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Close Reading Assignment

“Ethan wasn’t sure why he found himself so riveted by the spectacle of his students dancing. Individually, most of the kids didn’t look graceful or even particularly happy; they were far too anxious or self-conscious for that. Collectively, though - and this was the thing that intrigued him - they gave off an overwhelming impression of energy and joy. You could see it in their hips and shoulders, their flailing arms and goofy faces, the pleasure they took in the music and their bodies, the conviction that they occupied the absolute center of a benign universe, the certainty that there was no place else to be but right here, right now. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt like that” (99).

Aging Ungracefully: A Close Reading of *Nine Inches*

In Tom Perrotta’s *Nine Inches*, Ethan Weller is portrayed as a popular teacher at Daniel Webster Middle School with a wife, a toddler, and another baby on the way. Despite all of the responsibilities he faces, Ethan is required by the vice principal to chaperone the school’s dance. Although he originally does not want to chaperone the event, his attendance ends up allowing him to reflect on his personal life as he observes his students in this scene. Unfortunately, his observations lead to envy as he sees the pure joy in his students and their behavior. Perrotta explains Ethan’s thoughts stating, “You could see it in their hips and shoulders, their flailing arms and goofy faces, the pleasure they took in the music and their bodies” (99). It is at this point that it becomes clear that Ethan is longing for the youthful joy that is no longer present in his life. As a teacher, Ethan is surrounded by children of the same age every year, while he continues to

get older. As a result, he struggles to face reality and the unavoidable exposure to youthfulness that teachers face on regular basis, leading to poor judgment in his own actions.

As the passage proceeds, Perrotta's word choice makes this even more apparent. Perrotta's use of the word *benign* in this passage suggests the innocence of the children at the dance. As middle-school students, they have not yet been introduced to the numerous responsibilities of adulthood and are ultimately free to do as they please and enjoy themselves with few consequences. As a result, they have a very positive view of the world around them in comparison to Ethan, who has lost his innocence over time and views the world for the hard work and stress he now faces every day. Furthermore, the idea that "there was no place else to be but right here, right now" suggests that the students are focused solely on the dance, whereas Ethan, an adult with numerous responsibilities, has his roles as a husband and father in the back of his mind. While Ethan has taken the time to chaperone the event, it is hard for him to enjoy the moment when he has these other obligations to worry about. The students do not have the same burden, which gives them the distinct ability to live in the moment without other thoughts or responsibilities to distract them. In a way this makes Ethan a little envious of them, if not jealous of the fact that he can no longer experience that same joy and freedom.

Perrotta's choice to describe the student's "flailing arms and goofy faces" (99) develops specific imagery of the kids at the dance. This emphasizes the age and maturity level of kids in middle school, as well as their carefree nature. This would be expected for a middle school dance, but it is more powerful coming from the perspective of Ethan, who is almost living vicariously through the students. The word "flailing" resembles a lack of control that the students have in this scene, but also as students in general. It feels as if Ethan is wishing he could be in their shoes and not be in a position of power and control as an adult, and a teacher. In this process, Ethan

becomes caught up in the moment and uses questionable judgment with Charlotte, his co-worker, as if for one moment he wishes he could go back and experience a moment of less control.

Ethan's observations of the students at the dance seem to make him desire the youthfulness that is described in the passage, which is ultimately the driving force that results in him kissing Charlotte, despite being married to his wife Donna. His actions are shortsighted, likely because he is caught up in the moment, just like his students are at the dance. The final line of the passage where Perrotta writes, "he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like that" almost creates a feeling of empathy towards Ethan. Moreover, it shows that he misses his younger years, and is unhappy with his current situation in life. In some ways this passage is representative of the theme of this entire story. As a teacher, it is not surprising that Ethan is feeling nostalgic and jealous, as he is constantly reminded of easier times with less responsibility when he is around his students. Overall, this demonstrates the powerful effects of reminiscing and getting older, which can be even more daunting for teachers to overcome. Regardless of age, everyone wants to live happily in the moment, without a single thing to worry about. Getting older makes living spontaneously and carefree significantly harder to do, but the desire to live in the moment never goes away.