlights is from *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*, a poetic tribute to the power of language. Anders once treasured poetry so deeply that he dedicated time to memorizing it, in order to keep it on hand.

In addition, one of Anders's unremembered memories is from a poetry class. His professor lectured on how ancient prisoners would be "released if they could recite Aeschylus," and the professor then recited a poem himself. Anders's "eyes had burned at those sounds," as if he were about to cry. Watching someone else recite poetry once had the potential to move Anders deeply, without thought of criticism or judgment.

Anders also once saw "a college classmate's name on the dust jacket of a novel," and respected the classmate more "after reading the book." In his adult life, however, Anders does not "remember the pleasure of giving respect." In his adulthood, then, Anders's disconnection from language prevents him from feeling sympathy or respecting others. In his youth, however, language had the power to provoke admiration for a stranger.

Near the end of the story, the one memory Anders recalls before he dies involves appreciation and wonder for the uniqueness of language, and highlights the joy Anders feels when the conventions of language are subverted or made new. Anders starts to remember a **baseball game** from "forty years past." In this memory, a newcomer to the neighborhood, Coyle's cousin, asks to play shortstop because it is the "best position they is." This type of lexical mistake would be an easy target for Anders as an adult, as he is deeply critical of language mistakes, but Anders's response as a child is appreciative, not dismissive. In fact, he wants the boy to "repeat what he's just said," though he stops himself, worrying that others will think he's "ragging" Coyle's cousin for his words. This illustrates Anders's thorough sensitivity to language; he not only appreciates the mispronunciation, but also realizes that the others could misread his fascination in a mean-spirited way.

Although he does not get the boy to repeat the phrase, Anders is so struck by the "unexpectedness" of the mispronunciation that he "takes the field in a trance." Even though the mispronunciation breaks the rules of grammar, Anders seems enthralled by the newness of the words. In Anders's past, then, language was a source of joy and mystery; in contrast, as an adult, language has lost its emotional power, and is rote and monotonous to him.

This final memory, which emphasizes language's power to evoke wonder, shows how language helped Anders engage with the world. Anders's past demonstrates that he used to be a man who was moved by language, and drawn to its novelty. In his current career, however, he is uninspired by language, only able to criticize its improper or dull use. Wolff seems to caution that once someone loses the ability to be awe-struck by language, their worldview can turn bitter, dominated by anger or unhappiness.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE PAINTED CEILING

Before Anders is shot, one of the bank robbers tells him to look up at the ceiling. Instead of cautiously handling this violent situation, Anders looks up and focuses on the ceiling's mural, which he characterizes as amateur artistry.

In his mind, Anders elaborates on what he perceives to be poor artistic decisions: he describes the ugliness of the painting's subjects and the repetitiveness of certain elements, such as the facial expression of the painting's cherubs. Lastly, he focuses on a scene between two ancient figures, Zeus and Europa, and criticizes how the artist drew them in a comical and overdramatic style. Zeus and Europa are characters from classical Greek myth, a part of history that Anders, in his youth, used to respect and admire. As an adult, however, the painted ceiling and its classical backdrop are targets of Anders's scorn and cynicism. The painted ceiling thus represents the majesty and tradition of art, concepts that no longer impress Anders: he used to be moved by such things, but now he chooses to criticize and mock them.



THE BASEBALL GAME

When Anders is shot and a bullet begins traveling through his brain, Anders remembers a baseball game from his childhood. Memories of the summer heat and the chirps of insects set a scene of idyllic innocence, a sharp contrast to the violent and unfortunate situation Anders is experiencing outside of his memory. Before the game begins, a neighborhood boy, Coyle, and Coyle's cousin, who is from Mississippi, arrive at the baseball field. The neighborhood boys ask what position Coyle's cousin wants to play, and Coyle's cousin claims the role of shortstop. When Coyle's cousin is asked why he picked shortstop, he mispronounces a few words during his explanation, likely due to his southern accent. Anders finds the mispronunciation musical and interesting, and is so struck by the phrase that he almost asks Coyle's cousin to repeat it. As an adult, this sort of mispronunciation would be the target of Anders's scorn, but as a child, Anders was more forgiving and openly curious about the world. The baseball game therefore represents Anders's lost innocence and joy, embodying a time when Anders was more compassionate and sympathetic towards others.

