

# **A House for Mr Biswas Study Guide**

**A House for Mr Biswas by V. S. Naipaul**

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# Contents

<a href="#">A House for Mr Biswas Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Prologue.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">44</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">46</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">50</a>



## Plot Summary

In the first part of the novel, Mohun Biswas is an Indo-Trinidadian who begins his life inauspiciously when he is born under several unfavorable conditions. A Hindu pundit is called in to name him and cast his horoscope; he predicts that this will be a child who brings bad luck to his family. The prophecy seems to begin to fulfill itself when, as a child, Mr. Biswas is indirectly and unintentionally responsible for the death of his father, and his family is eventually broken apart as a result. As the youngest child, he stays with his mother, but she lacks the capacity to nurture him and influence his upbringing. He basically becomes a child of circumstance, and his life becomes more or less accidental. In his job as a sign painter for the Tulsi store, he is attracted to a young girl's smile. It inspires him to write her a note which her family interprets as a love letter, and he suddenly finds himself engaged, with no way of extricating himself from the situation.

As a married man, Mr. Biswas and his wife Shama live in Hanuman House with Shama's mother and multitudes of her relatives. He becomes a buffoon, a clown, a rebel, and is constantly in conflict with one member of the family or another. Eventually his offense is so great that he is sent from the house to run a store on one of the Tulsi properties. The endeavor is successful until Shama wants to have the house blessed; after that, Mr. Biswas experiences financial difficulties and makes ill-advised decisions that result in getting him deeper into debt. Seth, Mrs. Tulsi's brother-in-law and manager of Tulsi affairs, offers him a position as a driver on one of the Tulsi sugar estates, and he accepts, under Shama's coaxing.

On the sugar estate, the family lives in a barracks shared with eleven other families. Mr. Biswas is impatient to build a house, but he does not have very much money. The house is built bit by bit, and the promise of a nice house diminishes as economic considerations necessitate the substitution of substandard supplies for quality materials. Between his house, his growing family, and his job, Mr. Biswas begins to have worries, the worries become anxieties, and the anxieties become full-blown fears. One night during a storm, his house is almost blown away and he breaks down completely. He is taken back to Hanuman House, where Shama is about to give birth to their fourth child, and he recuperates in the solid security and comfort of the house he has professed to hate. When it is time for him to make a decision, he decides to leave Hanuman House and his family behind and make another attempt at setting out on a new life.

In the second part of the novel, Mr. Biswas goes to Port of Spain and finally begins to establish himself as an individual, settling into a satisfying, although low paying, job as a journalist. He reconciles with his family, and Mrs. Tulsi invites them to live in her house in Port of Spain. They enjoy their time there, and Mr. Biswas feels that he is becoming more detached from the hold of the Tulsis. Nonetheless, Mrs. Tulsi continues to use her manipulative powers on Mr. Biswas, and he eventually finds himself a reluctant resident of the Tulsi estate in Shorthills.

Seth has had a falling out with the Tulsis, and life is very difficult as the house deteriorates from neglect and abuse. The children especially face unpleasant



challenges, and Mr. Biswas builds another house for his family. This house is also doomed, and more bad judgment on Mr. Biswas's part causes a fire that barely avoids destroying the house. The family does not have to stay in the house long, however, since Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain becomes vacant again, and Mr. Biswas moves back, occupying two rooms, and sharing the rest of the house with other members of the Tulsi family. Conditions at the house get out of control as more and more people move into the house and it becomes a den of noise and uncleanness.

As Mr. Biswas's son Anand starts college, Mr. Biswas begins to sink again into despair. He is pulled out of it when he is offered a new job as a community Welfare Officer with better pay. The job eventually also provides him with a car, and Mr. Biswas achieves new status in the house. The status turns out to be temporary, as his family is obliged to move to a tenement in order to make improvements to the house in anticipation of the return of Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's son who has been studying medicine in England. The family is allowed to move back into the house after three months, but their stay is brief because of conflict between Owad and Anand, then Owad and Mr. Biswas, and finally Mr. Biswas and Mrs. Tulsi.

As Mr. Biswas looks for a place to live, he is not holding out much hope, but he is approached by a man who wants to sell his house, and circumstances arrange themselves so that Mr. Biswas agrees to make the purchase. Unfortunately, this turns out to be another incident of bad judgment, as the house has more problems than he realized, and the family is once again disheartened. They work to get the house livable and are able to enjoy some time in it, making it their own, before Mr. Biswas loses his job because the Community Welfare Department is abolished.

He goes back to his job at The Sentinel, and now his money worries are magnified since he has acquired a great deal more debt but lost a great deal of his income. He eventually has a series of heart attacks and ultimately dies, but he leaves behind a house that will shelter his family for as long as they live.



# Prologue

## Summary

Ten weeks before his death, Mr. Biswas is sacked from his job as a journalist. The family is living under challenging circumstances, but Mr. Biswas receives a sense of satisfaction from knowing that his wife Shama has not run to her mother for help. She has changed since they moved into their own house, and he considers that fact to be as rewarding as the actual acquisition of the house after years spent living with Shama's family. As a boy, before he married into the Tulsi family, he has been compelled to move from one house of strangers to another. When he finally buys a house of his own, it has many problems that he has not noticed until they moved in and were settled. Nevertheless, he feels gratified in knowing that he has reached the end of his life with something to show for it.

## Analysis

Before the events of the novel begin, the reader is informed of how it will end. Without too many details, the prologue informs the reader that the book's protagonist has lived a difficult life, but at the end, has accomplished what has been most important to him.

## Vocabulary

sacked, optimism, irretrievably, audacity, corrugated, precariously, conglomeration, leprous, destitute, squalor



# Chapter 1

## Summary

Not long after a quarrel between his mother Bipti and his father Raghu has sent Bipti to her own mother's house, Mr. Biswas is born around midnight, "in the wrong way," and with an extra finger. His grandmother, lamenting the fact that she is doomed to have bad luck, immediately takes steps to prevent evil spirits from entering the house, but the midwife says that no matter what they do, the boy will "eat up" his own parents. The next morning a pundit comes to name the child and cast his horoscope; he predicts that the boy will grow up having some undesirable qualities as well as an unlucky sneeze. The pundit prescribes some rituals that the family must perform to help ward off the bad luck, including keeping the father away for twenty-one days. He also advises them to keep the child away from trees and water. The naming is almost an afterthought, and the pundit combines a prefix he thinks safe with Bipti's idea and the baby is named Mohun, which means "the beloved."

Although he loses the sixth finger before he is nine days old, Mr. Biswas's family never forgets that he is an unlucky child; Raghu does not go to work if he hears Mr. Biswas sneeze, and begins to feel that they will become paupers. He begins to hoard money, and spends very little on anything, including the well-being of his family. Mr. Biswas suffers from malnutrition, stunted growth, a shallow chest, eczema, and sores on his skin. His brothers Pratap and Prasad go to work at the ages of nine and eleven.

When Mr. Biswas becomes a little older, his neighbor Dhari hires him to take water to his calf. Mr. Biswas decides on his own to take the calf for walks, and one day discovers a stream. He is fascinated with it, since he has never been allowed near water, and returns to the stream when he is walking with the calf. One day he is so absorbed with watching the fish in the stream that he loses the calf. He searches for hours and never finds it, so he thinks the best thing for him to do is hide.

When Dhari comes to the house to find out what he has done with the calf, Mr. Biswas is nowhere to be found, and his father fears that harm has come to him. When Bipti reassures Dhari that Mr. Biswas would never go near water, the neighbor immediately decides that his calf has been drowned. A crowd of neighbors has gathered, and they all go to the pond to investigate. Raghu, an expert diver, repeatedly dives into the pond and eventually comes up with the drowned calf. Exhausted, he insists on continuing to dive, looking for his son, but he has lost the strength for it, and he drowns. Before he is brought out of the water, a sneeze is heard.

Bipti's sister Tara comes to help with the funeral; afterward, she takes Dehuti, Bipti's daughter, to live with her in Pagotes and work for her. She asks Bipti how much money Raghu left her and Bipti admits she has nothing. Knowing that he hoarded his money, they look for hidden treasure and find nothing. Bipti discovers that Dhari and other



neighbors are digging in the garden; they are also trying to find the hidden money. They tell her to close the window and go to sleep; they are there to look after her.

Dhari continues coming into her garden at night and making disguised threats, and Bipti is intimidated into selling the hut and the land to Dhari and moving with Mr. Biswas to Pagotes. Prasad and Pratap are sent to live and work on a sugar estate with a distant relation.

Living in a back trace on Tara's property, supported by Tara and her husband Ajodha, Bipti and Mr. Biswas share the space with some of Ajodha's dependent relations, but they basically remain strangers to the other. Under the new circumstances, mother and son develop a distance from each other; Bipti has been broken and is unresponsive to her son, and Mr. Biswas feels as if he is alone.

## **Analysis**

The first look at the family of Mr. Biswas reveals that they have a tendency to quarrel and take a superstitious view of the world under the pretext of religion. Although there were no clocks to indicate the time that Mr. Biswas was actually born, both the midwife and the grandmother assert that it was midnight, adding potency to the idea that the child was born under negative signs. Even though the child is given the name of Mohun by the pundit, he continues to be referred to as Mr. Biswas throughout the narrative, regardless in what stage of life he is.

The difficulty of life for the family is emphasized by the fact that the children begin working at such an early age, forcing them to grow up too early. When Mr. Biswas takes the calf on walks to the stream, he shows a certain spirit of adventure, and some rebelliousness, as he has been forbidden to go near water. When he makes a mistake and is not able to correct it, his instinct is to hide. For this reason, his father suspected that he may have been in the pond, and his drowning seems to confirm the prophecy of the midwife. As the family is forced to break up, Mr. Biswas embarks on a series of living arrangements that require him to live with strangers under disagreeable circumstances without maternal guidance and support.

