A Horse and Two Goats Study Guide

A Horse and Two Goats by R. K. Narayan

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

First published in the Madras, India, newspaper *The Hindu* in 1960, "A Horse and Two Goats" did not achieve a wide international audience until 1970 when it became the title story of R. K. Narayan's seventh collection of short stories, *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories.* It reached an even wider audience in 1985 when it was included in *Under the Banyan Tree,* Narayan's tenth and best-selling collection. By this time Narayan was well established as one of the most prominent Indian authors writing in English in the twentieth century. The story presents a comic dialogue between Muni, a poor Tamil-speaking villager, and a wealthy English-speaking businessman from New York. They are engaged in a conversation in which neither can understand the other's language. With gentle humor, Narayan explores the conflicts between rich and poor, and between Indian and Western culture.

Narayan is best known for his fourteen novels, many of which take place in the fictional town of Malgudi. Many of the stories in his thirteen short story collections also take place in Malgudi, but "A Horse and Two Goats" does not. This accounts for the fact that the story has attracted very little critical commentary; however, all of the attention it has drawn has been positive. The story is seen as a fine example of Narayan's dexterity in creating engaging characters and humorous dialogue, but it is not considered one of his greatest works.

Author Biography

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Ayyar Naranayanaswami was born in Madras, a large industrial coastal city in India, on October 10, 1906. His family was Brahmin, the highest caste of Hindu society. When he was still young, the rest of his family moved to Mysore, a smaller city in the heart of the country. Narayan stayed in Madras with his grandmother, who read him classic Indian tales and myths from an early age and encouraged his imagination. He was not a serious student; he believed that the educational system was too regimented and that it discouraged students from thinking creatively, so he decided not to work hard and ended up failing several subjects and his college entrance exams.

After graduation, Narayan went to work in a government office in Mysore, but he was no more suited for mundane office work than for formal education. He tried teaching for a while, but did not last long as a teacher, either. What he wanted to be was a writer. At first, most of his stories were rejected. For three or four years he lived at home and earned less than five dollars a year, worrying and embarrassing his family.

In 1933 he married a woman named Rajam, who encouraged him in his writing. To help support his wife and daughter, he tried journalism, starting out as a correspondent for the *Madras Justice* and working his way up to junior editor. Rajam lived only five years as his wife, dying of typhoid in 1939. By that time Narayan had published three novels, and had begun, under the shortened name R. K. Narayan, to attract international attention. Finally, he was able to quit his newspaper job and become a full-time fiction writer. His fourth novel, *The Eng-lish Teacher* (1945), features a character patterned after Rajam and describes Narayan's own struggles to deal with her death. All of his fiction, most of which takes place in the fictional town of Malgudi and all of which is in English, gives a realistic portrayal of middle-class life in India, with its caste system and long-standing traditions, and many of his stories are based on real events.

Narayan is one of the most widely read of the Indian authors writing in English. He has published more than thirty novels and collections of short stories and essays, and was still producing new work well into his eighties. He has been honored for his work in India, in Great Britain, and in the United States, where he has been made an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. His own humble views of his life and success are presented in his memoir, *My Days* (1984).

Plot Summary

Set in Kritam, "probably the tiniest" of India's 700,000 villages, "A Horse and Two Goats" opens with a clear picture of the poverty in which the protagonist Muni lives. Of the thirty houses in the village, only one, the Big House, is made of brick. The others, including Muni's, are made of "bamboo thatch, straw, mud, and other unspecified materials." There is no running water and no electricity, and Muni's wife cooks their typical breakfast of "a handful of millet flour" over a fire in a mud pot. On this day, Muni has shaken down six drumsticks (a local name for a type of horse radish) from the drumstick tree growing in front of his house, and he asks his wife to prepare them for him in a sauce. She agrees, provided he can get the other ingredients, none of which they have in the house: rice, dhall (lentils), spices, oil and a potato.

Muni and his wife have not always been so poor. Once, when he considered himself prosperous, he had a flock of forty sheep and goats which he would lead out to graze every day. But life has not been kind to him or to his flocks: years of drought, a great famine, and an epidemic that ran through Muni's flock have taken their toll. And as a member of the lowest of India's castes, Muni was never permitted to go to school or to learn a trade. Now he is reduced to two goats, too scrawny to sell or to eat. He and his wife have no children to help them in their old age, so their only income is from the odd jobs his wife occasionally takes on at the Big House. Muni has exhausted his credit at every shop in town, and today, when he asks a local shopman to give him the items his wife requires to cook the drumsticks, he is sent away humiliated.

There is no other food in the house, so Muni's wife sends him away with the goats. "Fast till the evening," she tells him. "It'll do you good." Muni takes the goats to their usual spot a few miles away: a grassy area near the highway, where he can sit in the shade of a life-sized statue of a horse and a warrior and watch trucks and buses go by. The statue is made of weather-beaten clay and has stood in the same spot for all of Muni's seventy or more years.

As Muni watches the road and waits for the appropriate time to return home, a yellow station wagon comes down the road and pulls over. A red-faced American man dressed in khaki clothing gets out and is asking Muni where to find the nearest gas station when he notices the statue, which he finds "marvelous." Muni's first impulse is to run away, assuming from the khaki that this foreigner must be a policeman or a soldier. But Muni is too old to run any more, and he cannot leave the goats. The two begin to converse—if "conversation" can be used to describe what happens when two people speak to each other in separate languages, neither understanding the other. "Namaste! How do you do?" the American says in greeting, using his only Indian word. Muni responds with the only English he knows: "Yes, no."

The American, a businessman from New York City, lights a cigarette and offers one to Muni, who knows about cigarettes but has never had one before. He offers Muni his business card, but Muni fears it is a warrant of some kind. Muni launches into a long explanation of his innocence of whatever crime the man is investigating, and the

American asks questions about the horse statue, which he would like to buy. He tells Muni about a bad day at work, when he was forced to work for four hours without elevators or electricity, and seems completely unaware that Muni lives this way every day. By now he is convinced that Muni is the owner of the statue, which he is determined to buy.

The two talk back and forth, each about his own life. Muni remembers his father and grandfather telling about the statue and the ancient story it depicts, and tries to explain to the American how old it is. "I get a kick out of every word you utter," the American replies. Muni reminisces about his difficult and impoverished childhood working in the fields, and the American laughs heartily. Muni interprets the statue: "This is our guardian.... At the end of Kali Yuga, this world and all other worlds will be destroyed, and the Redeemer will come in the shape of a horse." The American replies, "I assure you this will have the best home in the U.S.A. I'll push away the bookcase.... The TV may have to be shifted.... I don't see how that can interfere with the party—we'll stand around him and have our drinks." It is clear that even if the two could understand each other's words, they could not understand each other's worlds.