Related Characters: Anders

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is an encapsulation of Anders's personality. He is a quick-tempered and embittered book critic, known in his professional life for disliking "almost everything" he reviews. Anders's temper and bitterness keep him aloof and isolated from other people: when he is stuck in a line with other restless customers, his first response is not to commiserate or sympathize, but to criticize. Instead of being annoyed by the mundane act of waiting—a common annoyance—he is angered by the "stupid conversation" taking place in front of him. Anders is more sensitive to the misuse of language than the tedium of errands, and this leads him to harshly judge his fellow customers, despite their shared circumstances. He is so thoroughly cynical that he can only disparage others, instead of showing any compassion or patience.

☛ Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the presumptuous crybaby in front of him. "Damned unfair," he said. "Tragic, really. If they're not chopping off the wrong leg or bombing your ancestral village, they're closing their positions."

Related Characters: Anders (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

This passage illustrates how Anders' cynicism and unkindness keeps him from interacting amiably with complete strangers. The two women in front of him, who provoked him with their "stupid conversation," begin making disparaging comments about a bank teller. When they turn to Anders, expecting him to join in on their commentary, he does not commiserate with them. Although Anders and the women are equally angered by the bank teller's illogical decision to close her window early, Anders still cannot resist unleashing his cynical wit on the women. Despite the fact that Anders feels a sense of shared frustration, cynicism still prevents him from sympathizing with the women; he is isolated by his bitterness, and unwilling to share a sense of



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Our Story Begins* published in 2009.

Bullet in the Brain Quotes

☛ The line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders—a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

camaraderie.

“Oh, bravo,” Anders said. “*Dead meat!*” He turned to the woman in front of him. “Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes.”

Related Characters: Anders (speaker), Robber

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 264

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Anders demonstrates how his cynicism not only supersedes any sense of solidarity with his peers, but also prevents him from accurately assessing the danger of a situation. When two masked robbers enter the bank and threaten the customers, Anders does not react with fear or caution like the rest of the customers; instead, he comments sarcastically on the robbers' clichéd words. Revealingly, Anders addresses his quip to one of the women he ridiculed earlier, further demonstrating his unawareness of social graces and illustrating how isolated he is from the people around him. Anders is more interested in showing off his cynical wit than staying quiet and cautious, despite the fact that the situation has escalated.

The barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare into the man's eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in the mask: pale blue and rawly red-rimmed. The man's left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was beginning to develop a sense of unease.

Related Characters: Robber, Anders

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

This passage brings Anders and his antagonist, the robber, into direct tension. The robber, feeling disrespected by Anders's sarcasm, holds his pistol against Anders's gut to threaten him, but Anders has to keep himself from laughing. Anders's cynicism and dark sense of humor have led the robber to this point of escalation, yet Anders seems unable

to understand the real danger he has put himself in. When Anders finally takes a moment to look beyond his contempt and mockery by “making himself stare” into the robber's eyes, however, he begins to change his behavior. Anders seems to finally recognize the robber's desperation, mania, and potential for violence. Freed briefly from the cynicism that blinds him to the danger around him, Anders becomes truly aware of the robber's intentions, and finally feels an appropriate “sense of unease.”

The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the utmost gravity.

Related Characters: Anders

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

The robber tells Anders to look up at the ceiling, as Anders's direct stare—and dawning awareness of the situation's gravity—makes the robber uncomfortable. Anders obeys, and the moment of recognition between the two men is broken: Anders falls back into his usual habits and expresses his cynicism by mentally mocking the painted ceiling. Forced to “scrutinize the painter's work,” Anders finds little to appreciate. Instead, he criticizes the ugliness of the venerated, ancient figures, and is especially derisive of how seriously the artist takes his work. To Anders, jaded by years of criticizing writers' best efforts, innocent dedication does not factor into artistic value. Anders is not more likely to appreciate something simply because an artist “executed” a piece with “utmost gravity.”

This passage also illustrates how little respect Anders has for topics that once inspired him. Anders's reaction is a stark contrast to the behavior of his youth—he used to have a great respect for classical concepts, such as ancient Greek tragedy. As an adult, however, Anders seems impervious to the wonder and awe he demonstrated in the past. Instead, he views the topics he once valued with the contempt and cynicism he now feels for everyone and everything.

