The Good Shopkeeper Study Guide

The Good Shopkeeper by Samrat Upadhyay

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Samrat Upadhyay's short story has won many distinctions. It was honored by being published in *Best American Short Stories* (1999) and is often singled out by book reviewers as an excellent example of Upadhyay's best writing.

The story focuses on Pramod, who is both a young husband and a new father. At the moment that the story begins, Pramod is troubled by the recent loss of his job. Although he is a good accountant and an excellent and respected employee, the large company has replaced him with another accountant who has computer skills. The modern world has, in other words, pushed Pramod to the side. Pramod is humiliated by this experience as he must present himself to his well-financed brother-in-law and plead for help. As time passes and Pramod cannot find a job, he tumbles into a depressive state. The only escape from his worries is an affair with a nondescript woman, whom Pramod meets while sitting in a park. The woman constantly reminds Pramod that he worries too much about life and that he should take life as it comes. Later, when Pramod demonstrates that he wants to beat up everyone who has humiliated him, this same woman brings Pramod back to his senses.

In part, this story is about the false importance people attach to material things and to the artificial significance that prestigious jobs may temporarily bring them. The tumble down into obscurity can happen with one simple decision made by a large, non-caring corporation; at least that is what happens in this story. One lesson implied here may be that people must learn to be self-reliant and create their sense of self-worth from within. Although life appears to be filled with complexities, it is in simplicity that one often finds the answers.

Author Biography

Samrat Upadhyay was born in Kathmandu, Nepal, but has spent almost as much of his life in the United States as he has in his native country. His parents were civil servants and saw to it that their son was well versed in English. When he was twenty-one, Upadhyay won a scholarship to the College of Wooster in Ohio, where he earned a bachelor's degree. He had first thought that he would major in business but found that he was not particularly drawn to that subject, so he switched to English because of his love of literature. He soon enjoyed high praise from his professors for his command of the English language, so when he was considering graduate school, he decided to pursue a creative writing degree at Ohio University. He followed this up with a doctorate from the University of Hawaii.

Upadhyay was at the University of Hawaii when he wrote and published his short story "The Good Shopkeeper," which he has stated launched his career as a writer. It was only the second short story of his to be published, and it appeared in the university's literary magazine *Manoa*. Since then, Upadhyay has published several more short stories, most of which have been collected in his *Arresting God in Kathmandu*. This collection has brought Upadhyay awards and high praise. His next publication was the novel *The Guru of Love*.

Besides his writing, which he practices every morning for three hours before his family awakens, Upadhyay is also a teacher. He has taught English in Nepal and in Saudi Arabia. Later, he taught creative writing at Baldwin-Wallace College in Ohio. In addition to his teaching assignments, Upadhyay has been an editor for *Travellers' Nepal* and for *Hawaii Review*.

In 1993, Upadhyay returned briefly to Nepal. It was there that he married his wife, Babita. As of 2005, the couple had one child, Shahzadi. As of 2005, Upadhyay teaches creative writing on the graduate level at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Pramod announcing that he has lost his job. His wife, Radhika, cries when he tells her. Then Pramod scolds her; he does not like to tell her things because she does not think "with a cool mind." But Radhika is not passive. She responds that she has a right to be emotional. It is not fair, after working for this company for three years that they let her husband go. Pramod reports that the company had no choice. They were out of money.

When his wife asks why they singled Pramod out and why they did not fire someone else, Pramod makes clear that others have more technical skills. Radhika, on the other hand, reminds her husband that other people also know "many influential people." Not to be undone, Pramod tells his wife he will go visit Shambhuda the next day.

In the morning, Pramod sets out to meet with Shambhuda. Along the way, the narrator comments on events that Pramod would normally not see: people on their way to work, others going to the temple, monkeys ready to snatch bags of food from unsuspecting people. He sees a former employer, Ram Mohan, and almost tries to avoid him until Pramod remembers how kind the old man is. Ram Mohan scorns the company that has fired Pramod.

Pramod meets with Shambhuda, who with both a confident and a lackadaisical manner tells Pramod not to worry. He will see what he can do. Then he dismisses Pramod. Just before leaving, Pramod notices all the figurines of the gods that decorate Shambhuda's house and wonders if these gods cause Shambhuda to be a success.

As time passes, everyone learns that Pramod is out of work. They are all supportive of him, but Pramod comes to hate their empathy, sensing that some of them might even be gloating at his misfortune. He dislikes his own reactions to their comments and especially dislikes the feelings he gets when he is around his wife's relatives who are better off than his family.

A month passes and still no job for Pramod. His wife suggests that they borrow money from her family, which Pramod dislikes to do. She also suggests that they sell their land in the south and buy some kind of shop, maybe "a general store or a stationery outlet." Pramod does not like this idea for several reasons. He does not believe that the land would bring much money. But he is also humiliated by the idea of being a shopkeeper. After being an accountant, he does not like the thought of having to cater to other people, especially people he does not like or who, in his view, are beneath him. At night, Pramod turns away from his wife in bed and instead fantasizes about being a man of influence. He even goes so far as to imagine himself in a big office, supervisor of a big international company, with his brother-in-law Shambhuda a mere office boy who begs for money from him.

At this point, a small and plump woman approaches Pramod while he is sitting on a park bench. She works as a domestic, cleaning other people's houses. Pramod, at first,

thinks the woman is rude to talk to him. She is beneath him in status. The woman is married, but her husband lives in another town, she tells Pramod. As Pramod talks to her, he reflects on how low he has fallen since he lost his job: now he is sitting in the park in the middle of the morning, talking to a cleaning woman.

The woman tells Pramod that he thinks too much. Though Pramod feels superior to this woman, who is only referred to as the housemaid, he is attracted, at least superficially, to her simple outlook on life. She offers him a respite from his worries. So when she asks him to come to her apartment, he follows her as if he has no choice. He also has sex with her as if fate had directed it and he must comply. In other words, when he is with her he does not think. He only reacts to the circumstances. When he goes home after that first night, Pramod feels renewed. His lifted spirits make his wife ask if he has found a job, thinking that is the reason for his feeling better. But Pramod yells at her, stating that there is no job and suggests that no one, including Radhika's brother Shambhuda, can help.