## **Vocabulary**

aperture, pundit, inauspicious, ochre, mitigated, sabots, Wellingtons, austerities, eddy, calabash, valance, harangued, passé partout, heliotrope, ferrules, engulfing, dhoti



## Chapter 2

### Summary

When Mr. Biswas starts going to school, it is discovered that there is no official record of his birth, and he has to get an affidavit for a birth certificate based on Bipti's approximation of his date of birth. In school, he becomes friends with a boy named Alec, who helps him discover that he has a gift for lettering. At home, his mother remains remote, and is subject to moodiness. Mr. Biswas feels helpless to help her and spends time with Alec to avoid the uselessness he feels around his mother. After six years, Tara decides that he should be trained as a pundit, and he goes to live with Pundit Jairam. Under Jairam's supervision, he is introduced to important Hindu scripture, learns Hindi, and is trained in the duties of the ritual of puja. After eight months, Mr. Biswas insults Jairam by eating some bananas that has been a gift, and then outrages him by desecrating a tree. He is sent back to Pagotes in disgrace.

Upon his return, Bipti is not particularly welcoming; she is distracted by her anger at Dehuti for running away with Tara's yard boy. Tara and Ajodha are more sympathetic, finding Mr. Biswas's embarrassment to be amusing, and comforting him as his mother should have.

Ajodha puts Mr. Biswas to work in a rum shop where he is under the supervision of Ajodha's brother Bhandat, and also where he shares a room with Bhandat's sons. Bhandat is inhospitable and suspicious, accusing Mr. Biswas of being a spy for Tara. He has a good reason to be worried, as he is actually stealing from the shop.

Bhandat has an explosive temper, fights with his wife and frightens his sons and Mr. Biswas. On one occasion when he is drunk, he accuses Mr. Biswas of stealing a dollar from him, beats him with a belt and cuts his eye. He goes back to Bipti, and they quarrel, Mr. Biswas bemoaning the fact that people can treat him badly because he has no father to look after him, and Bipti saying that she has no luck with her children, and with Mr. Biswas, she has the least. In anger, Mr. Biswas declares that he can get a job for himself and eventually have his own house, but he is not able to find any work that appeals to him. Defeated, he goes back and tells his mother he will kill himself; her response is that it would be the best thing for both of them.

Mr. Biswas goes to visit Dehuti and Ramchaud, the yard boy she has married, but their simple, tidy house and the change in Dehuti only depresses him. He realizes that he has also become separate from his sister. He finds Alec again, who has taken up sign painting. Mr. Biswas takes it up, and discovers it is something he enjoys, but the work is irregular.

Bhandat's wife has died in childbirth and Bhandat has abandoned his sons, Jagdat and Rabidat, to live with his mistress; Tara and Ajodha have taken in their nephews, and Mr. Biswas's reading duties have been taken over by Bhandat's sons. Now, Mr. Biswas,





unneded, does not hold the same status in the household. He is tired of the living conditions at the back trace and wants to move, but Bipti does not want to move. He starts to notice women, but there is always some feature that prevents him from being completely attracted to any particular woman. He secretly believes in love, but it embarrasses him, and he only speaks of it mockingly around his peers. He postpones any pleasure in life until he finds the romance and sweetness that he feels life will eventually bring to him.

## Analysis

In obtaining a birth certificate, Mr. Biswas effectively is born again into a new life as he enters a new world of education and new friendships. His unsuccessful experience with Pundit Jairam reveals his tendency to thoughtlessly follow his instincts and get himself into trouble, which becomes a recurring problem. The punishment for eating the bananas involves being forced to eat too many bananas, resulting in the stomach trouble that will plague Mr. Biswas for the rest of his life.

Returning in disgrace to his mother, he is disappointed that Bipti does not provide the reassurance that he so desperately needs, and instead finds comfort with his aunt and uncle. The relationship between Mr. Biswas and Bipti is strained, both of them wallowing in self-pity and blaming each other for their miserable lives. His depressing visit to his sister's house, along with his apparent replacement in Tara's house by Bhandat's sons makes him feel even more alienated from his family.

When his mother does not share his desire to move away from the back trace, his frustration with his status and his desire to have his own house lead him to get out and find a vocation for himself on his own. When he discovers he enjoys painting signs, he has taken another new path; this one will start him on fulfilling his destiny. Knowing that happiness awaits him someday, he lives with a sense of expectation. His romantic nature compels him to wait for the sweetness and romance that he is sure that life will ultimately supply, but he obstructs potential opportunities for romantic encounters with women by having impossibly high standards.

## Vocabulary

prolix, copious, depredations, deferentially, benignity, contentious, consecrated, pillaged, glutinous, intemperate, repartee, subsidiary, perfunctorily, allegory, abstraction, debauch, corrugated, querulous, ancillary, perversely, conciliated, rebuff, decorously, avuncular, deferred



## Chapter 3

### Summary

Mr. Biswas goes to Hanuman House to paint signs for the Tulsi store, and is enchanted by the smile of the girl at the counter. He works up the courage to write her a note that says, "I love you and I want to talk to you." When Shama smiles at the note, he interprets her response as mockery and thinks he has made a fool of himself. Ashamed, he tries to get the note back, but Mrs. Tulsi, Shama's mother, comes into the store to settle a dispute between Shama and a customer. She sees the note and takes it. She scolds Shama for playing a trick on the customer, and Shama bursts into tears, disintegrating Mr. Biswas's enchanting image of her, and he slinks out of the store.

He decides to go about his business as if nothing has happened, but after he finishes working, Mrs. Tulsi sends a message that she wants to see him before he leaves. When he sees her, she shows him the note, and he denies writing it. He cannot convince her, though, and she and Seth begin talking about marriage. They seem friendly, impressed at Mr. Biswas's Brahmin bloodline, and concerned that he does not feel forced to marry Shama, putting him on the defensive and compelling him to say that he is not being forced. Nevertheless, their subtle manipulation is very intimidating.

He realizes that, with this marriage, he will be losing any hope of romance, but he cannot devise a plan to get out of the situation. Mr. Biswas and Shama are married at the registrar's office, and Mr. Biswas's anticipation of a handsome dowry is crushed when Mrs. Tulsi tells him that they are not the sort of people who show off. He thinks that the lack of a dowry means they will give him something else, such as a job, house, or both, and prepares to receive these rewards.

He feels lost in the Tulsi family, with no one to talk to, but it does not occur to him to escape because he feels he has made a legal and moral commitment. For a while, he does not attempt to establish relations with Shama, and he even avoids talking to her. He realizes that the Tulsis married him to Shama simply because he is of the proper caste, but without money or position, they expect him to become a Tulsi.

He does not like the Tulsis; he rebels, finishes the signs he has been painting for the store and decides to finally escape, with Shama or without her. She cries, making a scene in front of the relatives, saying that Mr. Biswas is breaking her heart and creating trouble in the family. Biswas packs up his brushes and clothes and leaves in a temper, heading back to Pagotes.

Bipti has heard about the marriage and is joyful because he has married into a good family. Ajodha teases him, and Tara shows disappointment. He confides his unhappiness to Tara, hoping that she will tell him that he is free and does not have to go back. Instead, she goes to talk to the Tulsis and returns with news that they plan to set him up in a shop in a village called The Chase. Tara is reproachful toward Mr. Biswas



because the Tulsis told her that the marriage is a love match, referring to the note Mr. Biswas has written. Under Tara's inducement, Mr. Biswas concedes defeat and packs his things to go live with the Tulsis.

As a member of the Tulsi household, Mr. Biswas is uncooperative and troublesome. He works away from Hanuman House, and when he returns, Shama waits on him, serving him his food in his room. They are still not on friendly terms, but their culture expects certain duties from wives, and she is resigned to her Fate. Mr. Biswas takes these opportunities to express his scorn for the Tulsis, mocking them and giving them disparaging names. He takes his disrespectful behavior even further by spitting out the window.

Eventually, he gets tired of having only Shama to talk to, and he makes overtures of friendship to one of his new brothers-in-law, Govind, who is married to the sister they call C, for Chinta. Govind is wary of Mr. Biswas, but he listens to him talk, and occasionally offers advice, suggesting that he give up sign painting and become a driver on the estate. Mr. Biswas responds by saying his motto is to "paddle your own canoe."

This comes back to him when Seth asks to see him and confronts him with his attitude toward the family, mockingly calling him a paddler. Mr. Biswas realizes that Govind has been repeating their private conversations to Seth. Mrs. Tulsi's younger son, whom Mr. Biswas has named "the little god", is especially offended for his mother's sake and demands an apology, but Mrs. Tulsi indicates that this kind of apology cannot be sincere.

The confrontation with Seth, Mrs. Tulsi, and the little god is frustrating and unsettling as Mr. Biswas is once again put on the defensive. His shame at his ingratitude turns into anger at his own weakness, and he loses his temper and tells everyone to go to hell. He starts packing to leave again, but he feels foolish. As Seth's wife and Govind's wife come to beg him not to do anything in a temper, he realizes that he is being viewed by everyone else as defeated; the Tulsis have declared themselves enemies of Mr. Biswas, so he resolves to stay and fight.

Another family confrontation occurs over Mr. Biswas's interest in the Aryan ideas that are being advocated by missionaries from India. These ideas are in opposition to all the orthodox principles observed by the Tulsis. The problem intensifies when Misir, a friend who works for the newspaper, writes an inflammatory article that mentions Mr. Biswas's name and address. Seth says that Mr. Biswas is trying to disgrace the family, and in response, Mr. Biswas starts ridiculing the family ideals.

When Mr. Biswas leaves Christian booklets lying around, Seth confronts him again, and Mr. Biswas counter-attacks again, implying that the family's Hindu beliefs are being compromised by the sons' attendance at a Roman Catholic College. The argument escalates, with Seth threatening to hit Mr. Biswas, but Shama drags him away before any physical action can take place.



In the midst of all the commotion, Mrs. Tulsi faints, and all her daughters tend to her, following a complex ritual. Mr. Biswas and Shama continue their own argument, and Mr. Biswas stays away from the family until the next morning, when he acts as if nothing happened. When Mrs. Tulsi comes in, he asks her if she feels better, and she says she does. It seems as if everything is going to get back to normal when the younger god, Owad, comes in to perform the morning puja. Mrs. Tulsi tells Owad to take the camphor flame to his brother Mohun, but Mr. Biswas declines to participate, insulting Mrs. Tulsi once again.

After the conflict, Biswas initially feels elated, but his spirits fall when he leaves Hanuman House. He feels as if the campaign he is conducting against the Tulsis has gotten to a point where it seems pointless and degrading. He realizes that, in his present situation, he amounts to no more than a visitor or someone who upsets the established routine does.

