An Astrologer's Day Study Guide

An Astrologer's Day by R. K. Narayan

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Author Biography

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan was born in Madras (now known as Chennai), South India, on October 10, 1907. Although his family moved to Mysore when he was a child, he continued to live in Madras under the care of his grandmother, who ensured that he led a very disciplined life. A Brahmin (one who belongs to the priestly caste) by birth, he learned Sanskrit as part of his training in Hinduism. His mother tongue was Tamil, a language spoken by some sixty million people in India. His knowledge of English came from his education.A voracious reader, he learned a great deal of English literature during his school years, and this knowledge was crucial to his own development as a writer. Until he passed his university entrance examination he remained in Madras, and then joined Maharaja's College, Mysore. After considerable effort, he obtained his B.A. in 1930 and decided that he would pursue no further formal education.

After having tried teaching as a profession, Narayan gave it up in exasperation and decided to pursue what he really liked: writing. Financial difficulties forced him to take up journalism for a period of time, but his main objective was to become a full-time writer. In 1933 he married Rajam, a devoted wife who died in 1939. His first novel, *Swami and Friends*, was published in 1935, and since then Narayan's life has been devoted to writing novels, short stories, and essays; during the last sixty years he has produced some fifteen novels, seven collections of short stories, and eight other books, which include his essays and retelling of Hindu myths and epics. His early novels won the admiration of Graham Greene, whose support gave Narayan the opportunity he needed to find an international readership for his writing. Although he has not consciously avoided important issues - such as the struggle for independence, the career of Mahatma Gandhi, the partition of India, or the role of India in South Asia - his primary focus has been the day-to-day lives of ordinary folk in his fictional town of Malgudi. The forces of change have been recorded in his fiction, but the dominant theme of his work is the timelessness of India. What he has projected consistently is a vision of a culture or way of life held together by shared values and a sense of humanity. Narayan continues to live in Mysore and still writes occasional pieces.

Plot Summary

Description

The story begins with a description of the astrologer, who is the central character in the story. In minute detail, his appearance, his clothes, and all the materials he uses to ply his trade are described. The astrologer, who is not given a name, comes across as a type, one of the many street vendors in India, who sit under the shade of a tree or a temporary shed and sell anything from vegetables to newspapers. This astrologer belongs to the same category although, given the nature of his trade, there is a need to dress and behave in a particular manner. He does that effectively by giving the impression of a holy man whose special powers enable him to function as an astrologer.

Almost casually, the surroundings of the astrologer begin to take shape. While there are no clear references to a particular city, it is likely, since Narayan consistently uses the fictional city of Malgudi, that this story too takes place in Malgudi. In any event, one gets the impression of a somewhat backward city which still retains a measure of its rural character. The reference to "municipal lighting" is one of the strategies employed by the author to suggest a sense of the place. In addition, the reference to other vendors who sell a variety of goods gives a sense of a bustling community in which the astrologer operates.

Dialogue

The first part of the story provides a sense of the setting and background without providing any real information about the astrologer. In very broad terms, the daily activities of the astrologer are told. The narrator makes it very clear that the astrologer is a charlatan who knows nothing about the future but is a shrewd judge of character. The transition from a type to sharply defined individual occurs when the astrologer is ready to leave for home and one last client stops in front of him. At that stage, omniscient narration gives way to dialogue and the astrologer and client become involved in a discussion. The astrologer treats this client like any other and begins with the same platitudes and comments he always uses, only to find that the client is unusually aggressive and mean-spirited. This client insists on his money's worth and states that if the astrologer does not tell the truth, he should not only return the money given to him but also give an additional sum for having lied. Realizing that he is likely to be exposed, the astrologer gets nervous and does his best to back out of the transaction. The client, on the other hand, is adamant and insists that a challenge is a challenge. The astrologer then has no choice except to agree to the terms.

Just when the reader feels that the client has called the astrologer's bluff, the story takes on a new dimension. The astrologer begins by recounting the story of the client's past and describes how a long time ago he had been stabbed and thrown into a well and left for dead. It was the assistance of a passerby that saved him. The client, who is

tremendously impressed by this revelation, is stunned when the astrologer addresses him by name, calls him Guru Nayak, and advises him to go back home and stop looking for the man who stabbed him since he had died in an accident. To further reinforce his point, the astrologer says that if Nayak leaves his village again, he is likely to face considerable danger. By now, the reader is quite mystified and begins to wonder whether the astrologer has some mystical powers after all. The transition from lighthearted satire to serious narrative is quite striking and the narrator avoids enlightening the confused reader.

Conclusion

Nayak then pays the astrologer and leaves; the astrologer too leaves for home. Since he is late, his wife is at the door waiting for him and insists on an explanation for his delay. This becomes the occasion for the astrologer to give his wife the extra money he earned by winning the wager and to add that now a great load has been lifted off his mind. All these years he had thought that he had killed a man, and that is why he had run away from the village. Today he realized that the victim was in fact alive and well. The wife is mystified and doesn't understand the full story, and the astrologer does not care to elaborate. For the reader, at this moment, the entire sequence of events makes perfect sense. The client was none other than the person who had been stabbed by the astrologer; for obvious reasons, Nayak fails to recognize the astrologer. The author's strategy of ensuring that the encounter takes place late in the evening ensures that the two do not recognize each other initially. In fact, it is only because Nayak lights a cigar that the astrologer gets the opportunity to see his face and recognize him. The story ends with the astrologer going to sleep, completely at peace with himself.

Summary

The astrologer punctually arrives at his makeshift office, at midday. His office is located under the branches of a tamarind tree in Town Hall Park. It is lighted by the sputtering flare of the vendor next door and the lights of the shops nearby. His office is shared by medicine-sellers, stolen junk vendors, magicians, a noisy cloth seller, and a vendor of fried groundnuts. His office equipment is comprised of a dozen cowrie shells, a piece of cloth painted with obscure mystic charts, a notebook, and a bundle of palmyra writing. His work uniform consists of a saffron-colored turban around his head, beneath which his forehead is painted with sacred ash and vermilion. A dark beard adorns his cheeks and chin.

Despite the enigmatic costume, it is his eyes that draw his customers to him, like "bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks." They sparkle with an abnormal gleam, which the astrologer's customers mistake for a prophetic light. In reality, it is really just the sharp gaze of another vendor looking for customers.

The astrologer is nothing more than another vendor, and his wares are not prophecies, but merely a mixture of educated guesswork and a shrewd knowledge of what people want to hear. "He knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew what was going to happen to himself next minute," and had never intended to be an astrologer, until fate forced the strange profession on him.

The astrologer was born in a small village, destined to till the land, marry, have children and die. This fate was not to be his, however. One day, he leaves the village, without a word to anyone, and travels hundreds of miles to finally settle in this city, under these tamarind boughs, in Town Hall Park.

The trade of astrology had chosen him, not because of any divine insights that he is blessed with, but simply because of his working knowledge of mankind's troubles. These troubles include, among others, marriage, money, and the tangles of human ties. His method is simple. He says not a word until his customer has spoken for at least ten minutes, and based on this monologue, combined with his own astute intuition, he is able to formulate answers, questions and predictions to satisfy the person whose palm he is holding in front of him. His answers include such ambiguous predictions as "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," or "Most of your troubles are due to your nature...You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior."

When the nuts-vendor blows out the single flare that illuminates the astrologer's workplace, he knows it is time to pack his belongings and head home. As he is packing his cowrie shells, he looks up and sees a man before him. Out of habit, he tries to lure the man in with a promise of telling his fortune. The man scoffs at his attempts, and the astrologer's pride is wounded. A bet is started between the two men. The stranger gives the astrologer an anna, and says that if he is not satisfied, the anna must be returned, with interest. The astrologer accepts, on the condition that if the stranger is satisfied with his answers, then he must pay eight annas, instead of the usual three pies the

astrologer charges. The stranger accepts, but counters that if he is not satisfied, he must be paid twice as much. The astrologer accepts, and sends up a prayer. The stranger lights up a cheroot, and by the light of the match, the astrologer catches a glimpse of the stranger's face. For a moment, the world seems to come to a standstill for the astrologer, although the cars that pass them keep honking their horns, people keep talking, and the crowd continues to pass by.