Finally, the American pushes one hundred rupees into Muni's hand—twenty times Muni's debt with the shopkeeper. He considers that he has bought the horse, and Muni believes he has just sold his goats. Muni runs home to present the money to his wife, while the American flags down a truck, gets help breaking the horse off its pedestal, and drives away with his purchase. Muni's wife does not believe her husband's story about where the money came from, and her suspicions only increase when the goats find their way home. As the story ends, she is shrieking at him, and Muni appears to be not much better off than he was at the start.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"A Horse and Two Goats" is the story of a comical and fateful meeting between two men, neither of who speak each other's language.

Muni and his wife live in poverty in a remote village in India called Kritam. In his prosperous days, before pestilence took most of his cattle, Muni had 40 sheep and goats. Now, in his old age, Muni has just two goats. His usual daily routine is to take the goats to graze two miles from his home, alongside the highway, at the foot of a life-sized clay statue of a horse. Muni never thinks about the statue. It has been there since before he was born and is just part of the landscape, as far as he is concerned.

On this particular morning, Muni goes outside and shakes six bean-like fruits, called drumsticks, from the branches of the drumstick tree in his yard. Usually, his wife would boil some drumstick leaves, with a bit of salt, in a mud pot over their domestic fire. On other mornings, she would cook some millet for him, but today, Muni craves drumsticks in sauce. Their store of food is empty; however, so his wife sends him to the shop to get the items she needs to make the sauce.

Muni can sometimes charm the shopkeeper into giving him a few items on credit. This time, however, Muni's charm fails him, and all he gains for his trouble is public humiliation. The shopkeeper pulls out a ledger and reads the list of all the unpaid items already charged to Muni's account. To pay off his debt to the shop, Muni would have to come up with five rupees and a quarter.

When Muni returns home empty-handed, his frightened wife sends him out with the goats, warning him not to come home before dark. He knows from experience that if he will just do as she says, she will calm down and find some way to scrape together a dinner for him.

Muni is sitting on the pedestal of the statue, letting his goats graze, and watching the highway, when a van runs out of gas right in front of him. The driver of the van is an American man on holiday in India. As soon as he sees the clay horse, he develops a craving to own it. He assumes that Muni is there to sell the horse and begins to negotiate.

The American speaks only English, and Muni speaks only Tamil. The two men have a comical conversation, in which neither understands the other. Muni is in the middle of telling the American about his religion, when the American finally says, "I really wonder what you are saying because your answer is crucial. We have come to the point when we should be ready to talk business."

When the American starts waving money around and petting Muni's goats, Muni's dream has come true. Finally, he thinks, someone will buy the last of his goats. He takes the 100 rupees from the stranger and returns home alone.

While the American waits for Muni to come back to help load the statue into the van, some other men from the highway stop, help him load the horse, and give him some gas. The American drives away.

Meanwhile, Muni returns home to his worried wife, who is praying for a miracle, and surprises her with the 100 rupees. No sooner does he explain that he has sold the goats, when they stand bleating at the door. Instead of being relieved and joyful at the money that has come into his hands, Muni is left confused, and his wife is left terrified that her husband will be punished as a thief.

Analysis

The portrait of Muni and the American in "A Horse and Two Goats" offers insight into the vast differences between Eastern and Western cultures, while it also highlights traits that are universal to all mankind. The difference in languages is just the beginning of the gulf between these two men.

Muni is the poorest man in his caste. He lives in the last house on the last street in his village. He is, in other words, the lowest of the low. The American, on the other hand, is clearly very wealthy, despite his protestations to the contrary. He works on the 40th floor of the Empire State Building, buys an hour of television time each month to advertise his business in New York, and has a home in Connecticut. Muni, being of low caste, has never learned to read and write, while the American belongs to the "Book-of-the-Month Club." The American wants to know how the horse was made. Muni is interested in conveying its meaning. Muni's only currency is his charm and his claim on human sympathy. The American has money and cigarettes.

Most striking is the contrast between Muni's passivity and the American's activity. Muni's range of options seem to be encompassed within a two-mile radius of his village, which he has inhabited for all of his estimated 70 years. The American can go around the globe, whenever he chooses. Acquisition is what gives the American a sense of purpose and meaning. "I don't want to seem to have stopped here for nothing," he says. On the other extreme stands Muni's boast that "I go nowhere and seek nothing."

This last difference actually points to the main thing that these two men have in common. Each man embodies, in his own way, the values of his respective country. Though the cultures may be different, each man represents a "good man" in that culture. Just as the American is a successful example of the power of activity, Muni is a successful example of the power of passivity. Just by being where he believes he is supposed to be, Muni is present to receive the money he and his wife desperately need.

Muni and the American share a human desire for novelty, although perhaps on a different scale. The American wants to experience other cultures, and Muni wants

something other than millet and tree leaves for dinner. Both men rely on the labor and good will of their wives to give them the experiences they crave.

Both men exercise a universal principle, however unconsciously, in that each finds the world to be as he expects it to be. Specifically, the clay horse was to each man what he believed it to be. To the American, the horse was a fantastic souvenir from India and a conversation piece for his living room. For Muni, the statue represented his redeemer, and indeed, it became Muni's redeemer on this day.

Finally, the story humorously and gently illustrates the sad fact that human beings are often the beneficiaries of miracles that we do not recognize. The old couple's reaction to the gain of 100 rupees obviously illustrates this, as does the American's belief that he is not a wealthy man.

This characteristic of human nature is illustrated more quietly by the presence of the drumstick tree next to Muni's house. The drumstick leaves that Muni is bored with are sometimes dubbed "miracle food." Drumstick leaves offer more vitamin A than carrots, more calcium than milk, more potassium than bananas, more vitamin C than oranges, and nearly as much protein as eggs. Just like the wealthy American, who gets bored with his air-conditioned comforts, the poverty-stricken Indian gets bored with this food, never knowing that it provides him with so much at no cost. That may be the funniest, as well as the saddest, similarity of all.

Characters

The American

See The man

The man

The man comes riding into the story in a yellow station wagon. A businessman who works in New York and commutes from Connecticut, he is dressed in the khaki clothing worn by American tourists in the tropics. He typifies the "Ugly American": he speaks only English, but is surprised and a little annoyed to find that Muni can speak only Tamil, and although he is in the tiniest village in India, he expects to find a gas station and English-speaking goatherds. Once he sees the statue of the horse, he must own it for his living room, with no thought for what the statue might mean or who might value it. Even when he can't speak the language, he knows that money talks.