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, "*Capiche*-oh, God, *capiche*," and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

Related Characters: Robber, Anders

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

Anders momentarily loses his cynicism when he realizes the robber's capacity for violence, but it is not enough to change Anders's behavior entirely. When the robber reverts to his clichéd, gangster speech, Anders breaks into laughter, unable to resist showing off his contempt. Revealingly, it is the robber's language that prompts Anders' scorn; even in a moment of intense danger, Anders's disdain for cliché is what provokes his judgment. Although the robber's behavior briefly forces Anders to see beyond his overwhelming sense of cynicism, he is still the jaded critic, and his bitterness skews his ability to behave appropriately. Although the robber is ultimately responsible for Anders's death, it is Anders's own cynicism that incites this fatal incident. The robber would not likely have singled Anders out if Anders had not grabbed his attention by making multiple sarcastic comments as the robbery was taking place.

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been released if they could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus himself, right there, in the Greek. Anders did not remember how his eyes had burned at those sounds.

Related Characters: Anders

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which illustrates an unremembered scene from Anders's past, Anders is deeply moved by his college professor's recitation of ancient poetry. In contrast to his adult personality, which is characterized by disdain for everything—including art depicting ancient figures—Anders's youth was a time of deep emotional engagement. Anders's

past veneration of subjects such as poetry and art only highlight how drastically he has changed: art used to have the capacity to evoke passion and feeling from him, but now it leaves him feeling unmoved. In fact, Anders has become so cynical in his adulthood that he is more likely to criticize art and poetry for any superficial flaws than to allow such things to move him or provoke emotion in any way.

He did not remember when he began to regard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread, or when he grew angry at writers for writing them. He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else.

Related Characters: Anders

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which depicts another unremembered scene, Anders is portrayed as a character whose life is defined by monotony and dullness. Surrounded by books and language, which in his youth would have provoked passion and engagement, Anders only feels "boredom and dread." Cynicism seems to have stolen all the joy and happiness from Anders's personality: language, which was once capable of evoking surprise or excitement, is now represented by the dreary "heap of books" that pile up on his desk. Moreover, Anders is so thoroughly absorbed in his cynicism that he has grown "angry" at the writers whose work he is meant to review. Instead of being excited by new material, he only resents having to generate more disparaging commentary. Anders' cynical outlook has destroyed any sense of novelty—he believes everything is derivative and hollow, only worthy of his scorn.

"Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position they is." Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle's cousin repeat what he's just said, though he knows better than to ask. The others will think he's being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn't it, not at all—it's that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music.

Related Characters: Coyle's Cousin, Anders

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anders's current cynicism is sharply contrasted with the past innocence and love of language that defined his youth. A newcomer to the neighborhood, Coyle's cousin, is visiting from Mississippi; he is invited to participate in a local baseball game with Anders and his friends. Coyle's cousin chooses to play shortstop, but when he explains his rationale, his accent changes the sound of his words into something new. Anders is "elated" to hear the cousin's mispronunciation, as the "unexpectedness" of the words' rhythm excites him. As an adult, this type of mispronunciation would likely fuel Anders' sense of superiority and lead him to mock the speaker for bad grammar. As a child, however, Anders was much more respectful of other people, including their use of language.

This passage also illustrates how Anders used to be more socially sensitive and empathetic towards others. As an adult, his cynicism leads him to interact uncivilly with strangers; he often makes sarcastic quips at inappropriate times and cannot commiserate with his peers. As a child, however, Anders was much more aware of how his words might affect others. In this passage, for example, he decides to keep his thoughts about the mispronunciation to himself, because he does not want to insult Coyle's cousin.