The story jumps ahead, with Pramod and the housemaid walking through the marketplace on the way to her apartment when they run into Ram Mohan. Pramod is embarrassed to be seen with the woman and pretends not to be with her. Later, she questions why he was so afraid. As time passes, Pramod spends more time with the housemaid, sometimes even staying overnight with her. Thoroughly discouraged, Pramod does nothing to find work. When he visits his wife's relatives, he is moody and defensive. The men make fun of him, stating that they are the fools for working so hard, while Pramod spends the whole day without any worries. Shambhuda comes to Pramod's defense. He tells the other men to stop mocking Pramod. They all have had their troubles in the past, Shambhuda reminds them. Then Shabhuda mentions having rescued one of the men after that man had embezzled some money. Tempers flare, and one of the men accuses Shambhuda of having murdered a police inspector. The women enter the room and calm the men. Then Radhika returns and goes directly to Pramod and accuses him of having started the fight. Pramod tells her, "You are a fool," and then he leaves the house.

In the next scene, Pramod has returned to the housemaid's apartment. The narrator states that Pramod has gone there because he wants to be anesthetized. He later asks the housemaid if she worries that her husband might show up. The woman asks Pramod, in turn, what he would do if this should happen. Pramod says that he would beat him up. Then he pretends to throw Karate punches and kicks, pretending to beat up everyone who has recently angered him, including Shambhuda. The woman laughs and asks him: "What good will it do . . . to beat up the whole world?"

Something snaps inside Pramod, making him realize his own foolishness. He tells the housemaid that he must return home, despite the fact that she has prepared him a dinner. En route Pramod stops at the temple, and once he enters his house, his mood is changed. He plays with his baby and sings to it, then surprises Radhika with a proposal of starting up a shop. That night "he started to think." And what he thought about pleased him. Maybe he would make a good shopkeeper after all.

Characters

Housemaid

The housemaid is not given a proper name. She is the woman whom Pramod meets in the park and with whom he has an affair. The housemaid tells Pramod that he thinks too much and offers him a temporary escape from his troubles. She also helps him to look at life differently. She expresses a simple acceptance of life as it comes to her, enjoying every moment instead of wasting time worrying about the details and possible consequences. Eventually Pramod realizes that this woman is only a temporary fix to his problems, and he stops seeing her. But she has comforted him during his depression over losing his job.

Kamalkanth

Kamalkanth is one of two men who often appear at Shambhuda's house at the same time when Pramod visits his brother-in-law. Kamalkanth is described as a poorly dressed man, and it is suggested that Shambhuda pays him under the table for special business services. After Pramod bumps into the men several times, Pramod notices that Kamalkanth sneers and snickers under his breath, suggesting that he and his friend are laughing at Pramod and his predicament.

Ram Mohan

Ram Mohan, a former employer of Pramod, sympathizes with Pramod about the loss of his job. Pramod times his morning walk so that he can avoid passing Ram Mohan; Pramod is embarrassed by Ram Mohan's goodness and consideration. Although Ram Mohan is sympathetic to his crisis, Pramod grows tired of hearing Ram Mohan tell him that something will come his way soon. Ram Mohan also makes Pramod self-conscious when Ram Mohan sees Pramod with the housemaid.

Pramod

Pramod, the protagonist, is an accountant who has just lost his job. Pramod knows a fellow accountant who is computer literate is still employed with the same company. Pramod has been so comfortable in his job, and he does not know how to find another one. Humiliated, he decides to seek help from his wife's relative. It embarrasses him when people ask him how he is doing, because he has no prospects and has no positive news. In this interim, he takes up with a woman whom he considers beneath him socially, and she encourages him to re-evaluate his life. He has been worrying too much about appearances, and through the housemaid, he learns to see life more simply.

Pramod's evolution from an arrogant man who has lost his job and temporarily lost his identity, to a more modest figure is the basic focus of this short story. As Pramod confronts his professional changes, the story takes on the drama of a psychological study of someone in crisis. Pramod's changes are subtle, but the results of those changes are personally dramatic for this character. He must strip himself of his ego in order to accept a possible path toward recreating his professional identity.

Radhika

Radhika, Pramod's wife, prods Pramod a bit when he begins to sulk about having lost his job, and she also tries to inspire him. When that does not work, she appears to fall into the background as Pramod is absent from their apartment. However, her anger comes to the forefront while she and Pramod are visiting Radhika's family. When the men tease that maybe Pramod has a better definition of life (one without a job and one with a mistress), Radhika must admit to herself that all is not well in her relationship with Pramod. She yells at Pramod at this point and blames him for setting off a fight between her brother and other male relatives. In the end, it is Radhika's idea that gives Pramod hope for the future. She is dependent on her husband and his choices, but their property may serve him as he finds a new way to make a living.

Shambhuda

Shambhuda, an influential brother-in-law of Pramod and brother to Pramod's wife, is involved in the construction business and obviously makes a lot of money. He has a bulging stomach, which he displays immodestly, when he is first introduced in the story. He promises to help Pramod to find a job, but he never comes through with anything substantial. Except for one moment when he defends Pramod at a family party, there is little evidence to suggest that he has any particular commitment to his brother-in-law.

Themes

Humility

As Upadhyay's short story "The Good Shopkeeper" opens, the protagonist Pramod is just beginning his downslide from arrogance into humility. He has assumed he was sitting on top of the world with his great job as an accountant for a large corporation. He was making a good salary and proving to his wife's family (who enjoyed a better economic status than his family) that he was on equal footing with them. But corporations have no heart, this story implies. So when a more qualified young man appears with more technologically advanced skills, Pramod finds himself a victim of progress. He finds that he must take advantage of his wife's connections and humble himself in front of his brother-in-law. And when that does not work, Pramod fantasizes about having money, working in a fancy office, and in his dream it is his brother-in-law who must grovel to Pramod. But his fantasies satisfy Pramod only temporarily. So he seeks another diversion. He has an affair with a housemaid, a married woman whom he sees as socially beneath him, allowing him at least a few moments of arrogance. At this point, Pramod has still not learned how to be humble. Instead, he continues to try to find ways to make himself feel superior. This appetite for feeing superior keeps him from considering becoming a shopkeeper. Only when he is knocked off this artificial pedestal created by ego does he come to realize that his position in society is not important. Pramod realizes, finally, that his family matters most. So it does not matter what kind of job he holds. What matters is that he does not lose his wife by having an affair with another woman and that he does take care of his family economically, even if he must work as a shopkeeper. Once Pramod is humbled by his situation, in other words, he realizes what is truly important to him.