The astrologer tries to back out of the bet at this point, but the stranger won't hear of it. He persists, and will not let the astrologer leave until he has told his fortune. The astrologer finally relents, and begins with the usual lies that he tells his other customers. The stranger stops him and demands that he is told something real. He tells the astrologer that he wants to hear the answer to just one question, whether or not he will succeed in his present search. The astrologer hesitates for a few moments longer, then begins to speak again. He asks first if the stranger was once left for dead. The stranger's interest picks up. He asks if it was a knife that had been the murder weapon, and once more, the stranger answers in the affirmative. He gives further details of the experience, and the stranger is astonished. The stranger asks when he will find the man who tried to kill him, and the astrologer replies that he will see the man in the next world, because the stranger's would-be murderer is dead. The stranger groans in frustration at hearing that he will not be able to avenge his attempted murder, but he is surprised out of his frustration when the astrologer addresses him by name and advises that the man return home to his village, as he foresees great danger for the stranger if he stays in the city. The man agrees that if his enemy is dead, there is no reason for him to be away from home anymore.

The man leaves, giving the astrologer a handful of coins, and the astrologer heads home. His wife is angry, as it is almost midnight when the astrologer arrives home, until she sees all the coins her husband has brought. She makes plans to buy sweets for their child the following day.

After dinner, the astrologer and his wife are sitting on the pyol together, discussing the day's events. He tells her that a burden has been lifted from him that day. He tells her that he thought he had killed a man once, many years ago, and that this is why he had left his village and settled in the city. He tells her that he has now seen the man he thought he'd murdered. He is alive, and thus, the astrologer no longer has the man's blood on his hands. He tells her that the incident had taken place when he had been youngster and hotheaded, a drunken quarrel over a gambling debt taken too far. She is horrified, but he dismisses it, and, possibly for the first time since the incident occurred years ago, lies down to sleep with a clear conscience.

Analysis

"An Astrologer's Day" is a story that is based on falsehoods. It is a lie that the so-called astrologer can determine the future, read palms, or see into the past. He is merely a man with enough common sense to know what people want to hear. It is his own sordid past that has brought him to this somewhat sordid profession.

It is important to analyze when the climax of this story is. On a second read, or perhaps even the first for an astute reader, it can be seen that the climax comes not at the end of the story, but approximately halfway through, at the moment when the stranger's face is illuminated by the match that lights his cheroot. The reader does not yet understand what this means, and the author in no way draws attention to it. However, it is at this moment that the astrologer realizes who the stranger is.

Light is an important element in the setting of "An Astrologer's Day." The author draws attention to the lighting of the small stall at the beginning of the story, but the reader does not know why until near the end. The lighting of the small stall is dim, even during working hours. However, as the story doesn't take place until after the other vendors have gone home, the lighting is dim enough that the stranger cannot see the astrologer's face. The astrologer is only lucky enough to see the stranger's face, because he lights a match and holds it close to his face as he lights the cheroot.

There is, the reader will come to understand, a connection between the astrologer and the stranger. This connection will allow the astrologer to see the stranger's past and future very accurately. It is not what the stranger wants to hear, but it is certainly a lucky break for the astrologer that he has stopped this man and offered to tell him his fortune. It serves him in two ways, both to alleviate the guilt he has felt all these years for the murder of another man, and to eliminate the fear of revenge that he has simultaneously felt.

The reader is given clues as to what will happen in this short story. The astrologer's very appearance is in and of itself an indication of what kind of person he is. The abnormal light in the astrologer's eyes, which his customers take to be prophetic, is nothing more than the shrewd gleam of a man forever in search of his next sale, the author tells the reader. Further, the ambiguity with which the author describes the astrologer's hasty departure from his village, that he had to leave without a word to anyone, will serve as foreshadowing that there is more to the tale than the reader knows at that moment.

Another theme that is prevalent in this short story is that of human greed. This man is a charlatan, obviously, much like his neighbor, a vendor of fried groundnuts who calls his wares Bombay Ice-Cream one day, Delhi Almond on the second, and Raja's Delicacy on the third. However, his treachery goes beyond that, for he is so greedy that he will take money from the same man that he had tried to murder over a gambling quarrel so many years ago. Further, he will even go so far as to complain to his wife that the man has not given him the full rupee that he had promised him, but only twelve and a half annas.

Human guilt is also an important theme in *An Astrologer's Day*. It is not just a fear of retribution that made the astrologer run, or the relief that has caused him joy on the day that is depicted in the story. It is also an absolution of guilt, of knowing that he did not in fact kill anyone, that he had been saved of the sin of murder by some concerned villagers who had found his victim almost dead. As a youth, he had been impassioned and foolhardy; as an adult this deed has weighed on his conscience for many years. One would like to think that it is for this reason that the astrologer hesitates, trying to

cancel his bet with the stranger once he realizes that it is the same man he'd tried to kill so many years ago.

All of the themes that are present in the story are summarized nicely in the title. An Astrologer's Day could refer to this day in particular, the day in which the astrologer has been absolved of guilt and freed from the possibility of retribution, but it could also refer ironically to the fact that what has passed on this day is of course somewhat unusual, but at the same time indicates that many elements of this unusual day are repeated on a daily basis for the astrologer. To divine his customers' pasts, and to help them choose the best possible course of action for the future, based not on divine knowledge, but merely on the very mortal information that the astrologer has, is for him, as the title indicates, all in a day's work.

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Characters

The Astrologer

The two main characters of the story are the astrologer, who is not given a name, and Guru Nayak, the client who turns out to be a former victim, now on a quest for revenge. The astrologer is not given a name partly because he is intended to be seen, for most of the story, as a typical figure, one of the many who conduct their business in makeshift locations in the city, and partly because the narrative mode does not require that he be given a name. It is only at the end of the story that the astrologer is given an individuality that makes him a distinctive figure. Also, in the story he interacts only with two characters: the first, a passerby who seeks his advice about the future. The relation between the two is purely functional, and there would be no need for the person to address the astrologer by name. The second is the astrologer's wife, who speaks to him at the end of the story. In this instance, convention demands that she should not use his name to address him: In a typical South Indian family it would be rare for a wife to address her husband by name. Hence, despite the latitude of omniscient narration, the author chooses to let the astrologer remain anonymous.

Nonetheless, the astrologer comes across as a sharply defined figure, mainly as a result of the assortment of objects he carries with him in order to create the illusion of spirituality and mystical knowledge. The care he takes over his personal appearance is yet another aspect of his charisma. The profession of an astrologer presupposes a commitment to religious observance, and that is precisely what this character achieves through his eclectic collection of articles. The bundle of palmyra writing (script on the leaves of a palmyra tree) in particular lends a very authentic touch, since such writings reflect both wisdom and a high degree of learning. The combination of holy ash and vermillion on his forehead, the turban on his head, and his whiskers, all taken together, give the impression of a man given to a holy life rather than business. The author ensures that despite the external trappings, the astrologer is not necessarily a negative or rogue figure. Telling the future is a job, not unlike selling peanuts or cloth, and he does this with a sense of purpose and commitment. Within the overall structure of the story, it is important for the astrologer to come across as a somewhat mild and inoffensive person who had left his village to escape a life of poverty. His portrayal as a positive character helps to offset the revelation at the end that he had left the village after having committed a crime. The important aspect of the astrologer's character is that as the story progresses he moves from being a type to a carefully individualized person.

