

# The Last Class

## The Story of a Little Alsatian

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**FOCUS: CHARACTERIZATION; INFERENCE**

I was very late for school that morning, and I was terribly afraid of being scolded, especially as Monsieur Hamel had told us that he should examine us on participles,\* and I did not know the first thing about them. For a moment I thought of staying away from school and wandering about the fields. It was such a warm, lovely day. I could hear the blackbirds whistling on the edge of the wood, and in the Rippert field, behind the sawmill, the Prussians going through their drill.\* All that was much more tempting to me than the rules concerning participles; but I had the strength to resist, and I ran as fast as I could to school.

As I passed the mayor's office, I saw that there were people gathered about the little board on which notices were posted. For two years all our bad news had come from that board — battles lost, *conscriptations*, orders from headquarters; and I thought without stopping:

"What can it be now?"



Why doesn't the narrator want to go to school?

How do the first two paragraphs establish the setting of the story?

Note that the Franco-Prussian War (see ABOUT THE SELECTION) took place in 1870–1871.

**Monsieur** — (French) (məs yûr') Mister (abbreviated: M.)

**participles** — verbal forms used as adjectives; e.g., *smiling*, as in "smiling faces."

**drill** — military exercises.

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS



Why doesn't the narrator want to go to school?

A. He would rather play outside and the study of grammar does not interest him.



How do the first two paragraphs establish the setting of the story?

A. The use of the word "Monsieur" as the teacher's title immediately places the story in France, while the information that the Prussians are "going through their drill" tells us that a German military force is occupying the community. It is clear that the French have lost, since much of the news has been bad. We can assume that the story is set somewhere around 1871.



Why do the students “stuff” their ears?

A. The students stuff their ears with their fingers in order to block out the sounds of their classmates reciting “in unison.” They are attempting to concentrate, a feat difficult to accomplish in the turmoil of the classroom.

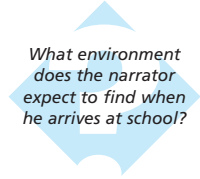


What environment does the narrator expect to find when he arrives at school?

A. He expects to find the usual turmoil and noise that prevails in the classroom daily.



Why do the students “stuff” their ears?



What environment does the narrator expect to find when he arrives at school?

Then, as I ran across the square, Wachter the blacksmith, who stood there with his apprentice, reading the placard, called out to me:

“Don’t hurry so, my boy; you’ll get to your school soon enough!”

I thought that he was making fun of me, and I ran into Monsieur Hamel’s little yard all out of breath.

Usually, at the beginning of school, there was a great uproar which could be heard in the street, desks opening and closing, lessons repeated aloud in *unison*, with our ears stuffed in order to learn quicker, and the teacher’s stout\* ruler beating on the desk:

“A little more quiet!”

I counted on all this noise to reach my bench unnoticed; but as it happened, that day everything was quiet, like a Sunday morning. Through the open window I saw my comrades already in their places, and Monsieur Hamel walking back and forth with the terrible iron ruler under his arm. I had to open the door and enter, in the midst of that perfect silence. You can imagine whether I blushed and whether I was afraid!

But no! Monsieur Hamel looked at me with no sign of anger and said very gently:

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“Go at once to your seat, my little Frantz; we were going to begin without you.”

I stepped over the bench and sat down at once at my desk. Not until then, when I had partly recovered from my fright, did I notice that our teacher had on his handsome blue coat, his plaited ruff,\* and the black silk embroidered breeches, which he wore only on days of inspection or of distribution of prizes.

Moreover, there was something extraordinary, something solemn about the whole class. But what surprised me most was to see at the back of the room, on the benches which were usually empty, some people from the village sitting, as silent as we were: old Hauser with his three-cornered hat, the ex-mayor, the ex-postman, and others besides. They all seemed depressed; and Hauser had brought an old spelling-

### HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**stout** — here, sturdy; strong.

**plaited ruff** — a pleated collar.

1 The name “Frantz” may be significant in this story about a forced change of nationality.