Simplicity

At the beginning of this story, material wealth is a measure of self-worth. Pramod is proud of what he can afford. But as his possessions accumulate his life becomes more complex. The more he owns, the more he worries about maintaining his position. So when he loses his job, everything in his life begins to unravel. He worries so much he cannot see the life that is passing in front of him. He becomes blind to his love for his wife and his child. On a whim, he acquiesces to a sexual relationship when a woman approaches him. Ironically, some good comes from this affair: Pramod learns the lesson of simplicity. The woman quotes her husband as saying that city people spend all their time worrying. The woman believes that one should live moment to moment and not worry about consequences until they appear. In other words, she enjoys what she has in front of her without worrying about the possibilities that it might be taken away. She lives in a simple apartment, eats simple food, and works at a job that she does not have to worry about when she comes home. Although her life is not perfect, some of her philosophy about simplicity tempers Pramod's outlook. Rather than losing his house, his wife, and his child while he holds out for a more respectable job to be arranged for him,

he needs to pursue the potential in a simple job that will provide simply and adequately for him and his family.

Modern Impersonality

Modern culture is impersonal in this short story. Pramod's loss of job is the prime example. When he tells family and friends about his loss, they empathize with him and wonder how such a thing could happen. Pramod was a hardworking and loyal employee. He had worked for the company for three years. But the employer, an international company, is focused on money as everyone else is. Loyalty to its employees does not increase the profitability of that company. What the company demands is efficiency, which relates directly with profit. So when another man appears who is a good accountant and has current computer skills, the company demands that Pramod be replaced. Even within the family, Pramod confronts modern impersonality. His brother-in-law, although he promises to find a job for Pramod and assures him that everything will be all right, does not come through for him. Despite being part of the family, Shambhuda is a businessman who is driven by profit. The story suggests that Shambhuda might have even murdered someone in order to protect his profits. Although it is never disclosed why Shambhuda does not find a job for Pramod, the suggestion is that in this world even family cannot be relied upon to help a relative in difficult financial times. Eventually Pramod gets over his depression, he finally realizes that he has to find his own way in order to survive. Thus he realizes that being a shopkeeper may not be such a bad thing. Even though a shopkeeper does not have the same social status as a corporate accountant, Pramod hopes to be self-sufficient when he has his own business.

Style

Limited Third-Person Point of View

Upadhyay uses limited third-person point of view. The narrator tells the story with apparent objectivity, observing the protagonist and his actions. The narrator is privy to only the protagonist's thoughts. Cues are given regarding what the other characters think, but mostly these characters are depicted according to how Pramod thinks. What goes through the minds of the other characters is suggested rather than revealed explicitly. Most of the story is colored by Pramod's interpretation.

Conflict

Conflict exists between Pramod and his wife, as well as between him and other family members who are themselves in conflict, but most of the conflict takes place in the protagonist's own psyche. Pramod has a certain image of himself based on his past work. He has become comfortable and even somewhat arrogant about his professional rank. So when he loses his job, he also loses his identity. The conflict is a psychological one therefore. Pramod must create a new self-image. Resolving this conflict proves to be more of a challenge than Pramod might have guessed. At first he thinks he will receive help. He prays; he in-laws. As time passes and his frustrations mount, he has conflicts with everyone who tries to communicate with him. The only one who does not appear to cause conflict is the housemaid, who offers Pramod an escape from the pressing need to find work. With the housemaid Pramod can almost forget who he is. He uses her like someone else might use a drug. Eventually, however, Pramod realizes that he must solve his own problems. He must do this by relying on himself, taking a risk, and trying something new.

Character Development

Protagonists in well-written short stories generally go through some form of dramatic change. If the main character does not develop, the character is said to be flat. The change conveys the point of the story; without significant transformation the story may seem to lack meaning. In this short story, the protagonist Pramod goes through a noteworthy evolution. In the beginning of the story, Pramod has just found out that he has lost his job. He is stunned by this announcement, but he has not fully felt the full impact of the loss. He assumes that he will find another job, hopefully one similar to the one that he just lost. As time goes by, however, he understands how much his job has defined his life. It brought money and prestige to him and his wife. In losing his job, Pramod also feels that he has lost his position in his society. As even more time passes, Pramod becomes depressed. He does not even want to feel the love of his wife or his child. He finds numbed solace in the bed of a stranger, a woman with whom he has no intentions of developing an emotional attachment. He uses her to help him forget. It

finally dawns on Pramod what he really wants. He realizes that he must change his whole perspective on life. He must become self-reliant.

Historical Context

Nepal Overview

About the size of Arkansas, Nepal is north of India and just south of China. It is a landlocked country with a dramatic landscape of the Himalayan Mountains to the north, bringing frigid weather in the winter, to the flat river plains of the Ganges in the south with subtropical weather. Mount Everest (over 29,000 feet), the world's tallest mountain, is found in Nepal as are eight of the ten highest mountains of the world. It is also a country of famine, polluted water, and rapid deforestation due to a lack of any other fuel alternatives. In the early 2000s, more than 27 million people call Nepal their home and a wide majority of these people are Hindu, making Nepal the only official Hindu state in the world. The ethnicity of the Nepalese people is a mixture of Indo-Aryans from India and Mongoloids from China and Tibet. Buddhism is the other major religion in the country, with Nepal proud to claim that Buddha was born there.

The capital is Kathmandu, which lies in the eastern portion of the country. Like the rest of the country, Kathmandu has both scenic wonders and filth and wear and tear. The country tries to maintain its heritage while coping with twenty-first-century challenges brought by a growing population and economic difficulties. More than 700,000 people live in the capital city.