“ But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, *They is, they is, they is.*”

Related Characters: Anders

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Anders is coexisting in two separate eras. In his adult life—the present moment—he has just been shot and is close to death, as a bullet is passing through his brain. In his memory, though, he is reliving an innocent and nostalgic scene from his childhood: he is in the middle of a summertime baseball game. Memory has allowed Anders to “make time” to redeem himself, despite his current cynicism. In his past, Anders is an innocent boy who respects others and forgives them for mistakes, and a mispronunciation inspires wonder, not scorn. In fact, Anders is so struck by a misuse of words that he repeats it to himself, demonstrating respect for language regardless of its source. In his childhood, reawakened in his memory, Anders was once deeply affected by language. In his adulthood, however, he has lost his youthful innocence; he resents everyone and everything, and errors in language invite Anders's mockery. His youthful respect for language and others, demonstrated through Anders's memory, offers a glimmer of redemption in an otherwise miserable adulthood. As long as Anders exists in the scene from his childhood baseball game, he can be spared, at least temporarily, from his unfortunate and senseless death.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BULLET IN THE BRAIN

Anders visits a bank just before closing time and gets stuck in a line behind two women having a “stupid conversation,” which puts him in a bad mood. This is not unusual for Anders, as he is a quick-tempered book critic, known for his “savagery.”

Anders’s personality is immediately framed by his dislike of others and his bad temper. Interestingly, standing in line does not annoy Anders; rather, he is enraged by the stupidity of the conversation he overhears.



One of the bank tellers, despite the long line, closes her window early. The two women in front of Anders vocally disapprove and turn to Anders to solicit his commentary. Although he feels a sense of “towering hatred” for the teller, he does not commiserate with the women. Instead, he makes fun of them, thinking they are “presumptuous.”

The women expect Anders to commiserate, as they are all suffering from the bank teller’s thoughtlessness. Anders does feel similarly to the women but refuses to side with them. Instead, his cynicism—which isolates him from others—makes him lash out at them for daring to presume he would be sympathetic.



Shortly afterward, the bank goes silent as two masked men walk in. One of them has a pistol pressed against the bank guard’s neck. They tell everyone to stay silent, or they will be “dead meat.” Hearing this clichéd phrase, Anders makes a sarcastic quip to the women he criticized earlier.

Robbers enter the bank, and everyone else in the bank falls quiet out of fear. Anders, however, is so jaded by his cynicism that instead of fearing for his life, he cracks a joke. Anders seems more willing to critique the robber’s language than stay safely silent.



One bank robber comments on the closed position and asks about the person who works in that spot. The bank teller who closed her window says it is hers, and the robber threatens her personally. Anders, finding poetic justice in this situation, jokes with the two women that “Justice is done.”

Anders does not express any concern for the bank teller, who has been singled out by an armed criminal. Instead, seemingly uncaring of the danger, he takes the time to make a joke. Anders’ cruel humor wins out over any act of self-preservation, or expression of compassion.



This comment gets one robber’s attention, and he calls Anders a “bright boy,” asking him if he told Anders to talk. When Anders makes another sarcastic comment, saying the nickname is copied from a story by Ernest Hemingway, the robber holds the pistol to Anders’ stomach in warning.

All of Anders’s quips finally grab one robber’s attention, and he addresses Anders directly. Instead of sensing the gravity of the situation, Anders takes a moment to point out a literary reference. Anders seems keener to show off his cynical wit than to behave cautiously.



The pistol tickles Anders, and he tries not to laugh. Instead, he looks the robber in the eyes, which are red and raw-looking. For the first time, Anders begins to feel a “sense of unease.” Anders’s direct stare prompts the criminal to ask if he’s being flirtatious, and Anders denies it. The robber uses the pistol to tilt Anders’s head to look at the bank’s **painted ceiling**.

Anders begins to study the **ceiling**, which is covered in a mural depicting classical figures from history, such as the Greek god Zeus. Anders finds the mural tasteless, and his facial expression registers this disdain.

The robber, seeing this expression, asks Anders if he thinks the robber is “comical.” Anders answers, “No,” and the robber continues to interrogate him, asking if Anders thinks he is “some kind of clown.” The robber then threatens Anders, saying that if he continues to mess around, he is “history,” and then asks, “Capiche?”

Anders, upon hearing this clichéd gangster speech, cannot stop himself from laughing. In retaliation, the robber raises the gun and shoots Anders in the head.

The bullet starts to travel through Anders’s brain, starting a chain of “neurotransmissions” in Anders’s mind. As a result of this, unremembered scenes from his past begin to play out, which feature various people from Anders’s life that once mattered to him. There is Sherry, a past girlfriend, and his wife; both women eventually came to “irritate” him.

The bullet continues to travel through Anders’s head. Another scene from his youth unfurls, featuring one of his college professors reciting work by the Greek playwright Aeschylus. Anders was so moved by the recitation that his “eyes burned.” Anders also once read one of his classmate’s novels, and felt deep respect for the writer, even though his current career as a critic has led him to resent writers and their books.