Shama brings his dinner to him in the room again, and he reacts angrily to bad food served on a brass plate. When he shows his contempt by spitting out the window, he hits Owad, who is infuriated. Mr. Biswas spits out the window again, but this time he misses Owad. He continues to quarrel loudly with Shama about the food, and she tells him that he should not criticize the food that other people give him. He then takes the plate of food over to the window and spills it out; again, it lands on Owad.

This causes great outrage throughout the family, and Govind comes in and starts beating Mr. Biswas. The family gathers round, some of them begging for Govind to stop, and Owad urging him to kill Mr. Biswas, who is not fighting back. Finally Mr. Biswas is afraid that he really will be killed and cries out, which makes Govind stop the beating. The next day Seth tells Mr. Biswas to leave the house. He takes Shama, who is now pregnant, and they move to the shop in The Chase.

## Analysis

The irony in Mr. Biswas's life continues as his first note to a girl results in a marriage that he does not want. His infatuation does not last very long as he sees Mrs. Tulsi, and then sees Shama crying. Just as he is pretending as if the note was never written, he is put in a circumstance where he does not have the strength of character nor the social experience to extricate himself, and he suddenly finds he is a married man living in another house of strangers. He becomes rebellious, trying to keep himself separate from the Tulsi family in an effort to hold on to his own identity.

As he continues to find himself in confrontational situations with Seth, Mrs. Tulsi, and other members of the family, he feels that he is being constantly manipulated, and he lashes out by saying and doing outrageous things. The effect is most often clownish, and the family considers him a buffoon. However, dumping his food on Owad is the final insult, and Mr. Biswas is at last expelled from the house but not the family, nor the family business. For better or worse, he is a Tulsi son-in-law.



## Vocabulary

impregnable, façade, amplitude, circumspectly, prognathous, complicity, bluchers, disparaging, maudlin, lucid, suppliant, elucidated, placate, ruminant, fastidiousness, acrimonious, supercilious, disputation, piqued, precipitating, contrition, decrepit, derelict, flambeau, feckless



# Chapter 4

## Summary

The shop in The Chase is dirty and rundown, and Mr. Biswas is distressed to see his savings dissolving as they buy necessary household items and stock for the small food shop. Mr. Biswas tries to be optimistic, saying that the place could be built up. Shama is unhappy and shows some hostility toward Mr. Biswas during the move, but determines to make the best of things.

Away from the Tulsis, Shama's attitude improves and they start getting along better. Both feel the situation is temporary, and Mr. Biswas does pretty well as a shopkeeper. When Shama wants to have the house blessed by her brother-in-law, the pundit Hari, Mr. Biswas resists at first, but eventually gives in to Shama's sighing, gloomy silences, and nagging.

The ceremony is conducted in a tent in the yard, and the Tulsis leave Hanuman House to attend the festivities. Among her family, Shama again becomes a stranger to her husband. Mr. Biswas complains to Mrs. Tulsi about the shortcomings of the property, telling her that he needs more room. Instead of offering to help him, she suggests dividing the room with sugar sacks, and Mr. Biswas responds with his usual sarcasm by saying that everyone should just live in coal barrels instead of building houses. Again he feels useless and small, and he thinks about leaving Shama and the Tulsis but does not know what he would do.

After the house blessing, Mr. Biswas begins to have money problems. He spent a great deal on the food for the festivities, and now a new shop is beginning to attract his old customers. Additionally, he has sold to too many customers on credit and they have not settled their accounts.

In anticipation of her baby's birth, Shama goes back to Hanuman House to wait. Anticipating a boy, Mr. Biswas compiles a list of boys' names, but the baby is a girl, and he is given no part in naming his own daughter. Seth and Hari have given her the name of Basso, but Shama intends to call her Savi, rejecting Mr. Biswas's suggestion that they call her Lakshmi.

When Shama returns to The Chase after three weeks, Mr. Biswas feels happy to have his family with him. One day a man named Moti comes into the shop and paints a terrifying picture of Mr. Biswas's financial future if the people who owe him money do not settle their accounts. Moti offers to connect Mr. Biswas with Seebaran, a lawyer who can provide assistance, and asks for five dollars to show he is serious, with no mention of further cost. Shama is angry at this tactic, they quarrel, and Shama takes Savi and goes back to Hanuman House. Once Seebaran has sent out letters, Mr. Biswas receives payment from some of his customers, but Mungroo, the most troublesome nonpayer, counteracts by bringing Mr. Biswas up for damaging his credit. It costs him



one hundred dollars to call off the action, and another one hundred dollars in lawyer fees. He has to go into debt to cover the expense, and it takes him several years to pay it off completely.

Three years after Savi was born, Shama has a son. Mr. Biswas hasn't prepared names for this baby, so he agrees to Seth's suggestion of Anand. Savi is sent to stay at Hanuman House and Mr. Biswas worries that someone might be mistreating her. When they put a brace on her legs, he worries that it may be some form of torture, but he finds that it is intended to straighten out her bowlegs. Mr. Biswas has never investigated the possibility that anything could be done, so his attitude to Hanuman House changes.

He visits more often, holding his tongue and trying to win favor. He gradually becomes accepted, and even enjoys a certain license, being invited to contribute to discussions with his comical commentary. He enjoys a new status in the house and begins to feel more comfortable and self-assured at Hanuman House while feeling more of a nonentity at the shop. He still privately abuses the Tulsis to Shama, and she says he is a hypocrite for not saying those things to their faces.

Pregnant again, Shama tires of life at The Chase and wants Mr. Biswas to close the shop and move back to Hanuman House. They argue for days on end, and a pronounced hostility develops between them. At one point, he hits her, and they are both astonished. She leaves, and he waits for her to make the first move toward reconciliation, but he does not hear anything from her.

When he calculates that his third baby is almost due, he closes the shop and goes to Hanuman House. He gets a cool reception from Shama, and she introduces him to his baby daughter Myna. When Shama asks if he is going back that night, he knows he hasn't intended to go back. Seth asks what they will do with the shop, teasing him for being taken in by Seebaran. He suggests "insuranburn," which would effectively get rid of the shop and get him seventy five to a hundred dollars for the goods. Seth offers to employ Mr. Biswas at Green Vale, where the Tulsis have a sugar estate that needs a driver to manage the laborers. Shama begs him to take the position, and Seth says he will arrange the insuranburn.

## Analysis

Away from the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas and Shama enjoy a better relationship. Although she does not have any power of her own in the marriage, she is able to get Mr. Biswas to agree with her ideas through passive aggressive behavior and persistence, so she gets her way and the house is officially blessed. Ironically, the blessing seems to have the opposite of the desired effect when Mr. Biswas and the shop immediately begin to suffer financial problems.

When Mrs. Tulsi makes overtures of reconciliation during the house blessing festivities, Mr. Biswas uses the opportunity to complain about the poor conditions in which he and Shama are living. He has not forgotten that, deprived of a dowry, he is still entitled to



some sort of recompense for marrying into the family. Mrs. Tulsi offers no real help for his complaints, and her manner as she talks to him, as always, makes him feel powerless, as though he is under a spell. Once the spell is broken, as always, he reacts in anger and makes outrageously absurd comments that offend her.

As he struggles to get back to financial health, he makes another bad decision by agreeing to use the services of Seebaran to help him collect his debts. This is a decision that backfires, like so many of his decisions, and it puts him into even more debt. Seth's idea to solve the problem by burning the store and collecting the insurance suggests that there is a strain of corruption in the righteous Tulsi family.

## Vocabulary

lorries, rhomboid, timorous, lymphatic, pendulous, declaimed, repository, assiduously, ,  
evanescent, obliquely, lugubriousness, assize, facetious, sated, iconoclasm,  
waggishness, deputed, hypochondria, invective, magnanimous, ineptitude, jalousie,  
febrifuges, effacing





# Chapter 5

## Summary

At Green Vale, Mr. Biswas is once again sharing living space with strangers, this time in a barracks with eleven other families. He is more determined than ever to get a house of his own. He is ineffective in his job overseeing laborers on the estate, and they mock him. He is unhappy and has more quarrels with Shama about the situations he keeps getting into because of her family. Shama goes back to Hanuman House and continues to live there much of the time.

He buys an elaborate dollhouse as a Christmas present for Savi, but the extravagance of the gift causes conflict among the other families and Shama feels compelled to destroy the dollhouse in order to keep peace. Mr. Biswas is enraged when he finds out and calls her a bitch. Indignantly, he takes Savi back to Green Vale with him, but her life is lonely, as he has to leave her by herself when he is working. After a week, Savi goes back to begin school, and Shama tries to reconcile, explaining why she had to break the dollhouse. Mr. Biswas shares his plans of having their own house and tells her that he will buy her a gold brooch when it is finished. After Shama and the children go back to Hanuman House, he is comforted by the feeling that he has claimed Savi.

When Mr. Biswas is alone at the barracks at Green Vale, he begins to have feelings of terror at night. The fear is reinforced when Seth reclaims the land that some of the laborers have been renting and warns Mr. Biswas to watch out for trouble. Mr. Biswas notices the laborers' attitudes toward him have degenerated to hostility, and he begins to imagine all the ways he can be hurt.

Hanuman House is undergoing many changes: the older god, Shekhar, has married and moved away.

Mrs. Tulsi lives in Port of Spain with Owad during the week so that he will not be alone in the city. She buys one house to live in and two other houses to rent. When she is away from Hanuman House, there is a great deal of squabbling and disharmony among the sisters. Anand is growing to be a very shy boy, and his shyness to use the bathroom at school causes him to humiliate himself. Mr. Biswas asks him if he wants to come live with him at Green Vale, but Anand is too shy to say anything, so Mr. Biswas goes back to the barracks alone and locks his door.

Seth tells Mr. Biswas that he can build a house on the Tulsi land. He has saved up a hundred dollars, and decides to try and borrow more money from Tara and Ajodha. Once he is in their house, their warmth toward him and their criticism of Bhandat's sons, who are always asking for money, discourage him from making his request. He decides to build the house in increments, adding to it as he saves more money.



With the help of the builder, Mr. Mclean, he designs a simple house, and construction begins. Because of lack of money, he has to make some compromises on his original ideas. Shama comes to see the house under construction, criticizing Mr. Biswas for trying to compete with people who have more money. She says she will not live in the house unless Hari comes to bless it. Mr. Biswas remembers the bad times he went through at the shop in The Chase after Hari's blessing, but agrees to have the house blessed to avoid more quarreling.