Brief Political History of Nepal

Recorded history of Nepal goes back at least to 700 b.c. when the Kiratis people lived in the Nepal Valley. This was the approximate period of the Buddha's birth, and Buddhism flourished in the area. By 200 a.d. , however, Buddhism had given way to Hinduism, which continues to be the major religion of the area. In more recent history, warriors from India invaded the area, and when British forces controlled major portions of India in the eighteenth century, Nepal lost part of its territory to British India. However, the country was never controlled by a foreign government. Nepal maintained its independence while enjoying good relationships both with Britain and later with India when that country reestablished its independence in the mid-twentieth century.

Nepal, the only Hindu monarchy in the world, was ruled by an inherited monarch until 1951, when a cabinet system of government was begun. Eight years later, the country held its first elections. However, in 1960, the reigning monarch, King Mahendra, dissolved the parliament, and ever since there has been little political stability in the country. In 2001, Nepal made headlines in newspapers all over the world when the crowned Prince Dipendra murdered ten of his family members, including his parents, King Birenda and Queen Aishwarya, then took his own life. It has been assumed that the issue that spurred these killings was the prince's inability to convince his parents to allow him to marry a woman he loved. The new king, Gyanendra, in 2002, attempted to secure his own power by dissolving the current prime minister and his cabinet for

incompetence. But with these acts as well as a growing insurgency by Nepalese people influenced by the political theories of the Maoists, Nepal continues to suffer from political insecurities. Voting rights have been promised by 2005. However, the insurgents are growing stronger and more active. Warnings have been issued by the U.S. government, suggesting that tourists be very cautious while visiting Nepal.

Famous Authors of Nepal

Modern literature in Nepal often begins in the early nineteenth century with poetry of such artists as Shuwananda Das, Radha Ballav Arjjyal, and Shakti Ballav Arjjyal, whose poems are devoted to the brave acts of soldiers and kings. During the later part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, there was a turn in subject matter as writers focused more on stories of mythology. One of the most well known writers of that time was Bhanu Bhakta Aacharya, who wrote *Ramayan, Badhu Shiksha* and *Ram Gita*. As the twentieth century progressed, topics for writers changed again and under Western influence, English words began to be incorporated in literary pieces. Works became more personal and topics such as sex and family dynamics were explored.

Nepalese Culture

The culture of Nepal is often described as caught between two ages, the sixteenth century and the twenty-first. While the Nepalese value their heritage and traditions, they are increasingly more in contact with Western consumer society and the urge toward capitalism is changing Nepalese lifestyle. Their arts and festivals remain shaped by the past. The music of Nepal, for example, is handed down through religious ceremony. Many of the songs are sung during religious ceremonies. The most popular (as well as most traditional) instruments are drums and wind instruments. Vijaya Dashami, a national festival held in early fall, honors the family. It is a time for music and lavish meals. Another major festival, Maha Shivatri, honors the Hindu god Shiva. Thousands of pilgrims travel to Kathmandu to the temple of Pashupatinath during this festival, where they bathe and fast. Pramod visits this temple soon after learning that he has lost his job.

Critical Overview

Upadhyay's "The Good Shopkeeper" was chosen for the *Best American Short Stories, 1999*, and subsequently was published in the 2001 collection *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, which won the Whiting Award for best emerging writers. Some critics, however, have pointed out some flaws. For instance, Kavitha Rao, writing for *Far Eastern Economic Review* found that Upadhyay's collection "has very little to distinguish it from other writers from South Asia," except for the fact that Upadhyay's tales are set in Nepal. But despite this criticism, Rao singled out "The Good Shopkeeper" as Upadhyay's "most successful story."

Writing for the *Village Voice*, S. Shankar also singled out "The Good Shopkeeper" in this critic's review of *Arresting God in Kathmandu*. Shankar found this one to be the "best story" in the collection. Shankar states, "The insights into Pramod's world that Upadhyay offers through his story are subtle and satisfying," then goes on to praise Upadhyay's "fine sense of place."

Writing for *Publishers Weekly*, Jeff Zaleski praised Upadhyay for his subtleties: "there are no lush descriptions or forays into spirituality" in these short stories, Zaleski writes. Unlike other exotic stories written about lands far from the shorelines of the United States, Zaleski found Upadhyay's writing refreshing. He found the author's writing to be assured and anchored in "small yet potent epiphanies."

Alix Wilber, writing for the *Seattle Times*, was not so impressed. The writing is a little too bland for Wilber, who stated that the stories included in the collection *Arresting God in Kathmandu* are "minimalist in form language." Although Wilber found Upadhyay's stories to be interesting and his writing to be "fluent," the writing was, nonetheless, "too unaccented to be interesting on its own."

Other critics have found more to praise in Upadhyay's writing. One is Ronny Noor, who reviewed Upadhyay's collection for *World Literature Today*. Noor concluded his article with these words: "These beautiful stories . . . are full of tender grace, woven in words that are not only perfectly set like beads in a necklace but also flow smoothly from sentence to flawless sentence without a bump."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Hart is the author of several books. In the following essay, Hart examines the roles of the two female minor characters in Upadhyay's short story.

Samrat Upadhyay's short story "The Good Shopkeeper" focuses mainly on the evolution of protagonist Pramod as he sorts through his options upon losing his job. Although the female characters, Pramod's wife, Radhika, and the unnamed woman with whom Pramod has an affair, are given little space in this story, their significance and their effect upon the protagonist is profound. It might even be true that these two female characters prevent Pramod from being lost in a downward spiraling depression.

Radhika appears first of the two female characters in "The Good Shopkeeper." Although Pramod reprimands her at the opening of the story, it is Radhika who offers the solution to his dilemma, even though it takes the entire length of the story, which covers more than a month, for Pramod to recognize and accept her advice. In the beginning, Pramod accuses Radhika of being too emotional, and he tells her this is why he is reluctant to share information with her. Her emotions, Pramod tells her, are what keep Radhika from thinking clearly. Pramod, of course, believes that he, as an accountant, always thinks in a clear, rational manner. He is, after all, a man who works with numbers all day. What could be more rational than that?

Having just lost his job and along with it, his self-image, Pramod invests in thinking clearly as the only way that he is going to successfully work his way through this crisis. And who can argue with that? On his first day of unemployment, he asserts that his own performance is not to blame for his losing his job. He recognizes that his company has run out of money and has no other choice but to let him go. "It is not their fault," Pramod tells his wife.