Muni

Muni, an old and desperately poor man, is the protagonist of the story. Once he was prosperous, with a large flock of sheep, but a series of misfortunes have left him with only two scrawny goats. He and his wife have almost no income and no children to help take care of them. Every day, Muni takes the goats out to graze on the scarce grass outside of town, while his wife pulls something together for an evening meal. As he watches the goats from the shade of a large statue, he remembers his younger days when the work was hard but there was enough to eat, when he could not attend school because he was not of the right caste, and when he imagined that he would one day have children. Like many poor and struggling people, he fears authority figures, and so he fears the American who steps out of a strange car wearing khaki clothes. While the man tries to talk with him about the statue, Muni babbles on about a recent murder and the end of the world. At the end he seems to have temporarily escaped his money troubles, but his bad luck continues when his wife suspects him of thievery and threatens to leave.

The shopman

The shopman is a moody man who has given Muni food on credit in the past, but who has been pushed past his limit. Muni owes him five rupees, and although they share a bit of humorous conversation, the shopman will not give him any more.

The wife

Muni's wife has spent some sixty years with him (neither of them is sure about their ages), through prosperity and poverty. Although she is gruff with him now, she is willing to indulge his request for a special meal. She works as hard as he does, or harder, getting up at dawn to fix his morning meal, and taking odd jobs at the Big House when their stores are low. But poverty has worn her down: her first reaction when she sees the hundred rupees is to accuse Muni of stealing.

Themes

Culture Clash

The most important theme in "A Horse and Two Goats," and in fact the central theme of Narayan's work, is the clash of cultures, specifically the clash of Indian and Western cultures. Using humor instead of anger, Narayan demonstrates just how far apart the two worlds are: the two cultures exist in the same time and space, but literally and metaphorically speak different languages. The two main characters in this story couldn't be more different: Muni is poor, rural, uneducated, Hindu, brown; the American is wealthy, urban, educated, probably Judeo-Christian, white. As a good Hindu, Muni calmly accepts the hand that fate has dealt him, while the American is willing and able to take drastic and sudden action to change his life (for example, flying off to India, or throwing away his return plane ticket to transport a horse statue home on a ship). Each man is quite ignorant of the other's way of life.

Unlike many stories about culture clash, the inability to communicate in this story leads only to confusion, not to any real harm. In fact, although each feels vaguely dissatisfied with the conversation, the men do not realize that they are not communicating. Each speaks at length about his own life and local calamities, with no awareness that the other hears nothing. At the end of their encounter each man has what he wants or needs, and neither man has lost anything of value. As an Indian who writes only in English, Narayan himself has experienced the ways in which Indian and Western cultures conflict. While this conflict may be painful at times, here he finds it merely amusing.

Wealth and Poverty

Although they have little in common, the most important way in which Muni and the American differ is in their respective level of wealth. Narayan takes great pains in the opening of the story to show how desperately poor Muni is, and to emphasize that even in his time of "prosperity" his standard of living was still greatly below that of most Americans. The American takes for granted his relative wealth and seems unaware of the difference between Muni and himself. He casually offers cigarettes to a man who has never seen one, complains about four hours without air conditioning to a man who has never had electricity, brags about enjoying manual labor as a Sunday hobby to a man who grew up working in the fields from morning until night, and without a thought gives Muni enough money to open a business. He is not trying to show off; he simply accepts his wealth as his right. His very casualness emphasizes the gap between them. Narayan in no way condemns the man for being wealthy, or for not stepping in to aid the poor Muni, but he wants the two men and their relative wealth to be clear, so the reader can evaluate the relationship between wealth and worth.

Knowledge and Ignorance

In a small way, "A Horse and Two Goats" explores the different ways that a person can be educated. Muni, who grew up a member of a lower caste at a time when only the Brahmin, the highest caste, could attend school, has had no formal education. He has not traveled beyond his village, and he likes to watch trucks and buses go by on the highway a few miles away so that he can have "a sense of belonging to a larger world." He does not even know his own age. He does, however, have an impressive amount of knowledge of the two major texts of his literary heritage, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* which he has learned by acting in plays and by listening to speakers at the temple. He knows the stories, and he is able to mine them for truth and wisdom when he needs them.

The American, on the other hand, has had the full benefits of an American education. He has a roomful of books that he values as objects ("you know I love books and am a member of five book clubs, and the choice and bonus volumes mount up to a pile in our living room"), but there is no evidence that he understands or values what is inside them. On one level, he is familiar with the larger world around him in a way that Muni never will be. However, even on this trip to India "to look at other civilizations," he does not seem to be looking at India for what it is, but only for a reflection of—and ornaments for—his own life. The uneducated Muni tries to tell him the significance of the horse statue, but the American sees it only as a living room decoration. Of course, the language barrier prevents him from receiving Muni's interpretation, but it never even crosses his mind to ask. In this story, there are at least two ways to be ignorant.

Style

Point of View and Narration

"A Horse and Two Goats" is narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator who reports clearly and objectively on the characters' words, actions, and memories, but who does not comment or judge. The narrator describes Kritam's erosion and Muni's decline dispassionately, without regret; conversations between Muni and his wife, or Muni and the shopman, are told from Muni's perspective, but with his calm acceptance of whatever fate brings him. This restraint is important to the understated humor of the dialogue between Muni and the American; Narayan trusts the reader to interpret the absurd conversation without his having to say through his narrator, "Notice that this response has nothing to do with the question asked," or "See the irony in this remark." When the two men leave the place where they met, each taking away something of value, neither has been accused by the narrator—nor by the reader—of foolishness or evil. By creating a narrator who tells the story without judging it, Narayan presents two believable characters with human flaws, but two characters for whom the reader can feel compassion and sympathy nonetheless. The conflict is between two likeable characters, or two worthy cultures, not between good and evil.

Setting

The story takes place in Kritam, "probably the tiniest" of India's 700,000 villages. Its four streets are lined with about thirty mud and thatch huts and one Big House, made of brick and cement. Women cook in clay pots over clay stoves, and the huts have no running water or electricity. A few miles away, down a rough dirt track through dry fields of cactus and lantana bushes, is a highway leading to the mountains, where a large construction project is being completed. The meeting between Muni and the red-faced man was intended to take place between about 1945, when televisions became generally available to Americans, and 1960, when the story was published, but the date is not central to the story. Even today there are many villages in the world without modern technological conveniences, and many travelers who do not realize that not everyone lives as they do.