The construction of the house is stalled when the materials run out; then Seth offers some old galvanized roofing from the old brick factory for five dollars. Savi and Anand both object to this roofing because it will make their house look like a shack, but Mr. Biswas agrees to take it for three dollars. Mr. Mclean says that he can work with the material, and optimistically provides more ideas for finding cheap materials. More of the house is built, making adjustments because of the inferior quality of the materials, and then construction stalls again until more money is available for materials.

With the dispossessed laborers becoming more and more unpleasant toward him, Mr. Biswas starts sleeping with a cutlass and a poui stick at the side of his bed, and after hearing footsteps outside his room, he starts keeping the oil lamp burning all night. He gets a puppy for protection, but the puppy, Tarzan, turns out to be a friendly dog that is only a threat to the neighbors' chickens.

His imagination makes him progressively more anxious, and his efforts to calm himself and enjoy the promise of every moment are ineffectual. He is constantly questioning himself, wondering why he is so afraid. He is afraid to go see his family because he will have to deceive them and make them believe he is a whole person. When there is a fire on someone's land; he leads the fire-fighting efforts, and later realizes that he never questioned himself during the commotion.

He begins to be apathetic about the house, feeling that the Tulsis now have too much of a hand in it, considering the galvanized iron and Hari's blessing. He starts having bad dreams.

Close to Christmas time, Shama sends word that she is bringing the children to Greenvale to visit their father, and Mr. Biswas is filled with dread. He thinks he will kill Savi, Anand, and himself, but he does not plan to harm Shama and Myna because he does not care about them. Once they arrive, he acknowledges the absurdity of the plan, but he experiences extreme fatigue, and stays in bed, not wanting anyone to touch him.

His irrationality deepens as his family continues to stay with him, and he becomes afraid to leave the room. He pretends he has malaria and avoids talking directly to Shama. Finally, she confronts him, and he says he has "lots of little black clouds" on his mind. An argument begins and escalates, and he yells at Shama to get out, opening the window as if he plans to jump. As she approaches him in alarm, he kicks at her, hitting her in the belly.



Shama prepares to take the children away from him and back to Hanuman House, but Anand decides to stay with his father so that he will not be left alone. Once Shama is gone, Mr. Biswas no longer feels fatigued, and the old restlessness returns. He makes toys for Anand, and teaches him about science and God. He tells Anand that God is his father and Mr. Biswas is just a man he knows. With Anand as his companion, Mr. Biswas finds the confidence to move away from the continuing unease of the barracks and into the only finished room of his house. He hopes that the change of living conditions coinciding with the change of a new year will bring about a change in his state of mind.

Living in the unfinished house is problematic and full of inconveniences. Asphalt dripping from the patched holes in the roof reminds Mr. Biswas of snakes, and he starts to have dreams about snakes. He feels the trees around the house can conceal things, and his fears multiply. He develops a new fear that Anand will want to leave him and he will be alone. After an unpleasant encounter with two men who supposedly have come from Seth looking for jobs, Anand wakes up and finds that Tarzan has been killed and left on the doorstep. He insists on going back to Hanuman House, but a storm blows in and he's forced to stay.

At first, the storm makes everything intimate and cozy. During the storm, the house starts leaking more and more, and Mr. Biswas gets more and more agitated. As the storm grows violent, Mr. Biswas becomes more and more terrified, believing that people are coming to get him. The storm tears off part of the roof, a window is thrown open, and they are left in darkness. Anand is screaming, terrified, but Mr. Biswas is not able to reassure him. Just when everything seems to be at its most hopeless, Anand sees someone from the barracks coming through the storm with a light, and they are saved.

## Analysis

Living in shared quarters with laborers makes Mr. Biswas even more dissatisfied with his situation in life. In his new position as driver, he earns more money, but he does not receive any respect from the laborers under his supervision, which irritates him even more. Along with his status, his relationship with his family continues to have its ups and downs, but he and Shama actually seem to be beginning to enjoy brief moments of affection.

He feels vulnerable in the barracks, first when the laborers show disrespect by mocking him, then when they show real hostility after Seth dispossesses them from their land. He takes precautions to protect himself from harm. With Mrs. Tulsi away from Hanuman House during the week, the house falls into chaos, with sisters squabbling to have the power of the house.

Concerned about Anand's shyness, Mr. Biswas thinks that getting him away from the house to stay with him at Green Vale could be a solution to both their problems, but he will not press the issue when Anand will not say what he would like to do.



The beginning of construction on his house inspires positive feelings of excitement in Mr. Biswas, but after Hari performs another house blessing at Shama's insistence, and as more and more concessions are made because of finances and Tulsi "assistance," his enthusiasm fades and he begins to feel disinterested in how the house will turn out. His fears continue to grow, but during the period when he is directing the firefighting, the brief moments when he does not feel self-doubt makes him believe that he will get better.

Mr. Biswas's nervous condition turns critical when Shama and the children come to visit before Christmas. Their presence puts a strain on him as he attempts to hide his mental instability. The effort wears him out to the point that he has almost no strength to even get out of bed. He fears for anyone to touch him, in case he should give himself away by physical contact.

Of course, his behavior only arouses Shama's suspicions, and when she attempts to discover what is wrong, a confrontation results, and the argument becomes bitter and dangerous. Anand's decision to stay with his father so that he will not be left alone shows that he seems to have a precocious insight into his father's situation. His stay with Mr. Biswas forges a bond between them, but everything is jeopardized when they move into the unfinished house and Mr. Biswas's worries and anxieties continue to grow. During the storm, as Mr. Biswas sees his house assaulted by nature, he reaches his breaking point and is unable to act to save himself or his son.

## Vocabulary

austere, providential, taciturn, solicitously, duplicity, cambered, pyromaniacal, torpid, castors, ostentatiously, soldered, petulance, abatement, elegiac, euphemism, scantlings, distended, recalcitrant, obsequious, subsidence, palpitated, crepitation, tortuous



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Mr. Biswas and Anand are brought back to Hanuman House, and Mr. Biswas is taken to the Blue Room to recover. The Tulsis are compassionate as they tend to him, but among themselves, they talk about his “madness.” He appreciates the solid feeling of the house, and he feels secure, with only flashes of memories about what had happened in the past. The doctor comes and assesses Mr. Biswas as having a nervous condition and a certain vitamin deficiency. He rejects the suggestion that Mr. Biswas should be certified and prescribes some vitamins and nutritional supplements.

Seth tells Mr. Biswas that his house has apparently been burned down by the laborers. Instead of being shocked, Mr. Biswas feels grateful to Seth, and his remaining anxiety fades away.

Shama gives birth to another girl, but Mr. Biswas does not go to see her. As he recuperates, he still experiences occasional fits of anxiety, but he is strong enough to overcome them. He speculates about his future, realizing that he’s no better off than when he was seventeen, with no vocation and no reliable means of earning a living. Now, after the despair of the days at Green Vale, he has a different method for measuring happiness and realizes that, no matter what happens to him, he will provide for his wife and children.

When his money starts to run out, Seth tells him that he needs to decide to do something. He adds that Mrs. Tulsi and the little god are coming home, implying that he will have to leave the Blue Room and move to another part of the house. Mr. Biswas decides to leave Hanuman House, not feeling any connection to Shama, the new baby, or his other children. He feels that his past has been “a series of cheating accidents” and real life is still waiting for him. He waits for the children to leave for school, and then he sets out to begin again, keeping his fear under control.

## Analysis

Mr. Biswas is able to recover from his condition as he is removed from his responsibilities, placed in a secure, comfortable space away from the rest of the world, and tended to by the Tulsis. He is able to maintain some distance from the fears that have been tormenting him, but there is still a sense of unease. He realizes that his basic situation has not improved, but now he looks at it from the perspective that he does not need to worry about his children’s future or well-being. As he runs out of money and Mrs. Tulsi’s return to Hanuman House is anticipated, he makes the decision to try again to achieve the life he has always envisioned. Leaving Hanuman House, he is careful to avoid being seen by any of the children; this could be a show of cowardice or strength, as he wants to avoid confrontations, explanations, or goodbyes.

## Vocabulary

melodramatic, calamitous, inscrutable, verandah, Ramayana, certified, thaumaturgy, embrasure, perquisites , lorry



# Chapter 7

## Summary

Now thirty-one years old, Mr. Biswas is unsure of where he is going as he leaves Arwacas. Purely by chance, he ends up on a bus to Port of Spain, the city where Dehuti lives with her husband Ramchaud. They welcome him, and are sincerely happy when he says he has left Shama. Ramchaud tells him to take it easy and get over his illness, but Mr. Biswas begins to feel his freedom is becoming a burden, and he gets restless again. He decides he needs to do something, and fear spasms surprise him. He discovers that he cannot ignore the past, and the wholeness of his mind returns; unfortunately, the stomach pains, which had not plagued him for months, also return. Passing by the office of The Sentinel, he decides to go in and ask for a job. After painting some signs for the editor, Mr. Burnet, he is given a trial as a writer for a month, and then taken on as a reporter. He acquires a degree of fame in his capacity as the Scarlet Pimpernel, and is greeted as a celebrity when he goes back to Hanuman House, where he finally meets his newest daughter, Kamla, and reconciles with his family. He tries to entice Shama to come and live in Port of Spain with him, but she resists. Mrs. Tulsi offers to rent them some rooms in her house, and Mr. Biswas feels he is having a streak of good fortune. Savi and Anand have to be enticed by the offerings of the big city to join their parents in Port of Spain.

Living in the same house, Mr. Biswas's relationship with Owad and Mrs. Tulsi improves. Within his own family, Mr. Biswas establishes a strict routine, calling it training. Shama's job is to file the stories Mr. Biswas writes and keep accounts of household expenses. She also collects rent from Mrs. Tulsi's tenants which she sometimes borrows from when the household finances are getting low. Mr. Biswas buys a second hand typewriter, and tries writing for English and American periodicals to make it pay for itself. His first attempts are rejected, and he does not continue to pursue this endeavor. He does not use the typewriter for a while, and then attempts to write a short story based on his own life. There are different variations of the story, but they all feature a man who is his own age and has four children. In the story, he is always attracted to a young, slim heroine who is unable to bear children. The stories are never finished, and he crumples most of them up and throws them away. Shama, in filing the stories, reads them and Mr. Biswas is horrified and ashamed to remember his sensuous descriptions of the heroines. He stops writing on the typewriter again and impulsively paints the typewriter yellow.