The first three pages of the story are devoted to description of the astrologer and his surroundings. Roadside astrologers are a common sight in India, and the general perception is that they make their living by exploiting the gullibility of people who seek their advice. This astrologer is no different, except that he comes across as a shrewd and intelligent man whose livelihood depends on turning every occurrence to his advantage. Having no lighting system of his own, he manages to get by on his adjoining

vendor's light. When the groundnut seller closes shop, he has no lighting to conduct his business, and he too leaves for home. Similarly, when his clients seek his advice, he lets them speak long enough in order to gather sufficient information to make an educated guess about their future. His intuitive understanding of human nature and his wit are crucial to the plot of the story, and the relevance of all the details becomes evident at the end of the story. Among the trickster figures that Narayan has created in his work, the astrologer is a memorable and likable one.

Guru Nayak

Guru Nayak is the antithesis of the astrologer. He appears in the story at midpoint, and almost immediately comes across as both aggressive and mean-spirited. Unlike the astrologer who is described through third-person narrative, Nayak is revealed through his own dialogue. He too remains nameless until the astrologer addresses him by name. The name itself is chosen carefully, for the term "Guru," with all its associations of spiritual leader or teacher, is noticeably different from what we see in the character. Nayak is on a quest for the person who harmed him, and his attempt to solicit the assistance of the astrologer is part of his quest. Unlike other clients, Nayak begins with a skeptical attitude, and rather than accept the astrologer or leave him altogether, insists on a wager. According to the wager, the astrologer must be accurate in his predictions or give up a substantial sum of money. The wager is carefully inserted in the story in order to reveal later that Nayak, with his penchant for gambling, would have been at least partly to blame for the altercation in the past. It is also significant that at the end of story, when the astrologer's wife adds up the coins given by Nayak and announces the total, the astrologer realizes that he has been cheated. A small detail in itself, it establishes that Nayak is the opposite of the astrologer, and in the overall moral scheme of the story, it is the astrologer who is the victim and not the other.

From the perspective of narrative strategy, it is remarkable that while the astrologer is revealed through his actions and the point of view of the narrator, Nayak is shown through his dialogue. Nayak's language is always abrupt and elliptical, and his short sentences suggest a pugnacious nature. Choosing a diction is always a challenge for the writer when the characters would have, in normal circumstances, spoken a different language and not English. In this instance, the chances are that Nayak would have spoken in Tamil. The language he speaks in English is thus a close approximation of the kind of language he would have used in Tamil.

Rather than seek the assistance of the astrologer, Nayak proposes a wager, with the intention of fleecing him. A bully by nature, his objective is to intimidate the astrologer in order to appropriate his money. Curiously enough, at the end of the exchange, it is the astrologer who wins the sympathy of the reader. One of the ironies of the story is that in this encounter, the astrologer's "supernatural" knowledge turns out to be the truth, and Nayak leaves after having accepted the astrologer's advice about the future. Nayak's attitude at the end also affirms an interesting aspect of astrological prediction, at least as it is often practiced: the importance of prediction is not so much objective truth as it is the capacity to state what will resolve the conflict in the mind of the client.

Wife

The only other character in the story is the wife of the astrologer, who is also nameless, mainly because husbands rarely refer to their wives by name in the social ethos of the story. The absence of a name also has the effect of casting her as a type, confined to the house, comfortable with attending to household chores, cooking and taking care of their daughter. She is also not from the village - a trivial detail but a necessary one in that it provides the occasion for the astrologer to confess his past indiscretion at the end of the story. Had the wife been from the same village (and this would be more typically the case), the astrologer's confession would have been redundant and would have ruined the economy of the story. The wife is also a means to suggest the overall economic standing of the family, since acquiring twelve and a half annas - a paltry sum by Indian standards - becomes an occasion for celebration. She also serves the fictional purpose of providing the occasion for the astrologer to reveal aspects of his past and the significance of having encountered Guru Nayak on that day. Narayan's women characters are not often as sharply defined as his male characters, and the woman in this story is no exception. She comes across as a type rather than as a sharply individualized person. The very fact that she belongs to the town rather than the city is of considerable sociological interest, although to pursue that would have destroyed the unity of the story.

Themes

Fate

Narayan's world is predominantly a Hindu one in which fate plays an important role. Nothing happens by accident and all human actions have consequences. The entire story is based on the astrologer's sense of guilt at having stabbed another young man in the village and then having absconded in order to avoid punishment. The stabbing is later seen to be an act of youthful folly. Nonetheless, the astrologer lives with the fear of being identified, and the curious irony is that it is he who identifies the victim and not the other way about. He does not pay for his crime, but the story ends on the note that he had spent years regretting his deed and that in itself is punishment enough. The story demands a suspension of disbelief, and if credibility is strained at certain points, it is because the author's notion of fate transcends rational explanation. Narayan's depiction of fate does not lead to an attitude of resignation, and it does not preclude the importance of individual actions. There is, however, a sense of a larger scheme within which human actions function.

Religion

Although religion is never emphasized in this story, or for that matter in most of his fiction, it remains a constant preoccupation in Narayan's writing. In the world that the author depicts religion is a way of life and it becomes an integral part of everyday life. Everything about the astrologer - his palmyra leaves, the holy ash on his forehead, the vermilion - all these are suggestive of an engagement with religion. Ironically, the astrologer is no different from anyone else, and his profession is dependent largely on fooling gullible people. There is no real contradiction between the religious exterior of the astrologer and his profession. The story drives home the fundamental point that religion is not present as a moral force or as an indication of spirituality, but rather as an essential part of life.

Money

For a story that is concerned with moral issues, there is constant reference to money. In fact, for the major part of the story, the astrologer and his client haggle over how much money ought to be paid for the astrologer's services. The story ends with the astrologer's exasperation at having been cheated. Even the wife is described in relation to money, for her concern is with how much her husband earned during the day, and how she would spend the money. The curious juxtaposition of money and spirituality is what gives the story its distinctive texture. While there is an implied contrast between the two, the story also reinforces the coexistence of both.

Modernity

Admittedly, social realism is not Narayan's preoccupation. Issues of caste, gender, class, economic exploitation, and the environment are all incidental aspects of Narayan's work. To say this is not to claim that there is a naive idealism about Narayan that makes him turn away from the realities of modern India. Narayan has lived through a period that witnessed startling changes in India and he reveals in his essays an awareness of their significance. But he is also firmly committed to the idea of a timeless India. Despite all the changes brought about by colonialism, he perceives a fundamental unity in society and a way of life that has remained unchanged. Even in this story the signs of modernization are always present. The casual references to the Town Hall, the different kinds of goods that are being sold, the electric lights and the migration from the village are ways of alerting the reader to the changes that have taken place. At the same time, the texture of life remains unchanged. Institutions such as religion and marriage continue as before and the course of human life is determined by a process that has undergone very little change over time. The juxtaposition of the past and present in a way that privileges the past is one of the distinctive aspects of Narayan's work.

Style

Point of View

The story adopts the traditional mode of third-person omniscience. In other words, the author/ narrator relates the entire story to the reader, but since the entire plot is dependent on the revelation taking place at the end, the narrator does not reveal all the aspects of character at the beginning. While the narrator is forthcoming about all the peripheral goings-on in the story, s/he is careful not to reveal to the reader anything more than would be evident to any passerby. The reader sees the plot as it is being enacted, despite the presence of the omniscient narrator. The use of dialogue throughout the story serves the function of providing multiple points of view without altering the overall authority of the narrator.

Style

One aspect of Narayan's writing that has been noted time and again is the remarkably simple style he consistently adopts. For those who are familiar with the South Indian Tamil language, his style would come across as a curious mixture of English and Tamil. While the syntax and grammar conform to English conventions, several of the idioms are clearly influenced by Tamil. Particularly in dialogue, as in the exchange between the astrologer and Guru Nayak, the language moves between standard English and dialect. Sometimes, it is evident that what he is providing is a literal translation of expressions in Tamil. The unselfconscious skill with which he combines the traditions of two languages is yet another reason for his success.

Irony

If there is one aspect of Narayan's writing that has been remarked on by all critics, it is the quality of irony that is always present. Whether it is the narrator informing the reader about the past or the characters interacting with each other, the note of irony is consistent and occurs as a result of the distance between what people profess and, what they do. No one, usually, is free from the ironic perspective of the author. But the irony is never malicious or particularly harsh. The dualities that the author perceives in the characters are subsumed in a larger acceptance of human weakness. Narayan's irony has a quality of acceptance that prevents it from becoming satire or cynicism.