Realism

Narayan's fiction is often noted for its realism, its simple and accurate presentation of common, everyday life as it is lived by identifiable characters. In "A Horse and Two Goats" Narayan pays careful attention to the small details of Muni's life: where he lives, what he eats, how he coughs when he smokes his first cigarette. Although many of the small details, like the drumstick tree and the dhoti where Muni puts his hundred rupees, are particularly Indian, they are also basic enough to human experience that they are

easily understood by an international audience. Narayan's characters and stories are read not so much as regional literature but as universal.

Humor

Humor is an important element in "A Horse and Two Goats," and understanding Narayan's humor is important to understanding his world view. Humor, which is affectionate and sympathetic to humanity and human foibles, is often distinguished from wit, which looks more harshly on human fallibility. For Narayan, who looks at the world through the lens of his Hindu faith, weakness and strife are to be accepted and transcended, not railed against. When he creates the comic characters of Muni and the American (likely candidates for the roles of the "two goats" in the title), he laughs at them gently and kindly, not critically.

Historical Context

Colonial India

Indian culture is more than five thousand years old. Its great epics were composed before the year A.D. 200, and magnificent art and architecture were created in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. Beginning in the 10th century, Muslim raiders attacked and weakened the Buddhist kingdoms, and for the next several hundred years a series of Muslim kingdoms controlled what is now called the Indian subcontinent. By 1500, Europeans were also competing for control of Indian trade. In 1857, India became subject to British rule. Like South Africa, Indians found themselves governed by a white minority from another country and culture, whose governance was guided by racism and religious intolerance. India remained a British colony until 1947, when a long campaign of peaceful civil disobedience led by Mohandas Gandhi persuaded Britain to return control of the country to its own people. India was divided into two separate nations: India, a secular state populated mainly by Hindus, and Paki-stan, a Muslim state. The late 1940s were marked with great violence and eventually war between Muslims and Hindus. Thus, the world from which Narayan was writing in the 1950s was both old, rich in tradition and legend, and new, struggling for identity.

Independent India

Immediately after achieving independence, India's government, under Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, began planning and taking action to bring peace and prosperity to all Indian citizens. The task was daunting: although there was a will to provide education for all, there were not enough teachers; the need to grow more food and distribute it was apparent, but the technology and skills were not available. Although there was a change in the air, there was no real change in the day-to-day lives of poor people like Muni and his wife for many years. "A Horse and Two Goats" takes place less than a decade after independence, little enough time that Muni has realized no tangible benefits from living in a sovereign nation, and that he still shrinks from a white man wearing khaki, who he assumes must be a British authority figure.

For Narayan, independence made it possible for him to move more freely on the world stage, but he continued in his lifelong tendency to avoid politics in his personal life and in his writing. It should be noted that choosing to write and publish in English, his second language, was an artistic, not a political, decision. He was raised a Brahmin, a member of the highest Hindu caste, and he had enjoyed a good education and a life of relative ease. He had learned English in school, and as he developed his writing skills he found that the English language—as Indians speak it—was ideal for expressing his ideas and images clearly. But by writing in English, he was choosing to write for an audience that lived mostly outside India, since most Indians, like Muni, did not speak or read English. As a journalist, and then as something of an international figure, Narayan had seen more of the world than Muni ever could. He understood the conflicts between

Indian culture and Western culture as few people did, because he had created a life for himself that forced him to move through both worlds.

Critical Overview

Over a prolific career spanning more than fifty years, Narayan has published fourteen novels, thirteen collections of short stories, and eleven other volumes of essays, translations and memoirs. He is known primarily for his many novels and short stories set in the fictional, small Southern Indian town of Malgudi, and most critics and reviewers focus on these stories. Critics appreciate Narayan for the clarity of his vision for the town, for the way the town has grown and changed over the years as a "real" town would, and they compare his use of the town through many works to William Faulkner's creation of Yoknapatawpha County or Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, yet they find that his details about everyday Indian life and his warmth and sympathy toward his characters create stories that are universal. Reaction to Narayan's work has always been quite positive, but his reputation among literary scholars seems to be fading as the twentieth century draws to a close. While general readers continue to value Narayan's work for its simplicity of language, straightforward plotting and action, gentle humor and sweet disposition, recent commentators have found it perhaps a touch too unsophisticated and nonpolitical to warrant serious study.

"A Horse and Two Goats" is one of the few Narayan stories not set in Malgudi, and it has received very little critical attention of its own. It was one of many stories Narayan wrote quickly, at a rate of two per week, as a contributor to the Madras newspaper *The Hindu.* The story came to the attention of the international reading community when it appeared in the collection *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories* in 1970, and most criticism refers to this collection. Typical is *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation,* in which William Walsh relegates his discussion of the story to a chapter entitled "Other Work." His analysis, like most writing about this story, consists primarily of a plot summary and the observation that "Narayan is himself fascinated by the gap which exists between supposed and real understanding, by the element of incomprehension in human relationships." P. S. Ramana, in a short section of his *Message in Design: A Study of R. K. Narayan's Fiction,* focuses on "how, by manipulating the narratorial position, focus, tone, attitude and commentary, the author is able to almost overlook the darker side of the experience to produce a highly humorous and ironic tale." In an article in *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan,* H. C. Trivedi and N. C. Soni find the chief importance of the story is as "a subtle and real entertainment."

When the story appeared again in 1985, in the collection *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories,* a new generation of readers discovered it. This collection has received no formal criticism, but was reviewed in major American newspapers and magazines. Many reviewers of this volume single out "A Horse and Two Goats" because it is one of the longest stories in the collection, and because it is a fine example of Narayan's humor. In a review in *Washington Post Book World,* Frances Taliaferro calls the story "a classic of cross purposes." Neville Shack, writing for [London] *Times Literary Supplement,* finds "a flourish of banality, exasperating but quite moving at the same time, infused with human drollery." Although the market for short story collections has declined steadily, and critical attention to Narayan's work has also declined, "A Horse and Two Goats" continues to appear in high school and college textbook anthologies,

where students and teachers give it high marks for its insight into another culture in the form of a humorous tale.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bily has a master's degree in English literature and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines the role of women in "A Horse and Two Goats."