As Owad becomes of age, Mrs. Tulsi decides that he should go to England to study to become a doctor. Shama confides to Biswas that Shekhar had had dreams of going to Cambridge, but Seth had been against it. Among the sisters, this news causes some irritation toward Seth.

Shekhar comes for a weekend and Mr. Biswas bonds with the two brothers. They go to the sea and Anand disappears; Shekhar dives to find him and they are able to



resuscitate him. Anand writes a composition in school about the terror of the experience and receives twelve marks out of ten from the teacher. Mr. Biswas reads the composition and wants to get closer to Anand to make up for the terrible experience. Anand will not come and sit with him, and Mr. Biswas loses his temper. Instead of getting closer to Anand, he beats him. When Mr. Biswas meets with Anand's teacher and headmaster, they agree that Anand should be placed in the exhibition class. Mr. Biswas immediately arranges for Anand to have private tutoring.

## Analysis

When Mr. Biswas is practically abducted by the conductor on the Port of Spain bus, the decision of where he should go is virtually made for him. Once he has arrived in the city, he feels excited and free, as a world of possibilities seems to open up before him. His freedom makes him restless, as he is once again ready to make something of himself.

He is well suited to his position as a writer at *The Sentinel* since the editor requires sensationalist stories that will stir up the emotions of the readers. Once he has achieved a degree of success, he feels ready to go back and reclaim his family. The opportunity to share Mrs. Tulsi's house is a stroke of good luck, and Mr. Biswas feels as though he has finally achieved some status in the Tulsi family.

His short story and his attempts to write for periodicals indicate that he has some ambition to go even further, but the ambition does not appear to be very deep-seated, since he gives up so easily. As he becomes more attentive to his appearance, it appears that he is acknowledging that he has come up in the world, but the fact that he ultimately feels rejected shows that he still feels like an outsider, in spite of appearances.

With Owad going abroad to study medicine, it begins to appear that he is the favored son, especially when it is revealed that Shekhar was not allowed to follow the same dream. Mr. Biswas's new closeness with the two young men that he formerly tormented illustrates the change that has taken place in his feelings for the Tulsis and their attitude toward him. His farewell to Owad is emotional.

The near-tragic experience with Anand also brings about changes. Having nearly lost him, Mr. Biswas tries to get closer, but Anand shuts him out. The affront angers Mr. Biswas, and he expresses his anger as so many of the people around him do, through flogging. The composition Anand writes shows such potential that Mr. Biswas immediately begins to prepare Anand for academic success. He starts him on a regimen of dairy milk and prunes, which is how the little gods were fed to improve their brains, and he spends some of his sparse income on private tutoring. Whatever ambition he has had for himself is now shifted to his only son.





## Vocabulary

Solicitude, macabre, ostracized, disdained, in extremis, invective, aggrieved, fanatical, reviled, ewer, , deprecatory, convolutions, expostulations, retainers, defected, precarious, dredging, affronted, ribald



# Chapter 8

## Summary

With Owad studying abroad, Mrs. Tulsi has no reason to stay in Port of Spain, so she goes back to Hanuman House, but she has lost her vitality and is not the same person that she was. Without her direction, the house is in a state of disorder. Christmas at Hanuman house is depressing for the children; they get nothing in their stockings, Mrs. Tulsi does not play her usual role on Christmas morning, and the atmosphere is sullen. Savi says she will never go back.

At The Sentinel, Mr. Burnet is sacked, and extreme changes are made in the way the paper is published. Mr. Biswas is afraid he will also be let go because of his close associations to the “frivolous excesses” for which the paper is known. The new regime is more interested in simple, accurate reporting of news, no more scandal, shock, or sensationalism. In the retraining and reassignment of jobs, Mr. Biswas is assigned to cemeteries, unimportant cricket matches, and Court Shorts, which he feels is more like filling out a form than real writing. His name is not in the paper any more, and he is glad.

He grows very resentful of the new rules and policies and talks about how they can push him too far; he'll publish his own magazine and sell it himself. At home, he eases up on the strictness of the routine and occasionally has Anand call in sick for him, declaring that they can just sack him if they want to, but at the same time taking care not to overdo the absences. He finds solace in the grotesques of Dickens, and works with Dickens to help Anand develop a higher-level vocabulary; he does not want Anand to turn out like him.

The war is on, money is becoming even tighter, and Mr. Biswas is unhappy. It is a struggle for him to write about serious subjects he does not have a feeling for, and he knows his work is not good. He gets a raise, but it barely covers expenses. The quality of food deteriorates even more, instigating quarrels between Mr. Biswas and Shama. When Anand tries to help, Mr. Biswas laughs at him, making him angry and humiliated. Anand is getting very unhappy with the high expectations and greater work load he is having to deal with in the exhibition class and begins contriving ways to avoid going to school. He even petitions to go through the brahminical initiation so that his shaved head will be an excuse to avoid school, but once his head is shaved, he does not even want to leave the house.

Mr. Biswas comes home one day to see that his rose bushes have been torn up at the direction of Seth, who plans to build a shelter for his lorries on the site. They engage in a heated exchange of words. Seth says that Mr. Biswas would never have made it without Seth's help, and he should show gratitude. Mr. Biswas goes into a frenzy and storms through the house throwing things around, but in a way that is calculated to cause minimal damage.



## Analysis

As changes at the Tulsi house make the Biswas family uncomfortable, the changes at The Sentinel make Mr. Biswas unhappy. Even as he receives new assignments, he fears that he will be sacked just as Mr. Burnett was. The different style of writing preferred by the new regime feels stifling to him, leaving no freedom for creativity. Even as his status improves and his work life presents opportunities for diversion that he is not able to experience at home, he maintains a low opinion of himself, and works to develop Anand's intellect so that he will not turn out to be like his father. While Anand does not object to the basic premise of a good education, he finds the requirements of the exhibition class to be overwhelming and feels he is missing his childhood.

The fact that Seth is planning to shelter his Lorries away from Hanuman House is an indication that there could be some trouble between him and the Tulsis. The exchange between Seth and Mr. Biswas is evidence that Seth believes Mr. Biswas would never have amounted to anything if he and the Tulsis had not taken him into their lives. Mr. Biswas's resulting rage is more constrained than it has been in the past, indicating that it is not in his heart to inflict damage on his family or the Tulsis, in spite of the things he says about them.

## Vocabulary

cantankerous, invalid, flogged, arrogant, insatiable, intonation, perverse, zestfully, whimsicality, cowed, sonorous, effusive, denigrations, quail



## Chapter 9

### Summary

The Tulsis have suddenly decided to move to Shorthills and live in a grand estate with a cricket field and a swimming pool. Seth and his family have left, and the land is being neglected and crops are being burned. Shama wants to join her family in the move, but Mr. Biswas and the children want to stay in Port of Spain. Shama sulks and her relatives come to stay with them occasionally, putting more pressure on Mr. Biswas.

When Mrs. Tulsi raises the rent, Shama shows him how the expenses are getting out of control, reasoning that they will be able to save money by moving to Shorthills and eventually be able to buy their own house. Mrs. Tulsi, energized again, persuades him to visit the estate, which he finds to be just as nice as it was described, except for a few things that need fixing.

When Mr. Biswas talks about going home, Mrs. Tulsi convinces him that he is home. They move to the estate and find that it is even more crowded than Hanuman House because some more sisters have moved in, as well as some married grandchildren. The Biswas family is given two upstairs rooms for their quarters, across the hall from a brother-in-law that Mr. Biswas has not met. Mr. Biswas refers to this brother-in-law as Mr. W.C. Tuttle, after the author of some books he has in his room.

Without Seth to direct things, repairs are slow, and the house begins deteriorating from neglect. Mr. Biswas reconciles the neglect of the house with the knowledge that he is independent of the Tulsis because he has his own job off of the estate; the estate is also an insurance against the loss of his job. To supplement his income, he takes small amounts of fruit from the trees on the estate to sell in town.

When plans are made for the marriage of seven nieces, the swimming pool is filled in so that a huge tent can be erected for the wedding. After the festivities, the neglect of the house continues and some of the sons-in-law, mainly Govind and Tuttle, begin to plunder the resources on the estate, selling them and keeping the money for them. Mrs. Tulsi has withdrawn again, and the attitude around the estate is every man for himself. The widows band together to develop ventures which generate some income, focusing unsuccessfully on the American soldiers who have begun to appear in the area.

Life for the children of the estate is miserable, since they still attend school in Port of Spain and transportation issues require them to wake up at 4:00 A.M. to be able to leave the house in Tuttle's lorry at quarter to five. Eventually an old second-hand car is purchased, but it turns out to be unreliable, breaking down frequently and requiring the children to get out and push. They sell the car and get another one, the children crowding into the car and filling up the dicky seat.



On weekends, instead of resting after the week's many challenges, the children have to pull weeds and gather fruit. Sleeping arrangements for the children change from day to day. Animosities start between the children, and Anand develops a sense of satire, which causes the others to leave him alone.

As he sees the terrible conditions having an adverse affect his own children, Mr. Biswas starts looking around for a site on which to build his house. In the meantime, several members of the family die, including Hari, the pundit, and Padma, Seth's wife. Without Hari to conduct the spiritual business of the family, men and boys of the family take over the duties of the puja, but there is no consistency. Without Hari to say prayers for Mrs. Tulsis and the house, she believes the virtue and the luck have gone out of the family.

Different members of the family take on different moneymaking schemes with different degrees of success. The widows' attempts are always unsuccessful, and they do men's work around the estate. The estate continues to deteriorate as the land is eroded, the resources are scavenged, and animals die. Seth is happy at the Tulsis' misfortunes, saying that they are being punished for rejecting and slandering him.

When Chinta creates a stir when she announces that eighty dollars has been stolen from her room, she ultimately lays blame on the Biswas family. They become subject to persecution in the house and beg to move. Mr. Biswas uses up all his savings to build a house and they move in, but are still unhappy because it is in an unfinished state.

Mr. Biswas spends time making improvements on the house himself, laboring to bring it up to the standard that will satisfy his family. He sends for his mother, who agrees to visit for two weeks, creating a memory that is more precious to Mr. Biswas than any memories of his mother. After her visit, there is a botched attempt to burn the cleared wood on the land around the house, resulting in a fire that later rekindles in the middle of the night. Tulsis come to help fight the fire, and the house is saved from burning. Afterwards, Mr. Biswas makes jokes about charcoal and talks about how it is the best kind of fertilizer.