In fact the central irony of the story is that Nayak spends so much time looking for the man who had harmed him and, when he eventually meets him, does not recognize him. By the same token, the astrologer had spent years living in virtual hiding only to discover that he had not committed a crime. These instances of irony operate at the level of structure, while the more obvious use of irony becomes evident when characters speak to each other.

Structure

What gives this story its compelling power is the manner in which the story is constructed. The appearance of artlessness is really a result of a careful structure in which all the details fit together. The initial description of the astrologer gives the impression of a traditional method of introducing a character by describing his appearance. In this particular instance, the astrologer's appearance is a form of disguise, not because he is a fugitive, but because his profession demands that he should give the impression of being in possession of mystical powers. As a result, he hardly looks like the simple villager who left the village years ago. Hence it is no surprise that Nayak fails to identify him. By the same token, it is necessary to provide a context for the astrologer's initial failure to identify Nayak. That is achieved by the simple expedient of having Nayak appear when there is very little light and the astrologer is ready to close shop for the day. Significantly, the astrologer identifies Nayak when the latter lights a cigar and his face is illuminated for a brief moment.

Similarly, casual observations take on a particular significance later in the story. The astrologer's decision to leave the village is mentioned almost as an aside in the story. The strategy here is one of foreshadowing, where the author mentions a detail that appears trivial at that moment but becomes crucial in retrospect. Its relevance is evident at the end when he confesses that he is in some ways a fugitive.

One of the striking aspects of Narayan's writing is that, for the most part, he locates his work in the fictional town of Malgudi. While it is possible to speculate on a precise location for this city, the fact remains that Narayan intended Malgudi to be a microcosm of India. From the landscape to the characters who inhabit this world, there is a strong sense of allegory. The mountains, rivers, houses, city offices, places of religious worship, and shops are all constructed in a manner that would suggest that Malgudi is a typical city whose citizens may be found anywhere in India. It is the insistence with which Narayan does this that gives his work a quality of timelessness.

Historical Context

Another aspect of Narayan's work that has been consistently pointed out in criticism is the author's refusal to engage with the historical and political events of the time. The author does not completely disregard politics, but that is always less important than the ordinary lives of the people who live in Malgudi.

The collection itself was published in 1947, the year that India gained its independence. It was a time of considerable excitement and turmoil in the country as the British made preparations to leave, and the country was on the brink of a civil war. The conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims was becoming increasingly difficult to control and there was large-scale violence perpetrated by both sides. It was also the time when the nonviolent struggle against the British had achieved international recognition and Gandhi was seen as a major figure. The story does not provide any sense of such events.

Reading the story after five decades is a useful exercise largely because the story has not lost any of its appeal. The timeless quality of the story is also its strength, and as a result the story continues to be relevant. Despite the fact that India has made huge strides in technology and is considered highly advanced in many areas, the pace of Indian life continues to be the same. Street vendors are still a common sight, and the migration from villages to cities continues to be a typical occurrence. In that sense, no aspect of the story appears to be archaic or outdated.

Literary Heritage

R.K. Narayan was born in Madras, South India, in 1907. A Brahmin by birth (a Hindu priest caste), Narayan was trained in both Sanskrit (as part of his training in Hinduism) and English, although his mother tongue was Tamil, a language spoken by over sixty million people in India. Narayan published his first novel (in English) in 1935, during the turbulent division of India. His writing ranges from re-tellings of classical Hindu myths and stories to essays, short stories and novels.

Unlike some other Indian authors of the twentieth century, Narayan did not actively avoid writing about the immense political or economic strife of his time and culture, although his primary focus was the day-to-day lives of ordinary Indian people. These depictions of Indian life lend Narayan's work a sense of timelessness, while still recording the forces of change throughout India. Narayan's work has gained an international audience and many critics have praised his work for its ability to impart a sense of Indian life as a native, calling his work a blend of Hindu mysticism and English form. Narayan's work, though in English, is characterized by a Hindu sensibility and a conviction that human lives and problems are part of a larger cosmic harmony.

Critical Overview

Among Indian authors, Narayan has probably received the most attention. Apart from a few essays that have expressed some reservation about Narayan's refusal to engage with political social realities, all others have been largely adulatory. Book-length studies of his work have dealt with various aspects of his work, including myth, humor, religion, identity, and so forth. Surprisingly, much more attention has been paid to the novels than to the short stories, although Narayan has published several collections over a career that spans more than six decades. It is to his credit that any major study of Indian writing in English would include at least a chapter on the work of Narayan.

All critical discussions of the story have been positive. "An Astrologer's Day" has been perceived as a significant work, comparable to anything else he has written. While many critical accounts have been confined to plot summaries, a few have drawn attention to the quality of irony that accounts for the strength of the story. What has not been stressed adequately is that the quality of harmony that informs all his work also frames this story. There is very little violence in Narayan's writing, and very little by way of tragedy. Not all his fiction ends on a note of optimism, but there is always a sense of reconciliation, a suggestion that contradictions will be resolved. In that sense, Narayan's work is characterized by a very Hindu sensibility, a conviction that human lives and problems are part of a larger cosmic harmony. In this story too, all the potential for violence and revenge is transformed into a vision of harmony.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kanaganayakam is an associate professor at the University of Toronto and has written for a wide variety of academic journals. In the following essay, he discusses the themes of irony and cosmic harmony in "An Astrologer's Day."

Among Indian writers in English, R. K. Narayan is probably one of the most prolific, and he has the distinction of having written fiction for more than sixty years. His first novel, *Swami and Friends*, appeared in 1935, and since then he has written novels, short stories, and essays, totaling more than thirty books in all. Although known predominantly as a novelist in India and the West, his short stories are no less significant than his longer works, and the story "An Astrologer's Day" continues to be a heavily anthologized piece. It is of considerable significance that a story which first appeared in 1947 should retain its appeal after more than fifty years.

The deceptive simplicity of "An Astrologer's Day" is one aspect of the story that continues to baffle critics. Typically, Narayan's fiction does not depend extensively on the plot to sustain itself. Not much happens in the narrative, and the storyline is relatively straightforward and quite often linear. Sometimes the forward movement of time is arrested, as in this story, but the disruption is such that the reader perceives no real discontinuity in the overall movement of the plot. The shift from the present to the past is necessitated by the plot itself, and as soon as some aspect of the past that needs elaboration is mentioned, the story moves to the present. The spatial element too is kept relatively simple. Despite references to other settings□such as the village□ all the action of this story happens in two places which are logically connected to each other. The first is the street where the astrologer runs his "shop" and the second is the astrologer's home to which he returns after work. Thus the spatial and temporal aspects of the story are traditional and uncomplicated.

Nonetheless, the story is far from simple. Every facet of the story is crucial to the overall thematic preoccupations of the author. For instance, the astrologer leaves for home when the groundnut vendor closes shop, simply because he is dependent on the groundnut seller for lighting. When this story occurs, the reader is told that after the neighbor closes shop there is still a sliver of light that strays in from somewhere. Although it is a trivial detail in itself, it is this light that enables the astrologer to read Guru Nayak's palm. This incident becomes necessary as a realistic detail and significant as a symbol of mental illumination.

One aspect of the story that requires careful study is the use of the imagery of light and darkness. The setting of the story is such that it needs to begin when there is light and end when it is dark. But it is hard to miss the irony of the title which insists on "Day" when the plot really unfolds when it is dark. From another perspective, the issue of light and darkness has an economic angle to it. It reinforces the fact that municipal lighting does not extend to this particular street. And it also points out that, depending on the relative prosperity of the vendors, some of them have their own sources of lighting while others tend to rely on "borrowed" light to conduct their business. More importantly,

however, the duality of light and dark are obviously symbolic. When there is light, the astrologer conceals his past and the lack of any real expertise in the field of astrology. In that sense, light is associated with the inability to "see." By the same token it is when there is no light that the truth begins to unfold and both the astrologer and his client "see" aspects of themselves that had remained hidden. The astrologer realizes that he is no longer a fugitive and that he has paid for his sins. Nayak recognizes that his quest is, in the final analysis, a pointless one, and that he should return home and be at peace with himself.