When Muni the Indian peasant and the red-faced American meet and converse in "A Horse and Two Goats," the differences between them are immediately apparent, and these differences inform the main idea of the story, the clash of cultures. One of the few things the two men have in common is kept in the background of the story, but resurfaces frequently—each has a devoted wife on the sidelines, making it possible for them to keep going.

To begin to understand Narayan's sense of women, it would be useful to look briefly at how Indian and Hindu culture has perceived and shaped women's lives. It is believed that the ancient Tamil societies may have been matriarchal, that is, ruled and guided by woman. The great Indian epics, composed approximately two thousand years ago, contain stories of several important female characters, including two that Muni mentions: the goddess Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, and Sita, wife of Rama. In their roles as nurturers and storytellers, woman have been revered because they have kept the culture alive.

In practical terms, however, the life of a woman in India as recently as one hundred or two hundred years ago was almost unimaginable today, even in comparison to the restrictions placed upon American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hindu law and tradition dictated that women were under the protection of their fathers, and then of their husbands. In fact, wives were the legal property of their husbands and had no right to own property, to be educated, to divorce, or to speak in public. Under the custom of *sati,* a woman whose husband died would throw herself onto his funeral pyre and be burned alive, thus showing her utter devotion to him.

In 1829, *sati* was declared illegal by the British colonialists, although it never completely disappeared. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Muni and his wife were wed, it was still common for a woman to be married off at a very young age, often to an adult man whom she had never met. In fact, although Muni has never kept track of his age, "He was told on their day of wedding that he was ten years old and she was eight. During the wedding ceremony they had had to recite their respective ages and names." This is the tradition under which Muni had grown up. Women were honored on the one hand, and subordinate on the other—no more simple or straightforward than gender roles in any society.

Narayan is a bit younger than Muni, perhaps fifteen years, and his upbringing was different from Muni's. Narayan was raised by his grandmother, who taught him the legends and stories from the traditional literature. Muni learned most of his lore from other men, including the story behind the statue: "I was an urchin this high when I heard my grandfather explain this horse and warrior, and my grandfather himself was this high

when he heard his grandfather, whose grandfather. . . ." Narayan and his wife chose each other—over the objections of their families—and married when they were in their twenties. Sadly, her early death kept them from growing old together.

During his lifetime, Narayan saw many changes in the lives of Indian women. During the struggle for independence from Great Britain, women were active leaders and participants in the long years of civil disobedience. One of these women, Indira Gandhi, the daughter of the movement's leader Mahatma Gandhi, remained politically active and decades later became prime minister. With Indian independence in 1947, women became full citizens for the first time and acquired property rights and the right to vote. In 1955, about the time Narayan was writing "A Horse and Two Goats," a new Hindu Marriage Act raised the minimum age for marriage to fifteen for females and eighteen for males and gave women the right to seek a divorce if their husbands took additional wives. The next year, women won the right to inherit property from their fathers on equal terms with their brothers.

What does this mean for "A Horse and Two Goats?" Muni and his wife were married in a traditional ceremony at a young age and have lived together nearly all their lives. His expectations for their roles in relation to each other, based on tradition, have not been met. He remembers that "he had thrashed her only a few times in their career." The tone here is casual, without regret; thrashing is what husbands do when wives get out of line. But the balance of power did not hold, at least not in Muni's eyes: "later she had the upper hand." Critics have tended to accept Muni's view of this, agreeing that Muni's wife is controlling, even domineering. But is she?

In the opening, the narrator shows the town and a typical day. "His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment of the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday." It is a spartan meal, the most nutrition for the least money, but there is no mention of her preparing anything for herself. Is the narrator simply not interested in her diet, or does she skip the morning meal to leave more for Muni? "She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive."

Muni heads for the highway, where he grazes his two useless goats. They are thin, and the other villagers think he would be better off eating them than moving them back and forth each day. For the rest of the day, according to his usual schedule, he will sit in the shade of a statue, watch the goats and the passing cars, and daydream about his former prosperity. At this time in their marriage, he is not contributing much in the way of subsistence. His primary duty today is to "be careful not to argue and irritate" his wife, whom he seems to find unreasonable and difficult. His sixty-eight-year-old wife, on the other hand, "would somehow conjure up some food for him in the evening.... She was sure to go out and work—grind corn in the Big House, sweep or scrub somewhere, and earn enough to buy foodstuff and keep a dinner ready for him in the evening." If "her temper was undependable in the morning but improved by evening time," who could blame her?

The American's wife is even more on the periphery of the main action than Muni's wife; in fact the action could go along just as smoothy without her even being mentioned. But Narayan has a reason for introducing her. The American's wife's name is Ruth, the name of an Old Testament figure who stands in Judeo-Christian tradition as a model for wifely loyalty. The Biblical Ruth is loyal to her dead husband's family; the Ruth in "A Horse and Two Goats" is loyal to her husband and stands by to prop him up when he is about to do something off-balance. Although he speaks of her with an impatient tone, surely she would be right to "disapprove" of a full-sized horse statue in the living room and right to hang on to her plane ticket instead of throwing it away to accompany the statue on a ship. She seems to be a good sport, to support her husband's whims: "Next day she called the travel agent first thing and told him to fix it, and so here I am."

Having a loyal, grounded wife gives each of the husbands the freedom to move out into the world. Muni goes to the highway each day so he can "watch the highway and see the lorries and buses pass through to the hills, and it gave him a sense of belonging to a larger world." Later, he will describe the vehicles to his wife, whose duties do not permit her to move about so freely. Ruth has come to India with her husband, but he tells Muni that she is "staying back at Srinagar, and I am the one doing the rounds and joining her later."

There are other wives in the story. Muni remembers that in his youth he was often chosen for the women's roles in the plays the community performed. Sometimes he was the Goddess Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu. Lakshmi is one of the most popular goddesses in India, and countless people pray to her for wealth and good luck. She is a nurturer and a model for devoted wives. It is her obedience to Vishnu that gives her power. Muni also played the part of Sita, another incarnation of Lakshmi and the wife of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana.* Sita is another exemplary wife, who remains loyal to Rama in spite of many trials.

A possible reason for Muni's memories of these plays may lie in town gossip. To the delight of the men in town, the postman's wife has run off to the city with another man. The postman "does not speak to anyone at all nowadays. Who would if a wife did what she did? Women must be watched; otherwise they will sell themselves and the home." Men should keep an eye on their wives, because if they leave, the husbands lose their grounding.