In response, Pramod's wife asks: "So only you should suffer?" This is a reasonable question. In a company that really cares about its employees, could not everyone come together and give up a little, instead of one person having to give up all? Although this idea makes sense, Pramod finds a flaw in his wife's supposition. He acknowledges that the person who has replaced him on the job is more technically skilled than he is. So in conclusion, it makes more sense (at least economically if not socially) that Pramod is the one who is let go. Then Radhika finds a flaw in Pramod's argument. She adds that there is one more important factor in Pramod's release that her husband might have overlooked. The man who has replaced him has more influential social connections than Pramod. Her statement implies that connections matter more than qualifications.

So Radhika's suggestion prompts Pramod to seek his own connections through his wealthy and influential brother-in-law, Shambhuda. If this connection were to work for Pramod, help would be coming from Radhika's side of the family, through his wife. But as it turns out, Shambhuda does next to nothing for Pramod. He lifts Pramod's mood from time to time, telling him that things will get better, but no job prospects ever appear. Even though Shambhuda does not find a new job for Pramod, Radhika is the one who

pushes Pramod out the door and into the streets to look for another job. She provides the impetus that Pramod needs. Even her existence along with their child heighten his need to secure an income for their household.

When Pramod realizes that finding another job, especially one as prestigious as the one he has just lost, is going to be harder than he realized, he becomes physically ill. The pressure gets to him. He pays his next month's rent out of savings, but as that month passes by, he must turn to Radhika once again. It is Radhika's family who lends him and his wife the money to manage their mounting bills. The loan gives them more time, but it also makes Pramod feel belittled. He wants to be a good provider for his family and does not want his wife's family to think otherwise. But he has no choice. Radhika understands her husband's disposition and tells him not to worry. "She was still tying to maintain an optimistic attitude," the narrator informs the readers. But this optimism is something that Pramod "no longer shared." Slowly but surely, Pramod slips out of his rational mode and plunges deeper into worry and frustration, emotions that contribute to his depression.

Now Radhika is the one to think more effectively. She conceives a logical plan that might save them: They should sell the land they own in the south and buy a shop. The money they make from the sale could afford them a well-stocked store that the two of them could work; and with a little bit of luck, they could be back on the road to success. Pramod's first reaction to this plan is defensive. His ego, in particular, is completely stunned. How in the world could he go from being an accountant at a large corporation to being a small-time shopkeeper? The idea is absurd. "I am an accountant, do you understand? I have worked for many big people," Pramod snaps at his wife. He later regrets his rash comments to her. But even in a more rational mood, as he lies awake at night, his pride and emotionality still overrule his rational thinking. He comes up with reasons why being a shopkeeper would not work, but none of them is actually viable. He believes that he would have trouble dealing with customers whom he dislikes. He thinks the land they own is worthless. In truth, he is totally humiliated by the whole idea. A shopkeeper is a role that Pramod believes to be below him.

Pramod literally turns his back on his wife as they lie together in bed, and metaphorically he does so by becoming sexually involved with another woman. This woman, identified only as a housemaid, is his respite from having to think. She tells him upon their first meeting that he thinks too much. She sees right through him. From the very first time they meet, she catches him in a lie. She asks where he works. This is a simple question, but it galls Pramod that she immediately touches upon such a sore topic. He tells her he works in an office. She prods on: is it a holiday, she asks simply, realizing that most office workers would not be spending the morning in the park. She also notices how worried Pramod looks. "In this city I see so many worried people," she tells Pramod. "They walk around not looking at anyone, always thinking, always worrying. This problem, that problem." She compares her life, which she classifies as poor, to those who have much more than she does. She says, "For us poor people. Life is what God gives us." In other words, she takes what is handed to her and deals with it in the best way she can. Rich people assume they create their circumstances; they worry about protecting what they have and plan or connive how they can get more. By

contrast, the housemaid suggests, poor people enjoy life more because they are resigned to their fate. They assume they are not responsible for their circumstances. Ironically their poorer living conditions free them to enjoy the present moment more, whereas rich people are so preoccupied with their wealth, that pleasures slip by unnoticed as they compete for more possessions.

The simplicity of this woman is ridiculous, Pramod thinks. At first, he even feels like laughing at her. But instead, he follows her home and engages in sexual intercourse with her. As this woman takes up more and more of his time, Pramod becomes more and more disconnected from his former self. He stops looking for a job and even refuses to go home to his family one night. But one day, after having spent an uncomfortable afternoon with his wife's family, Pramod goes to see the woman, then senses something has again changed inside of him. He lies down in her bed and instead of being sexually aroused, "he felt like a patient, ready to be anesthetized so that his insides could be removed." At this point, Pramod has grown tired of his emotions. He wants to be numb. When he acts out a scene of wanting to fight with everyone who has caused him to wallow in his emotions, the woman asks: "What good will it do . . . to beat up the whole world?"

This question throws Pramod off guard. He stops in mid-motion and ponders it. Then he gets up, kisses the woman on the cheek, and tells her that it is time for him to go home. Pramod realizes finally, through the woman's simple clarity, that he has indeed been wasting time and effort. He has been fighting the wrong battle. Instead of fighting his depressive emotions, he has been fighting all the meaningless situations that have surrounded him since he lost his job. He has taken out his emotions, in other words, on everyone around him. But now it is time to get back on track. And when Pramod realizes this, he goes straight home to the people in his life who hold the most significance. He is gleeful and takes time to notice his child. The story ends much where it began. But at the climax of this story, Pramod is a different man. He has evolved, thanks to the gentle pressures and simple insights of the two female characters of this story.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "The Good Shopkeeper," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on contemporary literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the moment of quiet epiphany in which the protagonist moves from fear and despair to acceptance and wisdom.