The curious inversion of light and darkness leads to the notion of irony which is central to an understanding of Narayan's strategy. If there is one aspect of his work that has been praised by critics, it is his unique use of irony. It is unique in that it comes out of a predominantly Hindu sensibility. A Brahmin by birth, Narayan has always been deeply rooted in the Hindu traditions of India and it is this understanding that shapes his vision and sensibility. The fundamental premise of his irony is of course the traditional one of perceiving a dichotomy between the real and the apparent. In other words, when there is a gap between what people profess and what they do, what emerges is a sense of the ironic. In Narayan's fiction, the irony is pervasive, but it is never harsh or misanthropic. Narayan sees human fallibility as part of a larger cosmic system, and views the hypocrisies of individuals with amusement and understanding. Thus, for instance, the groundnut vendor giving his shop a different name each day to attract people is not seen to be fraudulent. The astrologer himself practices a trade about which he knows nothing, and that does not necessarily make the character flawed or negative. The limitations are not glossed over or sanctioned, but there is no malice in the irony.

The irony also operates at a deeper level. In fact the entire story is built around the central irony of Nayak going on a quest for the man who harmed him and when he finally encounters him, he does not recognize the astrologer as the perpetrator of the crime. A further dimension to the irony is that the potential victim not only escapes but also gives Nayak the advice he needs to resume his life and give up his quest. The philosophical underpinning to this episode is a very religious one in that human beings, regardless of how much they struggle, are governed by a larger scheme. This scheme ensures a form of closure and reconciliation, even if the parties involved are not fully aware of it. In this story both the astrologer and Nayak are guilty to some degree, and both of them suffer in their own ways until the reconciliation occurs at the end. The story is by no means a religious one, but the sensibility that informs and frames the story is, in a broad sense, religious.

Despite the strategy of narrative omniscience (third-person narrative), Narayan himself does not choose to give himself the authority of omniscience. The structure of the story requires that the reader too should be kept in ignorance of many details hence, the self-imposed limitation of the narrative voice that sees only what the reader sees, for the most part. The first descriptive part of the story simply gives details that any observer would have seen. Later, when Nayak arrives on the scene, more details about the two characters emerge through the dialogue. It is almost as if the narrator too is an observer, who knows a little more than the reader, but not much more. Such a limitation

is necessary for the assertion of cosmic harmony, which is an important motif in the story.

Narayan has lived through some of the most important years in India's recent history. Born when India was under British rule, he experienced firsthand the struggle for independence, the remarkable career of Mahatma Gandhi, and the subsequent history of postcolonial India. The creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh, the wars with Pakistan and China, and the period of emergency rule under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi are all events that Narayan is aware of and has discussed briefly in occasional essays. But none of these changes finds an important place in his writing. Even in "An Astrologer's Day," there is hardly any reference to the economic and political backdrop of the nation. While this refusal to address the realities of India continues to be matter of some debate among critics, the fact is that Narayan makes this a deliberate choice. What appeals to him is a traditional India, held together by a system of values that is ultimately spiritual in origin. And it is this assertion of timelessness, combined with an awareness of the secular world, that gives him a distinctive place in the literary history of India.

Narayan's depiction of society is hardly ever controversial, although his treatment of women sometimes lacks depth of understanding. Seen from a contemporary perspective, Narayan's treatment of gender comes across as somewhat limited and unsatisfactory. He does not consciously celebrate a patriarchal view of the world, but he is more comfortable dealing with male characters rather than female ones. In his novels he has, on occasion, attempted to deal with women more fully, but these attempts are, on the whole, not particularly successful. The treatment of the astrologer's wife in this story is typical of the manner in which Narayan's stories work. Here the wife is introduced at the end, and one of the first impressions she creates is that of a person whose sole interest is money. She is visibly happy when the husband brings home more money than usual, and her immediate plans are to spend the money making sweets for her daughter. She is cast in the form of a stereotype, and is associated with the home and the family, and with domestic life. The astrologer does not even feel the need to give her a full explanation at the end. Of course, it is necessary to recognize that this story was written more than five decades ago, when gender issues were not as important as they are now. Nonetheless, the treatment of women comes across as a flaw in what is otherwise a remarkably well-constructed and insightful story.

Source: Chelva Kanaganayakam, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this review of R.K. Narayan's The Astrologer's Day*, author Perry D. Westbrook points out that Narayan, an Indian journalist well before his work as a novelist, published his short stories in Indian newspapers. Westbrook is careful to point out that this is an important aspect of Narayan's short stories. These stories were written by a native Indian and read by a predominantly Native-Indian (English speaking) audience; Narayan was not writing to interpret India for Westerners.*

The first of R. K. Narayan's three volumes of short stories, *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947), contains thirty pieces, all of which had previously appeared in the Madras *Hindu*. Thus they had been written for, and presumably read and enjoyed by, the readership of one of India's greatest English-language newspapers. Though this readership would include most of the British, Anglo- Indians, and Americans living in South India, it would be made up overwhelmingly of true Indians. It is an important point. Narayan is an Indian writing for Indians who happen to read English. He is not interpreting India for Westerners. In Europe and America, of course, Narayan's reputation rests upon his novels. The publication in London of *An Astrologer's Day* followed two well-received novels, *Swami and Friends* and *The English Teacher,* but long before he was a novelist with an enthusiastic Western following, Narayan was an Indian journalist loved by his fellow-countrymen.

Paradoxically, however, though Narayan's short pieces have been welcomed in the *Hindu* for over thirty years, his novels have never been popular in India; indeed, I myself have found that they are obtainable there only with the greatest difficulty. Another book-hunter reports that in the leading bookshop of Bangalore in Narayan's own Mysore State not a single book by Narayan was available. On being queried, a clerk replied that there was no demand for Narayan's works. Narayan himself has stated that in the city of Mysore, where he has lived most of his life, perhaps only 200 of the population of 275,000 have ever read any of his books. And yet Mysore justly has the reputation of being an important centre of education and culture. The fact is that Narayan's books have first been published in England, and more recently in the United States, and have only later appeared in India in unattractively printed paperback editions.

Any reader of Narayan is aware that his stories are cut from very much the same cloth, both in quality and in pattern, as his novels. There is no intrinsic difference to explain why in the same cities where his novels are obtainable, several thousand or more subscribers to the *Hindu* read him with gusto. It becomes even more of a puzzle when we consider that the Indian booksellers do a brisk business in British and American novels and in continental novels in English translation. The most cogent explanation seems to be that of lingering cultural colonialism on the sub-continent. Too many educated Indians simply will not accept the possibility of excellence of style in the English writing of a compatriot. In the early years of the independence of the United States much the same prejudice existed. Publishers and readers alike preferred to read books□at least in the category of *belles lettres*□ imported from the 'old country'; American authors were deemed to produce something less than the authentic product.