## Analysis

Once again, Mr. Biswas is manipulated into living with the Tulsis in their estate at Shorthills. Without Seth's direction and planning, the haven that was anticipated becomes a nightmare of neglect, hazard, and inconvenience. Mr. Biswas is only able to tolerate it because he does not feel as though he is truly a part of it, and he is able to save his money.

Children's lives are stressful and unstable as their sleep routines are consistently disrupted and their school experience is clouded by the experience of trying to get there. As the men on the estate become opportunistic and self-interested, they do not contribute to the efforts to maintain the house and grounds. Consequently, the widows are forced to do the work that should be done by the men, with the results being substandard.



While the Biswas family is barely tolerating the conditions, Savi's bad experiences with school transportation ultimately prompt Mr. Biswas to earnestly consider building a house again. The situation with Chinta's missing eighty dollars reinforces his motivation and he builds his house a distance away from the estate house. Although the house has its flaws, Mr. Biswas works to make it right for his family. A bonus benefit of the house is that it provides Mr. Biswas with two valuable weeks to reacquaint himself with his mother, leaving him with the only memory of her that is not tinged with regret. In the aftermath of the fire, Mr. Biswas's jokes conceal whatever feelings he is having.

## Vocabulary

clandestine, lianas, punctiliously, escarpment, patois, terminus, ammoniac, dereliction, dicky seat, derisive, sooty, pathos, purgative, bush, idyllic, verge, conflagrations



# Chapter 10

## Summary

When Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain is vacated again, Mr. Biswas, Tuttle, and Govind take the opportunity to move their families into rooms of the house, along with Basdai, one of the widows. The Tuttles take up most of the house, leaving Mr. Biswas with two rooms. Basdai inhabits the servants' quarters, which are outside of the house.

Rivalry among the families begins as they squabble over the behavior of their children, and acquire new, modern possessions. Govind and Tuttle squabble over garage space.

Back at Shorthills, parents are becoming concerned about their children's education and start sending them to the Port of Spain house to have easier access to the school. Basdai takes the children in as boarders, and they eat on the steps and sleep under the house. With more residents, tight quarters become tighter, and noise and cleanliness become a problem.

Mr. Biswas says the Tulsi family has gotten him into a hole, and he keeps his address secret from work. Soon the house is attracting attention, and Mrs. Tulsi sends word that she plans on making changes to the house. The actual changes, however, are very superficial; the most effective transformation occurs when the wire fence is replaced by a brick wall so that outsiders cannot see into the area.

Mr. Biswas considers work a haven as he escapes the turmoil of the house to fulfill his new duties interviewing applicants for the Deserving Destitute Fund. On the other hand, Anand is under more pressure at school as he prepares for the exhibition examination. In view of all the effort that Anand is making, Mr. Biswas makes a pledge to get him his own bicycle someday.

On the day of the examination, Anand is prepared with supplies, charms, and the unwanted attentions of his family. When he is finished with the examination, he initially feels confident, but then remembers that he forgot to complete an entire section and realizes he has failed. He rejects Mr. Biswas's attempts to cheer him up.

Mr. Biswas gets word that his mother Bipti has died, and the family goes to his brother Pratap's house, which is crowded with mourners that Mr. Biswas doesn't know. Dehuti is there, distraught with grief, having been estranged from her family because of her marriage. Biswas feels a sense of loss for the past that should have been if it had not been for his marriage and his children.

When they get back to Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas is remote and withdrawn, writing feverishly. Shama approaches him to find out what is bothering him and he tells her that the doctor who signed Bipti's death certificate, Dr. Rameshwar, has been disrespectful and abusive, feeling imposed upon to write the death certificate for a peasant. Mr. Biswas has been trying to write a letter to express his objection to the doctor's treatment



of his mother and the family, and make him realize that he was in the wrong, but the letter has not been coming out the way he wants. Shama and the children share Mr. Biswas's outrage, and give him strength. With Anand's help, he writes the perfect letter on the yellow typewriter.

When the results of the examination are published, Mr. Biswas learns that Anand placed third and will be awarded one of the twelve exhibitions. The Tuttles present Anand with congratulatory gifts and their son asks Anand to be his tutor. In the midst of all this happy news, a man comes into The Sentinel office with an envelope for Mr. Biswas. It contains the letter he wrote to Dr. Rameshwar, and Biswas regards the doctor's returning of the letter as acknowledgment that he has accepted responsibility for his error in judgment.

## Analysis

Moving back to the Port of Spain house should be a happy event, but now there are too many others, and the addition of the readers and learners who are sent from Shorthills to board with Basdai make the situation intolerable. Mr. Biswas lives in two worlds as he travels between the chaos of his living quarters to the structure of his job, and he embraces opportunities to escape the house and spend time in other places.

As Anand prepares to take the exhibition examination, Mr. Biswas is eager to be supportive, promising him a bicycle and attempting to cheer him up when he believes he has failed.

Bipti's death creates mixed emotions in Mr. Biswas; he feels that he has never really known his mother and has never loved her, and he grieves for the past that should have been. When he learns that the doctor did not want to waste time signing the death certificate of a peasant, he is hurt and outraged for his mother's sake and he wants to finally honor her. As he tries to write a letter to the doctor, he has trouble expressing his feelings in a coherent, rational way until he gets the support of his family.

The family is becoming stronger as a unit, and they are becoming more important to him. When Mr. Biswas learns that Anand received the third best results on the examination his emotions go beyond pride and joy. Anand's success reflects on the whole family, and they are all viewed in a new light by the other members of the household. The reader may also be left to wonder whether Anand would have placed first if he had remembered to complete the section he left out, which is something Mr. Biswas does not seem to have considered. When Mr. Biswas receives the doctor's apparent acknowledgment of blame, his happiness is complete.

## Vocabulary

penitentially, maudlin, morris suite, joiner, virulently, homilies, assiduous, perfunctory, relegating, copra, inanities, mellifluously, rubric, misanthrope, transitory, multifarious, privation, unmitigated, dissident, invigilator, mortification, palled, vociferous, adumbrated





# Chapter 11

## Summary

Anand has entered college, and Mr. Biswas has changed without realizing it. The shifts in his ambitions have made him feel that he cannot change his circumstances after all, and he has “lost the vision of the house.” He sinks into despair “as into the void which, in his imagining, has always stood for the life he has yet to live.” He becomes withdrawn, but doesn’t have the fear and anxiety as he did before now.

Life goes on; then, when he is sent on an interview at a new government department, the Community Welfare Department, he is offered a job as Community Welfare Officer, for fifty dollars a month more than he is making at The Sentinel. He fantasizes a position where he will be placed in many supervisory positions, winning the confidence and devotion of peasants and juvenile delinquents.

The actual requirements of Mr. Biswas’s new job are to survey an area, having residents fill out a questionnaire. After collecting information he has to analyze it, this requires working late at home. He complains about all the work, and Shama points out that everywhere he goes it is the same. On top of his salary, he receives money for travel and subsistence pay, so he can afford to send Savi to a better school, buy better food, and treat Anand’s asthma. He also buys a new suit and does not save as much as he had hoped.

When the Department comes under attack—his first experience of public attack—he starts to worry about his job. The better his situation becomes, the more vulnerable he feels, worried that it is all too good to last. As he enters a new phase of his job, he is given a car on a “painless government loan” and now has to take driving lessons and apply for a driver’s license. They surprise everyone at the house with their new acquisition, a Prefect, and Anand finally receives the bicycle.

Shortly after they bring their new car home, they find out that Tuttle bought a house. Mr. Biswas wants to move into some of the extra rooms, but he does not get the chance to because Mrs. Tulsi moves back. Because of Mrs. Tulsi’s frail condition, the house becomes quieter out of respect.

Word comes that Owad, now a doctor will be returning from England. Even Mr. Biswas is excited, but he also feels uneasy, sensing some threat to his security. The threat turns out to be real, as Mr. Biswas is told to move to Mrs. Tulsi’s tenement to make room for Owad. When Mrs. Tulsi assures him that he will be allowed to return to the house in time, he feels as if she is playing a game of cat and mouse with him. The conditions in the tenement are worse than the conditions he sees on his job, and he has frequent fits of anger. After three months, the family is invited to move back into the Port of Spain house, but this time the family of six is given only one room.



## Analysis

Just as Mr. Biswas is plunging back into the depths of despair, he is offered a job that will pay him much more money, and he regains his sense of self-worth. Even now, when things finally seem to be going his way, Mr. Biswas continues to be worried about things that might happen, such as losing his job. He rarely seems to be able to enjoy the good moments that occasionally find their way into his life, and it seems that any happiness is short-lived.

The possession rivalry continues when the Tuttles follow the appearance of the Prefect with the announcement that they have bought a house. Mrs. Tulsi's occupation of the vacated Tuttle rooms has a dampening effect on the household, and routines begin to revolve around her needs. The news that Owad will be returning is greeted with excitement, but it turns sour when Mr. Biswas is informed that his family will have to move out of the house. When they are invited to move back after three months, it seems to confirm Mr. Biswas's notion that Mrs. Tulsi is playing a cat and mouse game with them. Forced to share one room, it seems as though they are living just like mice in a hole. As Mr. Biswas ponders the future, wondering if things will ever get better, it occurs to him that his children are growing up and he will eventually be no longer responsible for them. He realizes that he has missed their childhoods.

## Vocabulary

Desecrate, revived, garrulous, urbane, petulant, caprices, remonstrate, wood lice, quiescent, rapaciousness



# Chapter 12

## Summary

Upon his return from England, Owad has changed physically, but also philosophically and politically. He embraces children and sisters and brother, shakes hands with brothers-in-law, makes a show of rejecting Seth, and assumes his new role as head of family. He has stories to tell of heroic deeds, helping important people, and the wonders of Communism. There is a festival atmosphere at the house for seven days, and it seems as if the old days at Hanuman House have returned. Anand idolizes Owad and adopts his views, but Owad is impatient and insulting with Anand, belittling him when they lose a card game, and slapping him twice when he reacts by yelling.

There are many witnesses to Anand's humiliation, including his mother and sisters, and he tells his father he wants to move, but Mr. Biswas doesn't listen. Shama wants Anand to apologize, and he does, begrudgingly, but Owad makes no friendly overtures and leaves for the theater with other members of the family.

