The English lesson 1A

Dicey had an English textbook open in front of her and the teacher, Mr Chappelle, was introducing the

next unit of study. They’d spent the first three weeks on learning grammar and now they were going to

read some stories. Dicey was sorry the grammar had finished. She liked the precision of it. Besides, it

was easy.

‘Conflict’ was written on the board in Mr Chappelle’s square printing. He couldn’t write in a straight

line. He was young and skinny and had carroty red hair that he kept trying to brush flat with his hands,

but it always popped back. He had a pale face: pale blue eyes, pale skin, even his freckles were pale

brown. He was one of those teachers who taught standing up, but he didn’t move around much, just

stood in front of the blackboard. He always rolled a piece of chalk in his fingers. On the first day of

class he had introduced himself as the English and Drama teacher. In Dicey’s opinion he wasn’t very

dramatic.

‘If we define conflict as requiring two opposing forces, what might we look for?’ he asked the class.

‘For how conflict might appear,’ he added. ‘In what forms,’ he added. ‘In a story,’ he added.

Nobody sat near Dicey, who sat alone. She scratched at the shoulder of her T-shirt and waited to

hear how stupid the answers to the question would be. There was only one other person in the class

who thought of interesting answers and that was a girl who sat in the front row, diagonally across from

Dicey. This girl usually waited until all the stupid guesses had been made before she raised her hand.

Dicey never raised her hand, but if Mr Chappelle asked her she’d answer.

Dicey leaned back and waited to see what the answers to Mr Chappelle’s question would be. ‘Conflict

between two men,’ they began. Mr Chappelle wrote ‘two men’ on the board. Since it was correct, a

whole lot of hands went up. ‘A woman and a woman.’ ‘A man and a woman?’ ‘A boy and a boy?’ ‘A

girl and a girl?’ The predictable list went on. Mr Chappelle wrote everything on the board. Dicey made

her own list inside her head, because you could have conflict between someone with power and

someone without any, between someone honest and a liar. The voices faded away as she continued

with her own thoughts. You could even have a conflict between somebody and himself: and that was

an interesting idea.

The girl at the front had her hand up, and Mr Chappelle was waiting for the rest of the class to settle

down (‘A man and his dog?’) to call on her. ‘Yes, Wilhemina?’

The rich voice spoke out. ‘What about conflict between an individual and the society he lives in?’

Mr Chappelle wrote out the letters on the board, slowly, as if he was thinking.

‘What do you mean by that, Wilhemina?’ Mr Chappelle asked.

‘Well,’ the girl began. Dicey couldn’t stop herself from leaning forward in her seat to hear better. ‘A lot

of the time, conflicts are between one person and the people he lives with. Or she lives with. If the

society thinks one way and the person thinks another.’

Mr Chappelle was listening carefully, you could tell. Dicey figured, from the way he wrote down

everything everybody said, even when it repeated the same basic idea, that his brain didn’t work very

fast. ‘Can you give us any examples?’

The rest of the class shifted in their seats, getting bored. Too bad for them, Dicey thought to herself.

**Questions**

A1 – What five things do we learn about Mr Chappelle?

A2 – What do we understand about Dicey’s interest in learning?

A3 – What impressions are we given of the other students?

A4 – How is tension and drama built in the extract?   
A5 – “Dicey is rude and dismissive of other people” How far would you agree or disagree with this statement?