In a *San Francisco Chronicle* review of Upadhyay's collection of stories, *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, in which "The Good Shopkeeper" appears, Tamara Straus describes the theme of the story as "the escapism of love." No doubt this is true in a certain sense, but the story is more than a testament to the therapeutic effects of an extramarital affair. It is one of those stories in which much is hidden and unsaid, a quality that makes it, in spite of the simple clarity of the prose, rather mysterious, as mysterious as life itself. It raises questions that must have occurred to many people at some point in their lives. How do transformations happen? How does a person move, when all seems lost, from a condition of rigidity, fear, and despair, to acceptance and wisdom? For this is indeed what happens to Pramod, the protagonist, in a moment of quiet epiphany that is all the more moving for the understated way in which it is presented. Upadhyay is not an author who beats his reader over the head with an explicit moral or message.

Although for the Western reader the Nepalese setting is exotic and some of the local customs unfamiliar, the basic situation in the story is easy to understand. Anyone who has endured long-term unemployment, or had a friend or family member endure it, will attest to the fact that such a situation can sap a person's confidence and self-esteem, lower his/her status in the eyes of family and friends, and even undermine his/her will to live. In a sense, a person needs as many skills and resources to cope with unemployment as s/he does to handle a job.

It quickly becomes clear that Pramod lacks such skills. He is himself a somewhat ordinary man. There is nothing special about him. With his wife and baby and his job as an accountant with a firm in the city, he is a conventional middle-class Everyman. The misfortune he meets is not his fault. It could happen to anyone, as he himself points out. And like most people in such a situation, once he has gotten over the initial shock, he tries to be optimistic about the prospects of finding a new job, saying that he will end up with something even better than before. This of course is what people say to themselves, and others say to them, in order to mask their fear that it might in fact not be so.

Pramod does everything he can to remedy the situation, especially badgering his influential, if corrupt, brother-in-law, to help him. But when nothing happens, his confidence sags. He starts avoiding people, and he has to borrow from his wife's family, who as the situation drags on, cease to treat him with respect. This wounds his pride. Pramod is very conscious of social position and class. He is aware, for example, that his wife's family is better off than his own, and he resents having to ask Shambhuda for help. When his wife comes up with a practical suggestion, that he sell their land in the south and set up a general store or a stationery outlet, he dismisses it out of hand. Being a shopkeeper is beneath him, he insists. His peremptory dismissal of his wife's

suggestion shows how attached he is to his self-image as a middle-class accountant. He has his perceived position and role in the social hierarchy, and he refuses to let go of it. But since his job search continues to be fruitless, what is he to do?

Immediately after Pramod loses his job, he seems inclined, in a vague sort of way, and perhaps without being fully conscious of it, to turn to religion. Early in the morning, he goes to the temple, and even stands in line for tika from the Hindu priest in the shrine. *Tika* (also known as *bindi*) is a red dot, traditionally made from the red flower kum kum, that is applied to the forehead between and slightly above the eyes. It is thought to awaken a person's connection to the divine. Usually *tika* is worn by married women, but priests and other men who are on a spiritual path wear it also.

It is clear that obtaining *tika* is something Pramod does not usually do. He does not appear to be a particularly religious man, although religion seems to play a prominent role in his society. But on this occasion, when his life has been suddenly upset, he turns to religion, perhaps for hope and security. This is not at all uncommon for those who suddenly find themselves in a very difficult situation or who have suffered some trauma. They seek reassurance that everything will be all right.

Religious belief and practice confront Pramod again at Shambhuda's home, where Shambhuda is performing a *puja* (a devotional ceremony to the gods), which he does every morning. While Pramod waits, he gazes at the religious pictures on the wall. He is especially drawn to one that depicts Lord Shiva, one of the three most important gods in the Hindu pantheon, with the snake god, Nag, around his neck. Pramod is aware that Shambhuda is a successful businessman, and after their conversation, in which Shambhuda promises to help him, Pramod again looks at the religious pictures and wonders "if they had anything to do with Shambhuda's prosperity and quiet confidence in life." The question of whether the gods assist those who are devoted to them, or who at least follow the prescribed rituals, hovers in the background of the story. Although Pramod does not seem to consciously pursue the matter, he does take walks to the temple every morning before sunrise, and he gains solace from the temple lights, which remain lit until dawn.

After Pramod has been unemployed for quite some time, a new element is introduced into the story. This is his meeting with the servant woman in the city park, which introduces a sharp contrast of values into Pramod's rather enclosed world of family and friends. It is framed by the contrast between city and country, a literary theme as old as literature itself, used by writers from Virgil to Shakespeare. The idea is that life in the city is materialistic and corrupt. In ruthlessly pursuing their personal ambitions and self-interest and in jockeying for power over others, city-dwellers have lost touch with the simple and pure values of life that are preserved in the country. The idea is expressed by the servant woman, who remains unnamed throughout the story: "In this city I see so many worried people. They walk around not looking at anyone, always thinking, always worrying. This problem, that problem." She fears that if she stays too long in the city, she will become like everyone else. Her negative view of city life is certainly confirmed at the family game of flush that Pramod watches later in the story. The men all make

cruel digs at each other, and it appears that crimes such as embezzlement, bribery, and even murder are part of the family's way of doing business.

The servant woman's approach to life is completely different from the habitual complexity of the city dweller. "I don't think that much," she says. "What is there to think about? For us poor people, life is what God gives us." Pramod reacts smugly to her comments, secure in his belief that he is more knowledgeable and sophisticated than this simple village woman. He does not stop to consider that perhaps her phrase "life is what God gives us," with its implication that the village people are content with their lot and do not argue about what comes their way in life, might have something to teach him. At the moment he is too concerned with feeling superior, and this shows once again his strong attachment to conventional social hierarchies. Pramod, in fact, can fairly be called a snob. He is shocked that the servant woman has the nerve to ask him where he works, since she is obviously from a much lower class than he is. Even talking to her is a sign of how far he has fallen, he thinks. However, this does not mean he is above going back to her apartment and having sex with her, although this takes place after he has once more reassured himself of his superiority to this woman: "he knew a lot more than she did," although he does not tell her this (no doubt he congratulates himself on his tact).

It should also be pointed out that above the bed on which they engage in sex is an another religious icon, this time a poster of a smiling Lord Krishna, one of the most beloved divinities in Hindu mythology. Once again, religion seems to hover suggestively at the margins of the story.