When they return from the theater, their noisiness disturbs Mr. Biswas, who retired early because his stomach was acting up again. He yells at the crowd, attempting to get them to be quiet. Owad responds by mocking him, which makes everyone giggle, maddening Biswas. He yells at them to "Go to France," and Mrs. Tulsi responds by saying "And you can go to hell." Mr. Biswas's initial shock at this statement is followed by anger, and he and Mrs. Tulsi continue to insult each other, with Shama and the girls trying to get Mr. Biswas to restrain himself. Owad says he can't stand it and leaves the house.

Mr. Biswas gives notice that he will not stay in the house, and Mrs. Tulsi gives notice that he will not be allowed to stay in the house. Next day, Mr. Biswas's mood swings from optimism to gloom as he contemplates freedom but is faced with the housing shortage in Port of Spain, envisioning his family sleeping in Marine Square alongside the homeless families about which he has written stories.

He goes to a café where he talks to people and drinks lager; soon he is approached by a solicitor's clerk who wants to sell his house. Since it is raining and he does not like the thought of driving to his area in the country with his windows rolled up, Mr. Biswas agrees to go with the clerk to see the house. His impression from the outside is that it is not a house for him, meaning he does not think he will be able to afford it, since he only has eight hundred dollars.

The solicitor's clerk and his mother are very hospitable as they encourage Mr. Biswas to look at all the rooms, but Mr. Biswas's inspection is very superficial, since he has not revealed the fact that he cannot afford to buy the house.

The clerk tells him he will sell for six thousand dollars, comes down to five thousand five, then throws in the Morris suite when Mr. Biswas doesn't say anything, thinking that



he is driving a hard bargain. Mr. Biswas says he will think about it, but he does not think he will ever go back to the house on Sikkim Street.

That evening, a man comes and offers four hundred dollars for the materials of the house he built in Short Hills; the next day, Mr. Biswas puts a one hundred dollar deposit down on the solicitor's clerk's house. When he tells Shama, she cries, giving him several reasons for why she is upset at his sudden decision. Mr. Biswas has begun to appreciate Shama's judgment, and he is frightened by her despair. However, he is also sorry because he does not want to inflict pain on her.

Nevertheless, he goes to borrow four thousand dollars from Ajodha. Tara is supportive of his plans and Ajodha is business-like, making a contract for four thousand five hundred for five years at an interest rate of eight per cent. Mr. Biswas agrees to the terms, knowing he will not be able to pay the loan off in five years. Anxious to show him worthy of the house, he has the family dress up to go see it. Shama says she doesn't want to shame him, and she stubbornly stays in the car. The children walk through the house and express their enthusiasm for it.

## Analysis

When Owad returns from England, he has achieved heroic status because he has experienced things that his family will never be able to experience. Everyone is eager to drink in all of his stories and they immediately embrace his ideals of communism. Anand is just as smitten as everyone else is, and he wants Owad's respect and recognition. When Owad humiliates him, it may be that he recognizes a potential rival, and he wants to put Anand in his place and establish total control. In any case, his rejection has a devastating effect on the sensitive Anand, and he reverses his allegiance to Owad, rejecting all the principles he had previously espoused.

The dispute between Owad and Mr. Biswas triggers the hateful words exchanged between Mr. Biswas and Mrs. Tulsi. Coincidentally, or perhaps intentionally, her initial insult echoes Mr. Biswas's words in one of their earlier disputes. Now there is no choice; the Biswas family will have to move.

Realizing that his choices are almost nonexistent, Mr. Biswas feels that Fate is stepping in when the solicitor's clerk makes his proposition, and then a man suddenly is willing to pay him four hundred dollars for the materials of his house in Shorthills. Because he has been taken off guard and is uncertain of proper behavior under the circumstances, Mr. Biswas does not give the house more than a superficial inspection feeling that, because of his financial limitations, he is there under false pretenses.

After he talks himself into making the down payment, he tells Shama, who is upset because she has the sense to understand that this decision has been made too hastily. She is also upset because she has been left out of the decision-making, and she is worried about how they will pay for it, especially since they are still making payments on the Prefect. Additionally, she is reluctant to leave her family while they are still on bad



terms. Her stubborn insistence on staying in the car while the rest of the family inspects the house is bad judgment on her part since she is the one who is most likely to discern any problems in the house.

## Vocabulary

self-effacing, tenuously, quay, effervescence, sardonic, antipathy, solecisms, scathing, gratuitously, cryptic, proprietary, dacha, chastened, conundrum, excised, solicitor



# Chapter 13

## Summary

Once the house is officially theirs, the Biswas family visits the house again, this time in broad daylight, only to discover that it is in no condition for them to move into right now. The sun reveals flaws that no one noticed on the first two visits. Biswas is upset, saying that the clerk is a crook. They have to make basic repairs before they can move in, and they hire a mason and painters, borrowing more money. Then they discover that the septic tank has to be replaced and they have to borrow money again. Finally, they move in, but they are dispirited.

Mr. Biswas visits the next door neighbor and finds out that the clerk has built the house himself, as a hobby. The neighbor reveals more problems with the house, but Mr. Biswas tries to maintain focus on the fact that it is a strong house. The neighbor further reveals that the clerk has been trying to sell the house for a while, at a price of four thousand, five hundred dollars, which enrages Mr. Biswas even more. When the Tuttles come to visit, the Biswas family manages to camouflage the flaws and play up the coziness of the house, and the Tuttles are impressed.

After Mr. Biswas has tried determinedly to avoid running into him in the café, the solicitor's clerk suddenly appears five months later, saying he wants to build another house in the same location. Mr. Biswas calls him a crook, and he leaves, warning Mr. Biswas that he can get into legal trouble if he is not careful about what he says. Afterwards, Mr. Biswas measures the property and discovers that it actually extends twelve feet beyond the fence. They don't hear from the clerk again.

## Analysis

Once the Biswas family sees their house in broad daylight, they discover that the reality does not live up to the dream. Nevertheless, they band together as a family to make the best of it, and they put in the work and spend the money to do what must be done to make the house livable. When the solicitor's clerk has the nerve to show up again, Mr. Biswas stands up to him and basically makes him leave.

## Vocabulary

Tendrilled, whittled, jerry-builder, herringbone, tout, distemper, tinged, facile, frontage, futile, benevolently, unabashed



# Epilogue

## Summary

Before a year has passed, Owad leaves Port of Spain and Mr. Biswas loses his job when the Community Welfare Department is abolished. He returns to The Sentinel, but now his salary does not even cover the interest of the loan for the house. He thinks about selling the Prefect, but Shama intervenes by being rude to a prospective buyer. She says she is not worried about the money. Working back at the paper is an effort; without ambition, his enthusiasm has diminished. As he ponders solutions to his debt predicament, he considers that his children can take responsibility, but Savi and Anand both receive scholarships and go abroad.

Anand's letters begin showing signs of hysteria; his father understands and writes letters intended to calm and support him. Mr. Biswas falls into a pattern of waiting for the five years to be up and for Savi and Anand to return.

When he collapses at work and is taken to the hospital, the problem is not his stomach, as he would have thought, but his heart. Mr. Biswas is in the hospital for a month, and when he goes home, Shama and his two youngest daughters have painted the house and fixed up the garden.

The Sentinel puts him on half pay, so he goes back to work within a month. He suffers a second attack; this one is worse, and he has to spend six weeks in the hospital. He is given three months' notice from The Sentinel, and he becomes desperate to talk to Anand. He writes a hysterical letter, and when Anand finally replies, he says he wants to come home.

In spite of his worries about money, Mr. Biswas is ready to borrow more to help Anand get back home. Then Anand changes his mind, but Savi returns, and Mr. Biswas is as happy to see her as if she were both herself and Anand. Just when Mr. Biswas is about to reach the end of his notice pay from The Sentinel, Savi gets a job with good pay. He writes to Anand, attributing the happy coincidence to God.

When Mr. Biswas dies, there is an article about him in The Sentinel. All of Shama's sisters come to be with her, and when the service is over, Shama and the children go back to the empty house in the Prefect.

## Analysis

The family loyalty to Owad proves to be pointless as Owad leaves them behind to follow his own desires. While he has developed his brain, his heart seems to have shriveled.

Mr. Biswas's deepest fears are realized when he loses his job and has to survive on his old pay with his new debts. Overseas, Anand seems to be having his own nervous



problems, and Mr. Biswas tries to help him through letters, but Anand grows more and more distant, and will unfortunately never see his father again.

Shama demonstrates her fondness for Mr. Biswas when she tries to make some improvements on his house for him to enjoy upon his return from the hospital. Even though he is disappointed that Anand does not come home, Savi brings him joy and companionship in his final days, and he feels that she has grown to be a very intelligent young woman. There is poignancy at his death, as his family returns to the symbol of his life's accomplishment, his house.

## Vocabulary

eminence, buffer, receded, constrained, lethargy, excursions, boisterous, grotesque, resounded, cremation





# Characters

## Mohun Biswas

Mohun Biswas was born as a bad-luck child and grows up facing difficult situations with behaviors ranging from rage to farce. His life is a series of accidents, coincidences, and poor choices.

## Shama

Shama is the girl that Mr. Biswas is manipulated into marrying. She is a dutiful wife, but her strong attachments to her family and her bad cooking generate a great deal of conflict between her and Mr. Biswas.

## Bipti

Bipti is the mother of Mr. Biswas. Widowed when Mr. Biswas is very young, she does not seem to have the capacity to deal with her family obligations. She eventually regains her vitality, but many years pass before she and Mr. Biswas truly come to know each other.

## Raghu

Raghu is Mr. Biswas's father. He takes the ominous warnings of Mr. Biswas's bad luck to heart and becomes afraid for his wealth, hoarding all his money so that his family suffered. He dies while diving into a pond trying to find Mr. Biswas.

## Dehuti

Dehuti is the sister of Mr. Biswas, who goes to live with her mother's sister, but shames the family by running off with the yard boy.

## Prasad and Pratap

Prasad and Pratap are Mr. Biswas's older brothers, who begin working when they are nine and eleven. When the family is broken apart, they go to work on sugar estates.



## **Tara**

Tara is Bipti's sister, married to a wealthy man, with no children of her own. She takes charge when there is a death in the family and has a collection of funeral pictures on her wall.