In this speech, Muni comes as close as he ever will to stating the truth about wives: it may be annoying when they stay, but it is devastating when they leave. As Muni drives his goats out to the statue in the beginning of the story, he reflects on his age. "At seventy, one only waited to be summoned by God. When he was dead what would his wife do?" In fact, his wife would be lonely, but she is the one in the family with survival skills. The real question is what would Muni do without his wife if she were summoned by God? Where would a man be without a loyal wife?

Source: Cynthia Bily, "An Overview of 'A Horse and Two Goats'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Crane discusses "A Horse and Two Goats" in relation to common themes in Narayan's fiction.

"A Horse and Two Goats," by R. K. Narayan appeared, in a somewhat different form, in *The New Yorker* in 1965. It was first published in its present form in the collection *A Horse and Two Goats A Horse and Two Goats* (1970), and was later included in *Under the Banyan Tree,* a selection of Narayan's stories to 1984.

Narayan is admired as a writer whose novels and stories are remarkably consistent in quality. Yet one or two works do stand out—like the novel *The Guide* (1958) and the short story "A Horse and Two Goats." To many, Narayan is best known as the creator of Malgudi, one of literature's most enduring and endearing fictional worlds, so it is somewhat ironic that "A Horse and Two Goats" is one of only a handful of Narayan's stories not to be set in the brilliantly-realised world of Malgudi. Nevertheless, it is a tale that perfectly displays his mastery of the short story form.

Muni, the central character of the story, is a typical Narayan hero who has achieved little, and who feels he has been dealt with unsympathetically by the world around him, and by fate. Unlike most of Narayan's heroes, though, he is a lower-class village peasant, rather than the usual middle-class Malgudi-dweller, and he is very poor, as the appalling conditions of his life, always present behind the humour of the story, attest. Indeed, on one level this tale provides the non-Indian reader with a glimpse of the type of poverty and hardship that must be endured by the millions of Indians who, like Muni, have barely enough food to keep them alive:

His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment of the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday.

Narayan has, on occasions, been criticized for focussing on middle-class urban India in his stories, thereby excluding the poor of rural India who continue to make up the vast majority of the Indian population. But Narayan's purpose as a storyteller has never been to educate the non-Indian reader about India. So although we can learn specific things about village life in India from this story, it isn't about Indian problems or about Indian sensibilities as such. While what happens in "A Horse and Two Goats" is accurate to the particular of the Indian experience, it deliberately deals with themes that are quintessentially human, also. William Walsh has suggested it is a story about misunderstanding, a story about the gap between supposed and real understanding, a story about the element of incomprehension in human relationships.

"A Horse and Two Goats" is typical of Narayan's pre-Modernist, village storyteller style of writing. In a deceptively simple, linear narrative Narayan unfolds the story of Muni, an old goatherd. In keeping with his usual narrative formula, Narayan carefully follows Muni

as he goes about his daily, frequently humiliating existence—eating his meagre breakfast, visiting the local shopkeeper in a typically unsuccessful attempt tot get a few items of food on credit, and then taking his two scraggy goats to graze near the foot of the horse statute at the edge of the village. He spends the rest of his day crouching in the shade offered by the clay horse, or watching the traffic pass on the highway.

Once the nature of Muni's world has been established, both the plot and the comedy of the story hinge on the disruption of that routine (as they do with the arrival of Vasu in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* or Tim in *The World of Nagaraj*). This is a formula Narayan uses frequently, and always with consummate skill. In "A Horse and Two Goats" the seemingly timeless routine is interrupted when a car stops and a "red-faced foreigner," an American whose vehicle has run out of petrol, asks for directions to the nearest gas station.

This is where the comedy of misunderstanding takes over. After initially thinking he is being questioned about a crime by the khaki-clad foreigner, whom he assumes must be either a policeman or a soldier, Muni concludes that the man wants to buy his goats. Meanwhile the red-faced American, assuming the Tamil peasant owns the clay horse statute, which to the villagers, as Muni explains, "is our guardian, it means death to our adversaries," sets about trying to buy it, so he can take it back to the United States to decorate his living room: "I'm going to keep him right in the middle of the room . . . we'll stand around him and have our drinks."

The humour and the irony of this tale lies in the total benign incomprehension that exists between the two, not only in the way neither understands the other's language, but also in the absolute contrast of their cultural and economic backgrounds, emphasised by the way each values the clay horse. Much of this is conveyed through the wonderful double discourse that makes up a significant part of the story, with each of the characters happily developing his own hermetically-sealed interpretation of the other's words and gestures. The story's charm lies in the way Narayan refrains from passing judgement.

Source: Ralph J. Crane, "A Horse and Two Goats," in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* Detroit: St. James Press, 1994.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Rao analyzes "A Horse and Two Goats" to uncover Narayan's literary craftmanship.

Since writing last about Narayan's art as a novelist and, especially, after meeting him and conversing with him, the conviction has grown in me that he is a creative writer who has come to terms with himself and has no fierce quarrel with man, society or God. Narayan's novels reveal a creative intelligence enjoying inner harmony evolved rather early in life, though not without struggle and suffering. The house of fiction that Narayan built is built on the bedrock of his faith (Whatever happens India will go on, he told Naipaul). This, I thought, was my complaint against Narayan: he is unique, human and not so accessibly human. The distance between the world immediate to me and that of Narayan's later novels is the distinction between the Inferno and the Purgatory. I, of course believe that the Inferno—the world of Narayan's *Dark Room*—is too much with us. But I give credit to Narayan for his achievement: he makes his Purgatory credible (if not acceptable) to us of the Pit, both in the East and in the West. There is a muted contradiction in Narayan's later novels, between the humour which is humanizing and the grand Narayan vision which is so far above the merely human.

Then Narayan's *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories,* appeared, a slender collection of five stories. I believe that two stories in this volume are among the best written by an Indian in English. It is in these stories—the title story, "A Horse and Two Goats" and "Annamalai"—that Narayan truly evokes memories of the great Russian master, Chekhov. They are to me a marvellous re-affirma-tion of Narayan's (at) oneness with man; an orchestration of the merely human, inevitably rooted in the actual. I offer below an analysis of "A Horse and Two Goats" in a small bid to peep behind the curtains and see Narayan at work.

