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The Art of Living

As one hopes for ultimate revelation and satisfaction for the protagonist in Herman Hesse's Siddhartha, one hopes for Christopher Lloyd's progression from his intellectual and sexual innocence as an adolescent to the fulfillment of maturity, in Julian Barnes' Metroland. Ironically, Christopher's ultimate dream of happiness ends up being down a path he philosophically despised as an adolescent. However, Adolescent philosophies, like all philosophies, are lifeless. Dehydrated soup, for example, is powder until one adds water upon which it becomes soup. Similarly, philosophies are just empty words until one adds a person through which they become a lifestyle. Paying attention to the smallest detail of life as an adolescent, such as fascination with travel and foreign languages, Barnes, in a *mélange* of French and English in first person as Christopher, creates a loving, yet ironic and quite comedic portrayal of the process of testing one's philosophies as one grows up.

The novel draws on the author's personal experience of living in the suburbs, contrasted with life in 1960s Paris. The protagonist, Chris, and his childhood friend, Toni, grow-up in a bourgeois commuter town they distastefully refer to as Metroland. This leads to fantasies of travel, which they both accomplish. Chris goes to Paris with the intention of gathering information for his thesis and Toni goes to Morocco for his "de-Anglification" (Barnes, 84). In this choice Chris and Toni begin to show different ideals, foreshadowing their ultimate detachment from one another. Toni chooses a romantic, fanciful endeavor epitomizing their adolescent philosophies; however, Chris' choice shows "A completely normal sense of priorities among post-graduates" (Barnes, 83).

Barnes follows Chris through Paris and the only information given about Toni's trip to Morocco comes from his letters as well as inferences from his behavior later.

Chris and Toni live as victims of angst which they attribute to their surroundings – the entire middle class, parents, teachers and fellow inhabitants of Metroland. They theorize in “raucous cynicism” (Barnes, 15) concerning the behavior, lifestyle, and ethics of others. Conversely, in the narrative, Chris' present – 1977 – Chris has fallen into line with the status quo. He's content with his nine-to-five workday, his family, and his house in no less than Metroland. Toni, now a smug, world-hopping poet, returns for a visit preaching against the evils of “selling out.” This prompts Chris to question his comfortable life. He wallows in nostalgia, recalling his days in Paris, where he lived as an artist, strolled the city's boulevards, and found his first love.

Throughout their adolescence Chris and Toni fantasize about their adult lives, which they wish to spend “as artists-in-residence at a nudist colony” (Barnes, 71). In intellectual and sexual immaturity they conjure many philosophies rejecting the lifestyles of others, and as a result develop their own ideals. However, when Chris and Toni actually reach adulthood they choose very different paths. Chris conforms to the mold he and Toni once despised while Toni attempts to live according to the philosophies they developed as adolescents. Chris finds happiness in his current existence although Toni strongly and openly disapproves. Ultimately Chris discovers that he, rather than Toni, lives as an artist because he lives the life he has created as he has matured, rather than blindly following an immature philosophy.

Written in first person, Metroland invokes love for the characters without ignoring their flaws. Barnes, through Chris, comments sarcastically on the situation creating a hip,

comedic style appealing to readers of all ages. Modern rebellious teenagers, who currently hate everything their parents love, can find both solace and humor in Chris and Toni's schemes to outwit all adults as well as intrigue in the many sexual scenes and references throughout the novel. Middle aged and elderly readers can appreciate the nostalgic humor in Chris' and Toni's adventures.

Barnes' work is peppered with references to and from French poets, painters and German composers, all of whom date to times prior to World War II. It is curious that the novel contains no reference to the tumultuous events of the early sixties that were taking place in London and Paris. The early sixties were punctuated by sex scandals in the British parliament, the onslaught of rock and roll, and the growing popularity of such musical groups as the Beatles. Hemlines were up; long hair was in, yet Barnes' characters seem cocooned in a cultural pastiche created by artists who died before these youths were born. Such a glaring omission from the historical reality of suburban English life weakens the authenticity of the characters. Barnes makes a point of detailing the passion with which Chris and Toni observe the people with whom they are surrounded and the peoples' interactions with cultural markers. How could Chris and Toni fail to notice the leggy models in short skirts?

Perhaps Barnes suggests that despite changes in fashion, poetry and music the majority of people still find happiness in the solid, unchanging things in life – love, home, work and family. There will always be the visitor from outside this cozy world, the “artist” who never grows up and who continues to challenge the complacency of the conformists.