## **Ajodha**

Ajodha is Tara's husband; he has many different businesses, and allows Bipti and Mr. Biswas to live with some of his dependent relatives on the back trace of his property.

## **Mrs. Tulsi**

Mrs. Tulsi is Shama's mother, a widow who manipulates everyone around her. She traps Mr. Biswas into marriage just on the basis of a note.

## **Seth**

Seth is Mrs. Tulsi's brother-in-law, married to her sister Padma. He oversees the Tulsi businesses, but he has a corrupt side.

## **Hari**

Hari is the son-in-law who serves as the spiritual leader of the household. He is a pundit, obsessed with his illnesses, his food, and his religious books.

## **Owad and Shekhar**

Owad and Shekhar are Mrs. Tulsi's only sons, making a total of sixteen children in all. They are called the little gods by Mr. Biswas because of the way they are spoiled by the rest of the family; Shekhar marries a Presbyterian woman and takes over her family's cinema business. Owad becomes a doctor.

## **Savi**

Savi is the oldest child of Shama and Mr. Biswas. As a child, she does not consider herself to be very smart, but as a young woman, her father discovers that she is very intelligent, and she is there to save the family when he can no longer support them.



## **Anand**

Anand is the only Biswas son. He is shy, sensitive, and somewhat sickly; he forms a strong bond with his father, but as he gets older he begins to display some of the same nervous problems as Mr. Biswas, and they grow apart.

## **Myna and Kamla**

Myna and Kamla are the youngest Biswas daughters. Mr. Biswas does not have the same connection to them that he has with Savi and Anand.



# Objects/Places

## Hanuman House

Hanuman House is the Tulsi residence in Arwacas. It looks like a fortress and houses the Tulsi store on ground floor.

## Pagotes

Pagotes is where Tara and Ajodha live. Mr. Biswas lives in their back trace as a child and continues to visit them when he is grown.

## The back trace

The back trace is the area where Tara and Ajodha house dependent relatives. Mr. Biswas and Bipti shared the quarters with other people after Bipti sold their hut to her neighbor.

## Aryans

Aryans are Protestant Hindu ministers who came to Trinidad from India to preach that caste is unimportant, that Hinduism should accept converts, that idol worship should be abolished, and that women should be educated.

## The Chase

The Chase is the village where Mr. Biswas and Shama set up shop after they left Hanuman House. It is just a mud hut settlement in the heart of the sugarcane area.

## Port of Spain

Port of Spain is the capital city of Trinidad, and the place where Mr. Biswas got his job with The Sentinel. It is where Mrs. Tulsi owns the house that Mr. Biswas and his family share with various other members of the Tulsi family.

## The Sentinel

The Sentinel is the newspaper for which Mr. Biswas writes. In the beginning, he is required to write shocking stories, but when new owners take it over it goes back to basic news reporting and philanthropy.



## **Royal Enfield Bicycle**

The Royal Enfield bicycle is Mr. Biswas's mode of transportation throughout most of the book. It is subject to vandalism when he takes it on his assignments to the bad parts of town, and it is passed down to Anand when he gets his Prefect.

## **Dairy Milk and Prunes**

Dairy milk and prunes are the dietary requirements for children who are believed to possess great intelligence.

## **Macleans's Brand Stomach Powder**

Macleans's Brand Stomach Powder is the remedy that Mr. Biswas turns to when his stomach is causing distress.

## **Puja**

Puja is the name of the Hindu ritual performed by Hari and other pundits to show reverence to the gods.

## **Pundit**

Pundit is the name for a Hindu wise man that performs the spiritual requirements of the Hindu faith.

## **Gold Brooch**

Gold brooch is the item that Mr. Biswas keeps promising Shama that he will buy for her some day. He never keeps his promise.

## **The House**

The House is the dream that Mr. Biswas strives to achieve. To him it signifies privacy, independence, and space.

## **Cat-in-Bag**

Cat-in-bag is the name given to the method of marrying off Indian daughters.



# Themes

## Family

Family is a prominent theme in the novel. Mr. Biswas's family is broken up because of unfortunate circumstances, and he never really has a close relationship with his mother, his brothers, or his sister. His mother seems unable to deal with life around her, and especially not Mr. Biswas's needs. As Mr. Biswas is maneuvered into marrying Shama, he finds that he has taken on a very large family—fourteen daughters and two sons—to go along with her. It is Shama's family that creates most of the conflict that occurs between Shama and Mr. Biswas. Up against the Tulsi family, Mr. Biswas feels helpless. The theme of family continues in the birth of four children to Mr. Biswas. His attitude toward his own family is very complex: at times, he feels they are an alien interference in his life, and at other times, he struggles to establish a bond with them.

## Writing

Writing plays an important role in the events of the novel. It is Mr. Biswas's talent for sign writing that brings him to the Tulsi store where he first sees Shama. Then it is the note he writes that leads to all the trouble with the Tulsis. As he learns to communicate in writing, he secures a position writing for a newspaper, and he is able to express his feelings and find some peace of mind in writing the letter to Dr. Rameshwar after his mother dies. Finally, writing keeps him connected to his children, particularly Anand, while they are studying abroad.

## Food

Food is not just an ingredient in the novel it is a theme. Early in the novel, a punishment involving bananas causes stomach problems for Mr. Biswas, which will cause him difficulty for the rest of his life. When they are not fighting about the Tulsis, most of the conflict between Shama and Mr. Biswas is centered on food. Mr. Biswas does not like the quality of food he gets at the Tulsi house, and he does not like the way it is prepared. His sensitive stomach is always reacting to the bad food, and he constantly has to depend on Maclean's Brand Stomach Powder to get relief. However, food does not always play an antagonistic role in the novel. When there is cause for celebration, there is also cause for feasting, and the Tulsis' food improves greatly for special occasions. Finally, when the family is living at the estate at Shorthills, Mrs. Tulsi has her daughters experiment with bamboo and other strange materials in an effort to find new sources of food.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written from the third person point of view from the perspective of Mr. Biswas. It is Mr. Biswas's reaction to events that moves the plot along. His quirky character and his view of events provide pathos as well as humor to the novel.

## Setting

The novel is set in various parts of Trinidad spanning the period from the early to mid-twentieth century. During this time, Trinidad had a diverse population that included different races and ethnicities as well as different religions. This diversity is seen in the novel as characters slip between speaking Hindi and speaking English, and a variety of religious practices are observed.

## Language and Meaning

The language in the novel varies. The narrative is rich with imagery and descriptive details, while the dialogue conveys the non-standard dialect of the people of Trinidad, and it is employed in a way that adds depth to the characters. There is a great deal of sarcasm and irony, especially in the character of Mr. Biswas and the situations in which he finds himself, that lend a comic effect to the novel.

## Structure

The novel is written in two distinct parts with a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue begins with the end of the main character's life, eliminating any doubt as to the outcome of the novel. In this way, the reader is not distracted by the tendency to imagine what will happen, but can focus on the experience of getting there. Part one is focused on Mr. Biswas's life from the time he is born to the time he leaves his family. Part two involves his life from the point where he finds employment independent of the Tulsis, and moves through different stages of family life. At some points, the narrative provides some insight into what lies ahead, usually as a way of emphasizing the consequences of a character's actions.



## Quotes

How terrible it would have been. . . to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one has been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (Prologue)

He has begun to wait, not only for love, but for the world to yield its sweetness and romance. He deferred all his pleasure in life until that day. (Chapter 2)

Mr. Biswas has no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. (Chapter 3)

There is, in some weak people who feel their own weakness and resent it, a certain mechanism which, operating suddenly and without conscious direction, releases them from final humiliation. (Chapter 3)

Living in a wife-beating society, he couldn't understand why women were even allowed to nag or how nagging could have any effect. (Chapter 4)

For Shama and her sisters and women like them, ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow. (Chapter 4)

Mixed with his fear was this grief for a happy life never enjoyed and now lost. (Chapter 5)

It was the first of many disappointments. In time he came to disregard these periods of freedom, just as he no longer expected to wake up one morning and find himself whole again. (Chapter 5)

He was going out into the world, to test it for his power to frighten. The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning. (Chapter 6)

A chance encounter has led him to sign writing. Sign writing has taken him to Hanuman House and the Tulsis. Sign writing found him a place on The Sentinel. (Chapter 7)

Father and son, each saw the other as weak and vulnerable, and each felt a responsibility for the other, a responsibility which, in times of particular pain, was disguised by exaggerated authority on the one side, exaggerated respect on the other. (Chapter 8)

But in the box-board temple at the end of the ruined, overgrown garden there was no Hari to say prayers for her and the house. Bells were rung and gongs were struck, but the luck, the virtue has gone out of the family. (Chapter 9)





There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone has to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection. (Chapter 10)

How ridiculous were the attentions the weak paid one another in the shadow of the strong! (Chapter 12)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Even as a baby, the narrator refers to the main character as Mr. Biswas rather than Mohun. What effect does this have on the reader's perception of the character? What might the author's intention have been in choosing this approach?

## Topic 2

When Mr. Biswas is born, a pundit interprets certain signs to foretell that he will be a person of questionable character, and he will bring bad luck to his family. How much of this prophecy, if any, turns out to be accurate? What do these rituals tell us about the family?

## Topic 3

How do the Tulsis react to Mr. Biswas's outrageous behavior? What incidents produce the most serious consequences for Mr. Biswas?

## Topic 4

There are many incidents of wife beating and flogging of children in the novel. How do these incidents affect the reader's view of characters and events? In such a physical society, how do Mr. Biswas's actions compare to those of other characters?

## Topic 5

How can Mr. Biswas's range of feelings for his wife and children be described?

## Topic 6

What are some of the things that Mr. Biswas does to establish a connection with Savi and Anand? Why don't we see some of those efforts with the other two children?

## Topic 7

How can Mr. Biswas's attitude toward religion be described? What role does religion play in the lives of the characters? What role does it play in the plot?



## Topic 8

Given Ostad's enthusiasm for Communism when he returned from England, what could have caused him to drop the subject so abruptly?

## Topic 9

A House for Mr. Biswas has been described as a comic tragedy. Do you agree with this assessment? Which situations in the novel lean toward comedy? Does Mr. Biswas really intend to be comical?

## Topic 10

At the end of the novel, has Mr. Biswas achieved what he wanted from life?