The newspaper origins of the short stories would tend to place them in the category of reporting on Indian life and thus make them more acceptable to readers who would ignore his longer and more ambitious works. The reportorial quality is especially marked in his second collection, *Lawley Road*, in which the selections are sketches and vignettes rather than plotted stories. In *An Astrologer's Day* the tales also accurately mirror Indian life and character, but most of them appear to have been chosen for the ingenuity of their plots. The title story, ' An Astrologer's Day,' is a good example. The description of the astrologer pursuing his profession on the sidewalk provides an entirely typical glimpse of Indian street life. The astrologer himself, a fake driven into imposture by hard luck, is well drawn. The trickiness of the plot (its O. Henry quality) results from the coincidence of the astrologer's being requested, during a day's business, to forecast the fortune of a man he recognizes as one whom he had stabbed and left for dead years ago. It was this crime that had forced the astrologer to flee from his village. But the victim recovered, as he informs the astrologer, and has been devoting his life to tracking down his assailant so as to get revenge. The astrologer, who recognizes the man without himself being recognized, informs him that his enemy has died beneath the wheels of a lorry. Thus the astrologer saves himself from attack and learns, to his great relief, that he is not a murderer after all. Though such situations do credit to an author's ingenuity, they do not suit modern taste. Yet they are in a long and honoured tradition, that of Chaucer's 'The Pardoner's Tale,' itself derived from the Sanskrit. As a part of ordinary life, coincidences are legitimate material from any story-teller. At any rate, more than half the tales in *An Astrologer's Day* depend on such twists for their effect. Many of them have other merits as well, such as compelling atmosphere or a memorable character, but perhaps the most justifiable of them are those which present ghosts. 'An Accident ' vividly conjures up on a lonely mountain road the ghost of a man killed in an automobile accident who now devotes himself to helping other motorists in distress. 'Old Man of the Temple ' evokes the mystery and desolation of one of the ruined temples along the South Indian highways. 'Old Bones' exploits the atmosphere of the more isolated of the *dak* bungalows (government-operated overnight hostels). These are skilfully told stories of pure entertainment.

But some of the stories in *The Astrologer's Day* do not depend upon coincidence or some strange circumstance. The most impressive are those that open a window on to the bleak, tedious lives of the white-collar workers of India, that large segment of the population who drag out their lives at forty or fifty rupees a month in government or business employment. Examples are 'Forty-Five a Month ' and 'Fruition at Forty,' accounts of dreary, lifelong wage-slavery. In depicting such prisoned lives Narayan is at his best, even in stories freighted with 'surprise endings.' Thus in 'Out of Business' the destructive mental effects of unemployment on a former gramophone salesman are vividly presented, though the suicide that he narrowly escapes would have been a more convincing conclusion than the gratuitous turn of luck that saves him from it. More believable is the fate of Iswaran in the story of that name. Iswaran, a representative of the vast army of Indian students whose sole goal in life is the passing of government examinations, is driven by repeated failure to a suicide that even his last-minute discovery that he has finally passed with honours cannot deter his crazed will from carrying out. Most prominent in all these stunted lives is the intolerable humiliation that is part of the daily routine. The insults endured by a jewelry-shop clerk in 'All Avoidable

Talk' and the clerk's feeble attempt to rebel are unparalleled even in Gogol's and Dostoevsky's fiction on similar themes. Indeed a comparison with the insulted and injured in the works of the great Russian authors is inevitable. The tutor in 'Crime and Punishment', the twenty-ninth story in Narayan's volume, suffers true Chekhovian and Dostoevskian indignities, as does also the porter in 'The Gateman's Gift ', whose employer speaks to him exactly twice in twenty-five years of service. Blighting frustration, of course, figures in all these tales but most severely in 'The Watchman', one of the most powerful short stories Narayan has written. Here a young girl wishes to study medicine but her poverty-stricken family try to force her into a marriage she abhors; she drowns herself at night in a temple tank□at the second attempt, as a watchman stopped her the first time. The pathos lies in the inability of even the best-intentioned person to help a fellow human being in distress. This is the ultimate frustration.

Narayan's second volume of stories appeared in 1956, almost ten years after *An Astrologer's Day.* It is also compiled from writings previously printed in the *Hindu,* but contains fewer elaborately contrived stories. Named *Lawley Road* after a typical thoroughfare in the typical, though fictitious, South Indian city of Malgudi, the volume is made up of sketches, character studies, and anecdotes indigenous to just such a street in such a town. They are the more powerful for the absence of gimmicks, and are marked by naturalness, by the easy pace of Narayan's novels, and the informal style of a leisurely raconteur.

Thoroughly typical of this collection, and indeed of all of Narayan's best short work, is 'A Breach of Promise'. It begins:

Sankar was candidate 3,131 in the Lower Secondary
Examination and he clearly saw his number on a typed
sheet, announcing the results, pasted on the weatherbeaten
doors of the Government Middle School. That
meant he would pass on to High School now. He was
slightly dizzy with joy.

By way of celebration the boy and two of his companions go first to a restaurant and then to the local cinema. At four the next morning they climb the thousand steps carved a millennium ago in the rocky side of a nearby hill to the temple of the Goddess Chamundi. Thrice the boys make the circuit of the temple and then enter the shrine and remain there while the priest presents their offerings to the Goddess. They give thanks for having passed their examinations and pray for success in all future ones. As they prostrate themselves before the Goddess, Sankar suddenly recalls that before taking his examinations the preceding year he had vowed to the Goddess that he would kill himself if he failed to pass. He had in fact failed that year, but had selfprotectively kept the memory of the vow suppressed in his sub-conscious. But now, overwhelmed by his memory, he leaves his friends on the pretence of buying some jaggery in the temple shop. Actually he climbs ten ladders to the top of the lofty gatetower of the temple, crawls out into the mouth of the huge demon that caps the pinnacle, and is about to jump. At that instant he notices a bleeding scratch on his elbow, and his determination

to leap vanishes. Carefully he crawls back into the tower and descends, vowing to give the Goddess two coconuts a year instead of his life. At the bottom he hurries to get the jaggery and resumes a boy's normal existence.

Narayan says that 'A Breach of Promise' is 'almost his first tale', and describes it as being 'very truthful□autobiographical, you know'. Narayan was himself adept at flunking school examinations and after one of his failures he actually did climb to the tower room of Chamundi Temple with the idea□ but not, he emphasizes, the intention□of suicide. 'The whole thing was farcical', he says. 'That's the way life is in our temples and our houses'.

This is the way life is in most of Narayan's novels and early stories. What more absurd than the ease with which an irrelevance diverts a boy from a solemn vow and makes him substitute an utterly common-place one? But what is important is that one doesn't feel contempt for the boy; one is delighted that he is saved, and is something of a humbug. He is very human as he celebrates his successful examinations by gorging in a restaurant, attending the cinema, and only as an after-thought running up the hill to give thanks to the goddess Chamundi. In retaining Sankar's humanity, Narayan secures the reader's sympathy, for we see life reasserting itself against absurdity and solemnity.

If there is an all-pervasive theme in Narayan's work it is that human beings are human beings, not gods. Men and women can make flights toward godhood, but they always fall a bit short. Even Gandhi in the novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* displays an occasional human foible. Other aspi rants fall much wider of the mark, of course. In the novel, *Mr Sampath* (entitled *The Printer of Malgudi* in the United States edition), Srinivas tries with his newspaper *The Banner* to arouse the soul of India, but he is sidetracked, at least temporarily, into movie-making. Nataraj, the printer in *The Maneater of Malgudi,* futilely combats the principle of evil as embodied in the demonic Vasu. Indeed in that novel all of Indian society, as allegorically represented by a poet, a journalist, an inn-keeper, a civil servant, a veterinarian, and a temple dancer, fail to curb Vasu, who is endowed with the strength, cunning and malice of a mythological *asura.* Even the Gods had trouble overcoming the *asuras.* How could a mere human, or nation of humans, even 450,000,000 of them, be expected to blot out evil? Yet Narayan finds the efforts laudable□and at times amusing.

The foibles that Narayan records may be specifically Indian, but they are also generically human. Sometimes they are public and political, as in the title piece of *Lawley Road*, which recounts the agonizings of the municipality of Malgudi over the statue of an Englishman, Sir Frederick Lawley, who had been prominent in the city's history. When Indian independence came, the presence of this statue at a main intersection could not be tolerated, especially as it was discovered that Sir Frederick was 'a combination of Attila, the scourge of Europe, and Nadir Shah, with the craftiness of a Machiavelli. He subjugated Indians with the sword and razed to the ground the villages from which he heard the slightest murmur of protest. He never countenanced Indians except when they approached him on their knees'. The narrator of the story, a private citizen, buys the statue and at great expense removes it to his own premises, where it not only fills his house but protrudes into the road. In the meanwhile the

Municipal Chairman receives telegrams from all over India pointing out that there were two Sir Frederick Lawleys□one a despot, the other a humanitarian and an advocate of Indian independence. The statue at Malgudi was of the latter. The result is that the Central Government orders it to be set up again. The owner sells the statue to the Municipal Chairman, who pays for it from his own pocket, thus insuring his victory at the next election.