The opening lines:

Of *the seven hundred thousand villages* dotting the map of India, in which *the majority of India's five hundred million live, flourish and die,* Kritam was *probably the tiniest,* indicated on the district survey map by a microscopic dot, the map being meant more for the revenue official out to collect tax than for the guidance of the *motorist,* who in any case could not hop to reach it since it sprawled far from the highway at the end of a rough track furrowed up by the iron-hopped wheels of bullock carts. *But its size did not prevent its giving itself the grandiose name Kritam, which meant in Tamil "coronet" or "crown" on the brow of this subcontinent.* The village consisted of less than thirty houses, only one of them built with brick and cement. Painted a brilliant yellow and blue all over with gorgeous carvings of gods and gargoyles on its balustrade, it was known as the Big House. The other houses, *distributed in four streets,* were generally of bamboo thatch, straw, mud, and other unspecified material. *Muni's was the last house in the fourth street,* beyond which stretched the fields. (Italics mine)

We notice the easy, unselfconscious narrowing down of the focus from *seven hundred thousand villages* and *five hundred million* (lives) to Kritam, the tiniest village, and Muni the least of its villagers. The phrase *live, flourish and die* is not as much of a cliche as it appears; there is an unsuspected, seemingly endless agony between *flourish* and *die*: Muni in the story has had his halcyon days and is yet to die—we are going to witness him caught in that infernal suspension when living ends without death. Further there is the casual *motorist*; it is going to be a chance motorist that sets up ripples in the stagnant pond of Muni's life. And we also notice the touch of humour in the comment on the name Kritam; and as Muni is the least of the villagers his hut is the last in the last street of the village. (This is about two-thirds of the opening paragraph of the story. Further in the same paragraph we are also introduced to the "horse" of the title; we are told that the horse is, unexpectedly, made of clay. The horse is a "horse.")

So Muni is poor. A definition of his poverty follows, in the second para of the story:

His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it *a handful of millet flour,* added salt, and gave him his first nourishment for the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand *a packed lunch,* once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday. *She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive.*

This seems as good an account of Indian poverty as any (isn't Indian poverty a prime export item for many of our novelists in English?). But let us pause at the *packed lunch.* To commuters in India it might evoke associations of tiffin carriers; for westerners it could mean a nice fat carton of selective (watch your calories) snacks. We have already been told that Muni's first nourishment could not be more than *a handful of millet flour*; and when we are told that Muni's wife put in his hand *a packed lunch* it might conceivably rouse our expectations for Muni. But having roused our expectations, Narayan dashes them in the very next breath (just with the interruption of a comma): *once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday.* And this is poverty pared of sentimentality because it is illustrationally, the definition of Muni's poverty; but here is how, to cap it, Narayan concludes his statement:

... *She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive.*

This is a sudden lighting up; coming through the old woman's point of view, it is her casually muted, endearingly cynical expression of her love for her old man. This unobtrusive surfacing of the love between this old man and this old woman, the beauty of their relationship, in spite of the enormity of their indigence, is what gives the entire passage the sound of being merely factual and unsentimental; neither shutting his eyes to the presence of the wolves at the door nor spurning sentiment within the hut, Narayan gives character and dignity to the couple's poverty. The last sentence breaks through the crust of the preceding lines even as their humanity does through their sub-human living.

Narayan's invention moves ahead to illustrate and dramatize, to root his characters and their setting firmly in the actual. Here is the second half of the next paragraph:

. . . And so the two goats were tethered to the trunk of a drumstick tree which grew in front of his hut from which occasionally Muni could shake down drumsticks. *This morning he got six.* He carried them in with a sense of triumph. Although no one could say precisely who owned the tree, it was his because *he lived in its shadow.*

First, Narayan has initiated action with *This morning he got six.* For these six precious drumsticks Narayan sends Muni a little later to the shopman of the village who helps reveal a new dimension of Muni's poverty. And meanwhile there is the last sentence. *Although no one could say precisely who owned the tree, it was his because he lived in its shadow.* This is the drumstick tree. I believe that Narayan could have planted with equal facility any other vegetable tree or plant here; for example, a jack fruit tree or a gourd creeper. But it has to be the drumstick tree; for of course any South Indian with half Muni's weakness for drumstick sauce will know that a drumstick tree, as trees go, casts pretty little shadow; its small sparse leaves don't help, unlike say a banyan tree, shelter anybody that "lives" in its shadow. We normally have to take the idiomatic meaning of the phrase, but I think in the given context it acquires literal overtones. Thus we see that Narayan's invention is very economical—the crafty artist not only makes use of the drumsticks but also the drumstick leaves.

When Muni asks his wife for drumstick sauce, she orders him out to somehow procure the groceries for making the sauce; and Muni approaches the village shopman. The shopman helps Narayan throw light on Muni in a couple of ways. First we come to know of the "daughter."

"I will pay you everything on the first of the next month." "As always, and whom do you expect to rob by then?" Muni felt caught and mumbled, "My daughter has sent word that she will be sending me money."

"Have you a daughter?" sneered the shopman. "And she is sending you money! . . ."

The Munis have no children, as a little later on we come to know. In the Indian context even if one has many daughters (not a welcome proposition) one rarely expects to receive monthly allowance from any one of them—where's your self-respect? But even daughters will do for Muni, childless, would very much like to have some.

He recollected the thrill he had felt when he mentioned a daughter to that shopman; although it was not believed, what if he did not have a daughter?—his cousin in the next village had many daughters, and any one of them was as good as his; he was fond of them all and would buy them sweets *if he could afford it.* Still everyone in the village whispered behind their backs that Muni and his wife were a barren couple....

The non-existent daughter thus adds a new dimension to Muni's poverty; he is not only poor in money and material possessions, he is also utterly poor—in progeny. This sort of freckles Muni's character, this old man, and he is insinuated fully into our sympathy.

Muni may be poor but he still has vestiges of dignity and self-respect. Here is the conclusion of his unsuccessful mission to the shopman who indulges in Muni-baiting giving him nothing but mockery and scorn.

. . . Muni thought helplessly, "My poverty is exposed to everybody. But what can I do?"

"More likely you are seventy," said the shopman. "You also forget that you mentioned a birthday five weeks ago when you wanted castor oil for your holy bath."

"Bath! Who can dream of a bath when you have to scratch the tankbed for a bowl of water? We would all be parched and dead but for the Big House, where they let us take a pot of water from their well." After saying this Muni unobtrusively rose and moved off.

He told his wife, "That scoundrel would not give me anything. So go out and sell the drumsticks for what they are worth."

Muni may not have got much out of the shopman but Narayan has. Narayan's art is rich in the invention of the actual. But let us now move on to the farcical scene that is central to the action of the story. This is the scene between Muni and the foreigner. Basically Narayan is exploiting a device from the slapstick drama of our popular theatre. It is the humour of situation and dialogue that two deaf people create when they encounter each other in earnest business.