Even with a gun pointed directly at him, Anders is still fighting back his laughter. When Anders looks directly into the robber’s eyes, however, his cynicism briefly disappears, and he realizes the danger he is in. The robber seems unnerved by Anders’ deep gaze and tells him to look away.



Even though Anders is looking at the painted ceiling under duress, he cannot stop himself from mentally narrating his sarcastic commentary. Although the painting depicts classical figures, a part of history which Anders used to admire, he only feels disdain for the art.



Despite the danger he is in, Anders’s contempt for the ceiling’s painting supersedes a sense of caution. His disdain for the art prompts the robber to ask what Anders thinks is funny. The robber then uses a clichéd word from gangster movies to further intimidate Anders.



The robber’s cliché, like other clichés used earlier in the story, feeds into Anders’s cynicism. Anders cannot stop himself from laughing at the robber’s words, despite the fact that the robber has a gun pointed at him. In retaliation, the robber shoots Anders in the head.



Anders’s cynicism has led directly to his death, causing him to laugh due to a misused cliché in a moment of extreme danger. As the bullet travels through Anders’s brain, however, his fatal cynicism is contrasted with memories from his youth, which feature innocence and happiness.



In Anders’s youth, language inspired him: listening to his professor recite poetry had the power to bring him to tears. In addition, language also used to catalyze Anders’s compassion: reading a peer’s novel helped Anders better understand his classmate. In contrast, Anders’s adulthood is marked by a lack of passion for language; in fact, language seems to bore him, as he finds his career as a critic to be monotonous.



Finally, Anders remembers a scene from his childhood “forty years past.” In this scene, he is participating in a summertime **baseball game** in his neighborhood. The boys of the neighborhood are arguing over which baseball player is better, Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays.

As the argument continues, two new boys arrive to join the game. One of them is named Coyle, and the other is Coyle’s cousin, from Mississippi. Anders has never met Coyle’s cousin, and will “never see” him again after the game ends. The neighborhood boys ask Coyle’s cousin what position he wants to play in the game.

Coyle’s cousin says he wants to play shortstop, because it is the best position “they is.” This mispronunciation, a consequence of the cousin’s Southern accent, startles Anders. In fact, Anders is so intrigued by the mispronunciation that he wants Coyle’s cousin to “repeat what he’s just said.” Realizing, however, that asking him to repeat it will make Anders look like “a jerk” to the other boys, Anders refrains from saying anything.

Still, Anders is “elated” by the mispronunciation. He appreciates the way the those “two words” sound, relishing their “unexpectedness and their music.” When he runs out onto the field, he says them quietly “to himself.”

While this memory is playing out, the bullet is still traveling through Anders’s brain, bringing him closer to his inevitable death. But Anders’s memory of his childhood **baseball game** gives him time to relive his happier past and to recapture his innocence. In his memory, he is still a boy in the outfield, playing baseball and repeating, “They is, they is, they is.”

The last scene Anders remembers is one of quintessential innocence: a childhood baseball game. The youthful joy of this summertime game contrasts dramatically with Anders’s current situation, which involves his grisly, unfortunate death as a miserable adult.



In his adulthood, Anders is unwelcoming to newcomers: he is unsympathetic towards the women in line, and unfeeling for the bank teller who is singled out by the bank robbers. In contrast, in his childhood, Anders was a willing member of a neighborhood group, and innocently welcoming to other people.



When Coyle’s cousin mispronounces a common phrase, Anders is not disdainful of the mistake; instead, he is amazed by it, and wants to hear it again. As an adult, Anders would likely make fun of Coyle’s cousin for the error, but in his youth, such mistakes only inspire Anders’s curiosity.



Anders thinks Coyle’s cousin’s mispronunciation is unique; his mistakes change language into something exciting. In contrast to Anders’s adulthood, where others’ use of language inspires contempt, Anders’s youth is characterized by a deep appreciation and respect for other people’s words.



The bullet in Anders’s brain is inescapably fatal, and he will die a jaded book critic. Before the bullet exits his skull, however, he has time to get lost in memories?he can remember a time when language provoked wonder, not cynicism or contempt.





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