The story is obviously good-natured spoofing, a rollicking satire on the confusion of the public mind at the time of transition from the British raj to independence. Somewhat more serious as satire is 'The Martyr's Corner'. Rama, a small entrepreneur of the type that abounds in socialist India as in no capitalist country in the world, has for years made a living selling *chapatis* and other dainties on an advantageously located street corner which he has managed to reserve for himself by a little judicious bribing of the constable and the health department officer. Rama's working day, what with cooking his wares and vending them, begins at three or four in the morning and extends till late at night. His net earnings average five rupees a day. One evening a riot flames up in the town, its cause unknown even to the rioters. A man is killed on Rama's corner, which is then designated as the site for a statue to the martyr in an unknown cause. Rama is of course ousted from this 'holy' ground; in a new location his business falls off to nothing, and he is forced to take a job as a waiter at twenty rupees a month. Who is the martyr? The brawler to whom the statue is erected or Rama who is reduced to penury?

Narayan's fiction is not especially preoccupied with politics; in fact his attitude towards it approaches disdain. (Among his novels *Waiting for the Mahatma* is the only one that is appreciably political.) But disdain becomes dismay in the story 'Another Community', where he writes of religious rioting. Bigotry, fear, ignorance, hate explode into a massacre that sweeps an entire city. Obviously Narayan has in mind the frightful outbreaks between the Hindus and Muslims in 1947. The smouldering, engulfing hate, ready at any moment to erupt into violence, is presented through the consciousness of an educated, rational man, untouched by the popular passions, who considers the whole state of affairs 'absurd'. Detachedly wondering who will spark the conflagration, he unwittingly does so himself in a bicycle collision with a stranger in a dark alley. They quarrel and exchange blows. Unfortunately the stranger turns out to be a member of the other community. With typical restraint Narayan declares that the results 'need not be described . . .'

Narayan has said, 'My focus is all on character. If his personality comes alive, the rest is easy for me.' Certainly in the *Lawley Road* collection, the stories of character are the most absorbing, and where other considerations obtrude, character usually remains the dominant interest. Thus in 'The Martyr's Corner' the focus is always on the *chapati* seller rather than on the rather violent action; always before the reader's eyes is the little vendor□his drab monotonous life, his comments on his customers, his manipulation of the officials who could ruin him, above all his attitude towards existence, his sense of occupying a niche in the social order, the sense of dignity and satisfaction that transforms sheer dreariness into human significance. On every market street in every city, town, and village in India these curb-side merchants spread out their wares□old bottles, tin cans converted into cups and cooking utensils, baubles, and edibles of every

kind. What sort of people are they? What can life mean to them? 'The Martyr's Corner' contains at least the beginnings of answers to these questions.

Another ubiquitous frequenter of Indian streets is the beggar. There is one in the story 'The Mute Companions', which records the way of life of a mute mendicant who for a time enjoys the company and added income brought to him by a monkey he accidentally captures and successfully trains. Performing on the streets and in the homes of the wealthy, the mute companions share a good life together till one day the animal escapes and disappears. There is pathos in this story in the dependence of man and beast on one another, despite the unbridgeable differences of species. Narayan skilfully presents the process by which this speechless, gurgling, subhuman wanderer of the streets (one of the homeless, maimed, and starving of the world) regains his humanity through his association with a monkey, and becomes an object of concern and compassion. As for the characterization of the monkey, Narayan has here too achieved a minor miracle. Throughout his work Narayan's skill in depicting animals is noteworthy. In *Lawley Road,* there are several other memorable stories of animals: 'Chippy', which presents two dogs; 'At the Portal', an account of two squirrels; 'Flavour of Coconut', in which the protagonist is a rat! But the most remarkable of all of Narayan's animal portraits is the revered invalid elephant in *The Man-eater of Malgudi.* Narayan certainly bears out the belief that Indians are more understanding than Westerners are of non-human forms of life.

In addition to street-vendors and beggars a score of other types are represented in *Lawley Road,* highly individualized characters like the pick-pockets in ' The Trail of the Green Blazer', the 'coolie' in 'Sweets for Angels,' the black-marketeer in rice, who appears during every famine, in 'Half-a-Rupee Worth', the illiterate *ayah* or nursemaid of 'A Willing Slave', who is a slave first to the family in which she works and later to her husband.

In his first novel, *Swami and Friends* , Narayan proved himself a skilfull portrayer of children. In *Lawley Road* there are at least half a dozen stories of children, in addition to 'A Breach of Promise'. 'Dodu ' tells of a boy who has heard that the local museum has purchased some Palmyra-leaf documents, so he takes ordinary palm leaves to sell to the curator. In 'A Shadow' a boy, Sambu, daily attends a movie in which his dead father played the star role. In the film the father teaches arithmetic to a little girl in exactly the way he had taught it in real life to Sambu. Death is no longer a reality to the watching boy. In 'The Regal' we enter into the activities of a boys' cricket club and share their efforts to find a place where the adults will let them play. In 'The Performing Child' a precocious little girl dancer with a strong instinct for self-preservation refuses to dance before a movie director who her exploiting parents hope will hire her at a large salary. In 'Mother and Son' an adolescent runs away from his mother's home when she is too insistent about his marrying his fourteen-year-old cousin; after spending a night by the temple tank he is found by his mother and returns.

Lawley Road has not been published in the West: it is unobtainable in even the greatest libraries in the United States, nor is it listed in the printed catalogue of the British Museum. Two of the stories have been printed in America: 'The Trail of the Green

Blazer' under the shortened title 'Green Blazer', and 'At the Portal', the squirrel story, under the title 'The Mother Bit Him'. Two other stories by Narayan have appeared in American periodicals: the sensitive and humorous 'A Bright Sunday in Madison' (about an American child who gets lost temporarily) and 'A Horse and Two Goats', a piece of humour underlining the lack of communication between East and West.

In 1964 Viking Press published the United States edition of Narayan's third collection, *Gods, Demons, and Others* , a volume that marks a radical departure from his previous tales. Instead of drawing upon contemporary Indian life, Narayan in this book retells myths and legends from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and several other ancient Indian works. In an article in *The Atlantic* Narayan once wrote: 'All imaginative writing in India has had its origin in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.' The English influence, to be sure, opened up an entirely new perspective on literature and established a vogue for Western modes and genres. Yet, Narayan believes, the great religious and mythological writings still hold sway over the Indian literary mind, as can be seen in the numerous and usually unsuccessful attempts to reproduce the old legends in cinema form, attempts that Narayan lampoons in several novels, especially *Mr Sampath.* Re-tellings of the great epics or parts of them are commonplace in Indian literature. In the present generation Aubrey Menon's version of the *Ramayana* is notorious for its irreverence, which caused its sale to be banned in India, and C. Rajagopalachari's versions in Tamil of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were later translated into popular English editions. So Narayan's reworking of the age-old stories is completely in the tradition of Indian literature and art.