As the extramarital affair continues, Pramod's state of mind deteriorates, and he seems ready to walk away from his responsibilities as husband and father. A reproach from his wife, who blames him for creating the acrimony that surfaces during the game of flush, sends him out of the house, contemplating suicide. But he ends up going nowhere near the pond at the center of the city in which he thought he might have the courage to drown himself. Instead, he finds himself drawn to his lover's room. This scene is notable for the absolute contrast in mood and attitude between Pramod, who at first is so worried and depressed that all he can do is fall asleep, and the woman, who has about her an air of complete unconcern. When he asks if she is afraid that her husband may make a surprise visit to the room, she replies that she never thinks about it. It is not in her nature to do so, she adds as he questions her further. When she asks him what he would do in that situation, all his anger and aggression against the world boils up to the surface. He jumps up and makes a series of mock karate kicks as he imagines confounding all his enemies. When he has tired himself out, she says to him, "What good will it do . . . to beat up the whole world?" In response, he raises a finger "as if to say, *Wait*." But he says nothing at first. Instead, he smiles, kisses her on the cheek, and announces that he is going home to his wife.

Just what is going on here? This is in fact the crucial moment to which the whole story has been building. When Pramod raises his finger, it seems as if he is about to argue with the woman. But he does not argue. Instead, her words seem to trigger a new realization in his mind. In that moment, all his absurd macho posturing, his grievances

against the world, his defiance and his despair, all fall away. His excessive concern about social status, and his rigid self-image, which so limited his ideas about what occupation he should pursue, likewise crumble away into nothing. In this moment of epiphany, his mind is at last free to embrace something new.

It is clear that after he leaves the woman, he is a changed man. Back at home, he plays with the baby and surprises his wife by indicating that he is willing to accept her idea, put to him a long time ago, that he should sell their land in the south and become a shopkeeper. The solution to his problem was there all along but he could not see it. But now, having freed himself of stubbornness, pride, and snobbery, he embraces the idea willingly, even with a sense of humor. He no longer resists the opportunity that life is presenting to him. Perhaps he may recall the words of the housemaid when they first met, that "life is what God gives us."

How does this profound change happen? Pramod offers no explanation. Somehow, through pathways unknown, he manages to reconnect with the flow of life, dropping his preconceived ideas about the way things ought to be and accepting with good grace the way they are. Did the gods who watch silently from the walls play a role in helping him? Was the housemaid in truth a messenger from God, appearing in his life for a certain purpose and departing only when that purpose was accomplished? Wisely, the author leaves the reader with the mystery and does not try to explain it.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "The Good Shopkeeper," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Weinreich has a bachelor's degree in English and has worked as a staff reporter for a daily newspaper. In this essay, Weinreich considers the universal theme of the conflict between fate and free will, as demonstrated in "The Good Shopkeeper," and how the American perspective, as exemplified by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Self-Reliance," provides insight into the protagonist Pramod.

"The Good Shopkeeper" considers the quandary every human faces: Does a person have control over his or her destiny (free will), or does some unseen force or fate control a person's life (fatalism)? Samrat Upadhyay chooses to examine this question by throwing his protagonist, Pramod, a blow that upends his world—he is fired from his job. For most readers, this is a concrete dilemma, one they can envision or perhaps have experienced. Along with Pramod's job goes his self-esteem, his position in the community, and his relationship with his family. The author is a native of Nepal, and the setting he employs may seem exotic to the American reader, but the way he carries Pramod through his challenges crosses national, religious, and ethnic boundaries. How Pramod evolves from a lost soul, who views his bad luck as out of his control and others' responsibility to fix, to a person who looks within for the response to his predicament is the thread that holds "The Good Shopkeeper" together.

In his writings Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803—1882), the noted nineteenth-century American philosopher, considers the consequences of hewing to standards set by others or breaking stride with what society mandates one of the essential parts of the human condition, and this alternative is at the center of the conflict for Pramod. Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," serves as a blueprint to follow as the reader watches Pramod grow toward independence and all quotations here come from this essay by Emerson.

Americans are conditioned culturally to believe they have control over their lives; it is fundamental to their approach to problem solving, and Emerson is among the standard bearers for this philosophy. In contrast, the Hindu sensibility is attuned to acceptance of fate, and in the first part of "The Good Shopkeeper," Pramod reacts to his situation with characteristic resignation. Initially, Pramod is not a sympathetic character. He spends a lot of time and energy looking to others to solve his problems. He is whiny and obnoxious, arrogant and irresponsible. He is mired in a useless routine shaped by social hierarchy. Emerson says, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." Yet Pramod, thinking his brother-in-law Shambhuda is superior because he is rich and powerful and therefore in a position to alleviate his financial problems, visits Shambhuda so often looking for help that "it took him longer and longer to give Pramod an audience." The use of "audience" here clearly sets the tone for these meetings—Pramod is the supplicant; the rich relative, Shambhuda, is his superior.

Emerson would take issue with Pramod's approach to faith as well. Everyday Pramod visits a nearby temple before daylight, afterward visiting "people of influence, people

who could maneuver him into a job without the rigors of an examination or an interview. He tried to keep his faith that something would turn up." When he falls on hard times, Pramod, who is not known to be a religious man, apparently hopes for some kind of divine intervention. While left waiting for Shambhuda to finish a telephone conversation, Pramod observes a picture gallery of the gods lining Shambhuda's wall and wonders if the gods are responsible for his prosperity. For Pramod, even Shambhuda's success seems due to outside forces. For Emerson, an ordained minister who eventually left his church, "Prayer that craves a particular commodity, anything less than all good, is vicious. . . . But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft."

Readers may identify with Pramod's bereft feelings in facing his job loss, but these sympathies give way when he ignores his family and has an affair with a housemaid he chances to meet in the park. The maid reinforces his fatalism two ways. First, she gives Pramod someone to lord over, feeding his arrogance that he is better than the maid simply because he is an accountant. He sees her as simple, yet she initiates the affair. Second, the maid articulates the idea that poor people, at least, have no power over their lives when she says, "For us poor people, life is what God gives us." Being a maid is a low position in any society, and the author further diminishes her status by not giving her a name. Pramod's liaison with her allows him to escape from the trials of his situation and the nagging of his worried wife. For his part, Pramod "didn't know what he thought of her, except there was an inevitability to all this." And as he has sexual relations with her, he thinks, "The act had an inevitability that he could not control." Again Pramod sees himself as a leaf in the wind, buffeted about by circumstances beyond his control. The American reader has trouble with this attitude; few believe one has no control over engaging in an affair. This attitude contradicts the concept of free will, of Emerson's vision of self-reliance: "He who knows that power is inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere, and so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself . . . [and] works miracles."

