3. ALBERT EINSTEIN AT SCHOOL

What is the lesson about?

‘Albert Einstein at School’ is a narrative essay written by Patrick Pringle. The essay describes how Einstein was a misfit at school and how he made a desperate attempt to escape.

In this lesson Albert Einstein’s early life at school is explained. In the school Albert’s straightforward and honest behaviour was taken as his rude behaviour. Thus the teachers hated him and so he ended having no friends at all. Albert also hated the system of education in his school as subjects of his interest were given less importance. He believed in reasoning, he liked to know the why behind the things not how and when. His math teacher Mr. Koch was perhaps the only person in the school who recognized the hidden genius in him. This was the only class in which Albert enjoyed. He used to live in a poorest quarters of Munich. His landlady used to beat up her children and every Saturday her husband used to beat her up. She prohibited Albert from playing the violin, something which he thoroughly loved and enjoyed. He hated the slum violence and its atmosphere. Albert had only one friend Yuri who understood him. He found a doctor who helped Albert get a false certificate saying that he was suffering from a nervous breakdown and needed a break from school. He thought he would go to Italy and join a college or institute to continue his higher education. His math teacher gave a reference that certified Albert ready for higher education. The day at school when he was ready to submit the certificate, the head master called him and said that he was being expelled from school. As according to the teachers report it was impossible to teach during his presence at school. Albert got angry owing to the wrong blame on him but didn’t utter a single word and left the school with pride and happiness. There came no need to show the medical certificate. His sense of reasoning made him expelled from the school. He cheerfully walked out of the school, which had been his prison for the last five years.
Questions & Answers

1. What made Einstein unhappy at school?
   Einstein was a misfit at school and was unable to cope with the conventional system of education. As a student at Munich, he was different from other boys of his age. He hated the oppressive atmosphere of the school and was sure he would fail in the examination. He liked to study only the subjects which interested him. He believed that there was no point in memorizing things. When asked when the Battle of Waterloo took place, Albert replied frankly that he had forgotten the date. Moreover, he added, he didn’t see why one should learn dates as they could easily be looked up in a book. Albert’s honesty is mistaken for arrogance. He is punished and told that he is a disgrace to the school. This attitude of teachers and discouraging atmosphere made Albert feel miserable and long for an escape from school.

1. Did Albert succeed in leaving the school? How?
   Albert longing to escape got an idea. He wanted to play a small drama. He decided to pretend as if he had had a nervous breakdown. He would say that he had been advised by the doctor to discontinue studies. With the help of his friend, Yuri, Albert was able to find a doctor who was kind and understanding. The doctor gave a certificate of illness which said that he needed rest for six months. But even before he was about to submit the certificate, he was called by the head teacher, who told Albert that all the teachers were vexed with his rebellious attitude and wanted him to leave the school. Albert internally felt very happy as there was no need to give or show the certificate. He happily walked out of the school which he thought a prison.

2. What were Albert’s views regarding rote learning? Why is mere rote learning useless?
   Albert was different from other boys of his age. He was rational and reason seeking. He firmly believed that the mind is there to think most not to memorize
most. He was unable to cope with the conventional system of education, which laid a lot of emphasis on learning by rote. He believed that mere memorizing facts were useless. Facts and figures can be looked up in books. Thus on being asked when the Battle of Waterloo took place, he replied that he had forgotten the date and when it was there in the books, why he should struggle for it. He also added that it would be more useful and interesting to find out why the soldiers had killed one another, rather than to memorize a string of facts. He told his cousin Elsa that he could not learn things by rote like a parrot. One must attempt proper understanding and analysis of a subject. He thought that machine power is limited but mind power is unlimited.

3. The great thinker Socrates once said: “I can’t teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.” Do you think that the teacher role should be primarily to make students think?

The aim of education should not be to get a degree and take up a job which is often found in the conventional system of education, where the teacher is expected to impart fact-based knowledge or information transfer to do well in the examination. Drilling, cramming, dictating reproducing and marking important questions are some of the conventional tasks in rote learning. But in reality the role of a teacher is not to teach facts but to impart skills which can make the student think. He has to ignite the spark lying within the student. It’s not hyperbolic to say that the teacher shows the student how to think and not what to think. A true teacher encourages the individual to be inquisitive and to analyze the various facets and implications of an issue. The aim of education therefore is to produce learning individuals, not merely and necessarily learned ones, in an environment of freedom and creativity. It is not at all the aim of education to create academic or educated robots. It should make pupils think. Otherwise, the very purpose of education would be lost. Here the words of world famous writer,
Mark Twain are quite notable and quotable: “I have never let my schooling get in the way of my education”.

Annotations:

1. “You don’t have to understand what you are taught, just be able to repeat it in the exam”.

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Context: Albert felt uneasy in a system which lay emphasis on rote learning. He was sure he would fail in the examinations. Sharing his views with his cousin, Elsa, he speaks these words to her.

Meaning: Elsa tries to make Albert realize that he should be more practical in his approach to studies. She tells him that she knows many boys who, in spite of being far more stupid than Albert have passed the exams. Albert need not really know or understand anything he has been taught. He could simply repeat the lessons by rote.

Comment: Albert tells her that this is exactly what he can’t do. He is incapable of memorizing facts like a parrot.

2. “Yuri, do you know any friendly doctors?”

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Einstein, his history teacher Mr. Braun, Yuri, his best friend, Dr. Ernest Weil, who gave him the medical certificate and Mr. Koch, his lovable math teacher.

**Context:** Albert hated the school a Munich and longed to escape. But he knew that if he left his studies and went to Italy to join his family, his father would get angry and send him back.

**Meaning:** Albert gets an idea one day. Deciding to play a small drama, he wished to pretend that he had had a nervous breakdown. He asked his friend, Yuri, if he knew a kind and sympathetic doctor who would give him a medical certificate.

**Comment:** Albert would say that he had been advised by the doctor that he had a nervous breakdown and should not continue his studies because of his serious illness. An excellent plan was thought of by Albert.

3. **“This simplest thing will be for you to go of your own accord, and then the question won’t arise”**

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Context: Albert gets a false medical certificate to get out of the prison (school) and is about to go to the head teacher’s office to submit it. To his surprise, however, the headmaster himself sends for him. Einstein expects to be punished for some lapse.

Meaning: But it is the case and quite contrary happens. The head teacher tells Einstein that all the teachers are vexed with his rebellious attitude and don’t want him in the
school any longer. The simplest way out would be for him to leave the school on his own. Otherwise, he would be forced to expel Albert.

Comment: Albert falls in mixed feelings surprise and joy. He unnecessarily troubled his friend’s doctor-friend. His dream has come true without the need of any medical certificate. He cheerfully walks out of the school.