In his earlier stories Narayan did make some use of legendary material, as in 'The Image' (*Lawley Road*) and 'Such Perfection' (*An Astrologer's Day*), both of which are accounts of sculptors whose skill is regarded as divine rather than human. More important, Narayan's conception of the nature and function of literature seems throughout his writing career to have been influenced by ideas about the nature and function of the epics in Indian life that have been commonly accepted through the ages. In *Gods, Demons, and Others* he describes the composition of the *Ramayana* by Valmiki, 'The greatest story-teller of all times.' According to Narayan, 'Rama, the hero . . . was Valmiki's creation, although the word "create" is not quite apt . . . Rama was not a "character" created by a story-teller and presented in a "work". The "work" in the first place, was not "written"; it arose within the writer. The "character" was not conceived but revealed himself in a vision.' Now this notion, which has much in common with the Greek concept of the Muses and with later theories of the artist as a mere channel for divine revelation, was the theme of 'Under the Banyan Tree', in the final story in *An Astrologer's Day.* Far back in the forested hills, in the sleepy and illiterate village of Somal ten miles from the nearest bus stop, the story-teller Nambi holds sway over the imaginations of the villagers. Illiterate himself, Nambi attributes his stories to 'the Goddess', who causes them to spring up in his own imagination and provides him with the words with which to pass them on to his audience. Nambi's stories are pure flights of fancy, coloured and suggested by the whole body of Indian religious writing. The impression is that Nambi is a lesser Valmiki, in whose mind the Gods have decreed that certain persons and events will spring into being. Later, when Nambi's imagination dries up, he ascribes his failure to the Goddess's pleasure and resigns himself to her

will. What Narayan is apparently conveying in this story of Nambi and in his comments on Valmiki is that all creativeness, even that of the humblest village story-teller, depends on something other than the teller's mental energy. Ved Mehta reports Narayan as saying: 'I can't like any writing that is deliberate. If an author is deliberate, then I can't read him . . .' He says of himself, that he is 'an inattentive, quick writer, who has little sense of style'. With him, as Ved Mehta says, 'a novel well begun writes itself', and elsewhere, as we have seen, he claims: 'I can write best when I do not plan the subject too elaborately . . . If (my protagonist's) personality comes alive, the rest is easy for me.' Narayan's account in *My Dateless Diary* of how he started on his novel *The Guide* bears out these statements.

The art of narration, then, is a talent given to man by God for the benefit of all humanity, for their amusement and edification. In India even at present (as in all other cultures in the past) story-telling is an oral art, an activity in which the listeners and, very likely, the teller are unlettered. The tales in *Gods, Demons, and Others* are presented as told by a village story-teller□in this case, a well-educated one, of whom Narayan gives a detailed and interesting description. But even the stories in the two earlier collections are in many cases told in the words of 'The Talkative Man', a garrulous raconteur of Malgudi who is always ready with some account of personal experience if an audience of one or more is at hand. Narayan believes that modern writers, especially those of the West or under Western influence, have strayed far from their original function of providing pleasure and instruction to the masses. He is uncomfortable about recent academic interest in his own writing. 'Literature', he asserts, 'is not a branch of study to be placed in a separate compartment, for the edification only of scholars, but a comprehensive and artistic medium of expression to benefit the literate and illiterate alike.' Though far from achieving this purpose himself in his own country, where he writes in a tongue known mainly to the educated elite, perhaps he comes nearest to it in his short stories, at least those of the first two volumes, which first appeared in a widely circulated newspaper.

In his preface to *The Bachelor of Arts,* Graham Greene writes of the strange mixture of humour, sadness, and beauty in Narayan's novels, 'a pathos as delicate as the faint discolouration of ivory with age'. In the same preface he comments on Narayan's 'complete objectivity, complete freedom from comment'. Like many critics Greene sees a Russian quality in Narayan: 'Mr Narayan's light, vivid style, with its sense of time passing, of the unrealized beauty of human relationships . . . often recalls Tchekhov.' The vastness of the Indian geography, in which friends are separated never to see each other again, the irrelevance of Indian education which prepares students for nothing: these too remind Greene of the Russia of the tsars and the great novelists. In his introduction to *The Financial Expert*, Greene comments on Narayan's gift of comedy with its undertone of sadness, its gentle irony and absence of condemnation□a type of comedy virtually extinct in the West, where farce, satire and boisterousness are substituted for true comedy. At the basis of Narayan's comedy, Greene points out, is the juxtaposition of the age-old convention and the modern character . . . The astrologer is still called to compare horoscopes for a marriage, but now if you pay him enough he will fix them the way you want: the financial expert sits under his banyan tree opposite the

new Central Co-Operative Land Mortgage Bank'. Mr Greene's comments are in the main just; and they apply as much to Narayan's short stories as to his novels.

Source: Perry D. Westbrook, "The Short Stories of R. K. Narayan," in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* No. 5, July, 1968, p. 41.

Topics for Further Study

Narayan's story often draws attention to light and darkness. To what extent is the imagery of light central to the overall structure of the story? Relate your response to the title of the story.

The groundnut vendor, whose lighting enables the astrologer to conduct his business, comes across as a very colorful character. Write a brief narrative entitled "A Groundnut Vendor's Day" in order to show how different his or her life would have been.

Narayan's reputation as a significant writer has not waned during the last fifty years. To what extent do you think "An Astrologer's Day" demonstrates aspects of his fiction that would account for his popularity?

The general consensus among critics is that reading Narayan is one way of understanding the real India. How accurately and how comprehensively does "An Astrologer's Day" create a sense of the social and cultural conditions in India?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: India is still under colonial rule, gaining independence in 1947.

1970s: India has resolved many of its internal and external disputes and taken an active part in the creation of Bangladesh.

1990s: India emerges as a major industrial nation.

1940s: India is predominantly rural with relatively few urban centers.

1970s: India is still a controlled economy but major advances are occurring in the shift to urban life.

1990s: India has become technologically advanced and very urban in its structure.

1940s: In terms of gender relations, Indian society is very patriarchal in its outlook.

1970s: India sees a number of changes with women joining the work force in large numbers. Indira Gandhi becomes prime minister.

1990s: Women's movements are very active in the country and major changes have occurred in gender equity. While the country is still patriarchal in many ways, women play a far more active and significant role in the life of the nation.

What Do I Read Next?

Waiting for the Mahatma, a novel written by Narayan and published in 1958, is a very popular work that deals with contemporary issues, particularly the campaign against the British led by Gandhi and the impact it had on the people of the time. The novel is a very insightful portrayal of the social upheaval caused by Gandhi's attitudes on caste.

Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* was published in 1962. Arguably one of his finest novels, it deals with the gradual transformation of society as it encounters the forces of change. Written in a manner that is partly allegorical and partly realistic, the novel exemplifies Narayan's attitude toward culture and religion. At the very heart of Narayan's work is a mythical structure, and that comes across very forcibly in this novel.

A Passage to India has earned the reputation of a minor classic. Written by E. M. Forster and published in 1924, it remains a very important attempt, from the perspective of an outsider, to deal with the realities of India. A useful novel to be compared with Narayan's work.

Midnight's Children, published by Salman Rushdie in 1981, is a modern epic about India. Its style, approach, and sweep are very different from anything attempted by Narayan. Rushdie is experimental, discontinuous in his narrative mode, and politically engaged. He presents one version of India and Narayan another.

The Idea of India, published by Sunil Khilnani in 1997, is an excellent introduction to sociocultural conditions and the political situation in India. The focus of the book is post-colonial India—the last fifty years—and the author provides a first-rate introduction to a very complex and confusing topic.

Further Study

Holstrom, Lakshmi, *The Novels of R. K. Narayan*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1973.

Analysis of individual novels in relation to themes, plots, and style. Attempts to place Narayan in the tradition of Indian writing, and maintains that his novels express a Hindu vision of the universe.

Kain, Geoffrey, ed., *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Essays*, Michigan State University Press, 1993.

A broad-ranging collection of essays by some of the major critics in the field. Includes essays on individual novels and more general comparative essays. Provides a very good overview of different points of view. The bibliography of both primary and secondary material is likely to be very useful.

vanden Driesen, Cynthia, "The Achievement of R. K. Narayan," in *Literature East and West*, Vol. 21, Nos. 1-4, 1977, pp. 51-64.

A very perceptive and well-written article that deals with the whole corpus of Narayan's writing. Looks closely at the major preoccupations of Narayan's work. It is also one of the first works to suggest that Narayan is a fabulist.

Walsh, William, *R. K. Narayan*, Longmans, 1971.

An early work, but very perceptive in its treatment of Narayan's major themes. Walsh offers a close reading of many texts and his comparative approach provides a valuable overview to Narayan's work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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