It takes a family fight, a startling revelation (that Shambhuda is a suspected murderer), and some wise words from the maid to illuminate for Pramod the reality that he counts on others who are neither reliable nor worthy of the respect he has been giving them. It is important to note that, again, Upadhyay makes the women in Pramod's life powerful: Setting up shop is his wife's idea, which he rejects initially as beneath him. When he accepts the possibility of becoming a shopkeeper, he comes out of his depression, regains his self-respect, and fantasizes that as a shopkeeper he can ignore Shambhuda, and his wife will serve tea to the maid. The notion that his wife would be subservient to his mistress may offend or amuse some American readers, but it is a concept explored in another of Upadhyay's stories. It is hard to imagine an American woman finding herself in such an arrangement.

In revealing that Shambhuda may be a murderer or may have arranged a murder, Upadhyay brings the powerful down. In presenting the maid as a positive influence on Pramod, he elevates the poor and humble. Through these characterizations particularly, the author shows that position or wealth does not determine a person's character. However, Pramod's somewhat self-deluding fantasies make the reader wonder if he has

learned his lesson, since he seems to be maintaining a bit of arrogance as he considers how he will treat the people who come into his shop.

Emerson closes "Self-Reliance" by saying, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles." Upadhyay guides Pramod, and the reader, through the process of self-discovery until he comes to this realization. What remains is for Pramod to allow principles to guide his actions, and Upadhyay leaves unanswered the question of whether Pramod will do so. The reader can believe, that based on his development in the story, Pramod is likely to continue on that path. That he plans to ignore the powerful Shambhuda is a step in the right direction.

Because, in part, of its universal relevance, "The Good Shopkeeper" is the most successful story in *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, the collection in which it appears. Readers everywhere can identify with beleaguered Pramod as he makes all the wrong choices before finding the strength to change.

Emerson says:

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide. . . . The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.

Source: Bonnie Weinreich, Critical Essay on "The Good Shopkeeper," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research Hinduism and the caste system, then see if what you have learned helps you find more meaning in this story. Also, find definitions for all foreign words you note in the text and see if knowing those definitions helps readers understand the passages in which they occur.

Plan a trip to Nepal for your class. Decide how long the trip will last, what parts of the country you will visit, which festivals you will witness, and what special monuments of interest you will see. Be as detailed as possible, choosing the airlines you will use to get there as well as where you will stay and how you will travel through the country. Create a budget for this adventure as accurately as possible. Also make sure to check with the U.S. State Department to find out if there are any travel restrictions.

The protagonist Pramod has a fantasy during the course of this short story. In that fantasy, he imagines himself sitting in a large office with his brother-in-law coming in to ask him for a favor. Reread the section of the story in which Pramod describes what he looks like and how his brother-in-law appears. Then draw a cartoon impression of that scene.

Choose one of the minor characters in Upadhyay's short story and write a letter to Pramod. In this letter, describe your feelings for him and what he is doing with his life as he struggles to redefine himself. You might chose to be Pramod's wife, in which case you may want to let Pramod know that you are aware of the affair he is having with the housemaid. Or you could select Pramod's brother-in-law and explain to Pramod why you are having trouble finding him a job. Whichever character you choose, make sure that the letter fits in with the clues that the story provides.

What Do I Read Next?

Upadhyay's short story "The Good Shopkeeper" was first published in the literary magazine *Manoa* in 1999. However, in 2001, this same story was also published in a collection of Upadhyay's short stories called *Arresting God in Kathmandu*. This is Upadhyay's first book published in English, which went on to win the Whiting Award. A common theme runs through these stories: Upadhyay explores the changes that Nepalese face and the effects of those changes on their private lives.

In 2003, Upadhyay published his first English novel, *The Guru of Love*. In this story, a math teacher living in Nepal has an illicit affair with a young girl. But this is more than a love story. The setting of Nepal is significant as it reveals weaknesses of the government and the strength of the Nepalese people as they try to bridge their ancient traditions with the ever-changing influences from outside.

Kamila Shamsie's novel *Salt and Saffron* (2002) provides another version of what it is like to live in a country torn by sudden changes. This novel is set in the United States, but myths and histories of ancestors form the frame of reference for the protagonist as she manages her life. Thus the novel provides a Pakistani perspective on America.

Award-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri published a collection of short stories called *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). These stories focus on changes that people face in relationships and in a new land. Her characters generally are people from India, adjusting to their new lives in the United States.

Reading "Lolita" in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (2003) is written by Azar Nafisi, who was a professor in a Tehran university. She resigned because of the stifling politics. After her resignation she called together a group of women who met in secret to discuss the several well-known novels in Western literature. This book is her account of those meetings.

Further Study

Khadka, Rajendra, *Travellers' Tales Nepal*, Travellers' Tales Guides, 1997.

Caught between India and China and closed to the rest of the world until the 1950s, Nepal has been a place of great mystery for Westerners. This is a collection of stories by people who have visited Nepal.

Onesto, Li, *Dispatches from the People's War in Nepal*, Pluto Press, 2005.

Onesto chronicles some events occurring in Nepal. The Nepalese people have been in a long-standing war for liberation. By asking hard questions, Onesto records current events through the people who matter the most in these circumstances: those who are fighting this war.

Oshoe, Palden Choedak, *The Nepal Cookbook*, Snow Lion Productions, 1996.

For a different take on Nepal, readers might be interested in cooking and tasting some of the dishes for which Nepal is known. Some recipes contain a mixture of ghee, garlic, chili, and cumin.

Whelpton, John, *A History of Nepal*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Whelpton, a historian and linguist who teaches in Hong Kong, has traveled extensively through Nepal and provides a reflective history of that country.

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