. . . Now the other man (the foreigner) suddenly pressed his palms together in a salute, smiled and said, "Namaste! How do you do?"

At which Muni spoke the only English expressions he had learnt, "Yes, no." Having exhausted his English vocabulary, he started in Tamil....

And while "The foreigner nodded his head and listened courteously though he understood nothing," he is anxious that the Indian should understand him; he has already set his heart on the statue. He is puzzled that Muni doesn't understand English. He says:

". . . I have gotten along with English everywhere in this country, but you don't speak it. Have you any religious or spiritual scruples against English speech?"

Not an incapable man. But with Muni he seems to be getting nowhere; the two are on two different wavelengths. Here is more evidence of Narayan's shrewd exploitation of the linguistic curtain between the two:

Noting the other's interest in his speech. Muni felt encouraged to ask, "How many children have you?" with appropriate gestures with his hands. Realizing that a question was being asked, the red man replied, "I said a hundred," which encouraged Muni to go into details. "How many of your children are boys and how many girls? Where are they? Is your daughter married? It is difficult to find a son-in-law in your country also?"

So they go on, representatives of two civilizations, failing to establish contact except by the sheerest accident when the result as in the climax, is comic catastrophe.

The foreigner followed his look and decided that it would be a sound policy to show an interest in *the old man's pets.* He went up casually to them and stroked their backs with every show of courteous attention. Now the truth dawned on the old man. His dream of a lifetime was about to be realised. He understood that the red man was actually making an offer for the goats.

Thus Muni and what's-his-name. But what is the foreigner's name? He is unnamed. He is the red-faced foreigner, the red man, the foreigner without a name. But how marvellously Narayan invents the American with the very quirk and tang of the American's speech:

". . . I assure you that this will have the best home in the USA. I'll push away the bookcase, you know, I love books and am a member of five book clubs, and the choice and bonus volumes mount up to a pile really in our living room, as high as this horse itself. But they'll have to go. Ruth may disapprove, but I will convince her. The TV may have to be shifted too. We can't have everything in the living room. Ruth will probably say what about when we have a party? I'm going to keep him right in the middle of the room. I don't see how that can interfere with the party—we'll stand around him and have our drinks."

This is expert literary ventriloquism and it helps superbly concretize the image of the Ameri-can. Still, this is a case of a character being endowed with more than a local habitation—and that without a name: purposely. His speech, his manner and his actions typify him as a westerner (and who is more western in modern times than a New Yorker?); and the elision of his name, perfectly natural in the situation, is just the deviation to endow him with more than ordinary significance. He had told his wife in America, "We will visit India this winter, it's time to look at other civilizations." The unnamed foreigner is a typical representative of his civilization. He is *the* westerner.

The other civilization is India and of course who more true to her than Muni? To begin with he comes from *probably the tiniest village* of India. Narayan has always believed that India is her villages. (We remember *The Guide*; it is the rural India that traps Raju and positively sublimates him.) Narayan has already indicated this in his opening line. "Of the seven hundred thousand villages dotting the map of India, in which the majority of India's five hundred million live . . ." Not simply quantitatively; even qualitatively India is her villages. The *tiniest* (and *microscopic dot*) is thus microcosmic and the name Kritam with that selective touch of humour Narayan honours it with emphasizes the same symbolic value, with *the four streets* as likely standing for the four chief castes of the traditional Indian society. Muni may not know more than "Yes, no" of English (the only one who knows English in Kritam, the postman, has not prospered much—he is fighting shy of the shopman to whom he is indebted and his wife has run away with somebody); but he has imbibed the puranas through the oral tradition, and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabaratha* and the legends of the land, can talk no end of them. He is poor *and* dignified; unlettered *and* well-drilled in the country's rich lore. Muni is as

Indian as one in the centre of the society can realistically wish. He is the Indian delegate; he represents India for Narayan.

Here of course is the East-West encounter, so dear to our writers and critics—with a vital difference: it is offered to us through the prism of Narayan's vision, humanized by his humour.

But that is not the end of the story's potential for significance. The statue of the horse and soldier too is subject to just that accretion of meaning which marks it out as a metaphor. Narayan's careful and elaborate description of the statue—running into 24 lines—is supported by Muni's attempt at estimating its ancestry:

". . . I was an urchin this high when I heard my grandfather explain this horse and warrior, and my grandfather himself was this high when he heard his grandfather, whose grandfather...."

In the heightened context of the encounter between India and the West, the Horse stands for India's ancient heritage. But there is no sentimental mushing up here. We come back to the title, "A Horse and Two Goats." A Horse made of clay; Muni sees no value in it; though he has moved in its shadow ever since he can remember, he is not aware of any special value attached to it; but the appreciative American businessman is eager to possess it—even if he has to build his cocktail parties around it. Two Goats; made of poor (metaphorical) clay, probably far below the stipulations of a Chicago butcher. The gawky goats are Muni's only property, his only capital and not the horse; the American of course has no use for them, except to ingratiate himself with—for he has concluded they are Muni's *pets.* Each thinks the other values what he himself values; each doesn't value what the other does. In the event both leave with an absurd sense of business well—and hardly—done.

Source: V. Panduranga Rao, "The Craftmanship of R. K. Narayan," in *Indian Writing in English,* edited by Ramesh Mohan, Orient Longman, Ltd., 1978, pp. 56-64.

Topics for Further Study

Muni and his wife live a simple life, probably without running water or electricity in their home. How has life changed for poor villagers in India since 1960 when this story was written? Throughout the world, do more people live like Muni and his wife, or like you and the others in your class?

Find the stories Muni mentions, from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.* (Perhaps you can find Narayan's own translations.) How would this uneducated man know stories from two-thousand-year-old poems? Why might Muni be remembering them at this point in his life? What stories do most people in the United States know, whatever their level of education or sophistication?

Investigate the role that Great Britain has played in Indian politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially before 1947. Also, find out what you can about the origin of the word *khaki.* Does your new information help explain Muni's warning to himself, "Beware of Khaki"?

Most critics find Muni's wife cold and unsympathetic. Do you agree? Compare the lives of the two wives in this story, and what can be guessed about their personalities. How important are their wives to these two men?

Find the meanings for these terms from the story: *dhall, drumsticks, swarga, betel leaves, dhoti.*

Then look closely at an American short story you have read recently. Which terms would a person from Muni's village need to have explained?

Compare and Contrast

1947: One of the goals of the new Constitution in India is to provide free and compulsory education for Indian children. In 1951, approximately 80 percent of the adults in India, like Muni, are illiterate.

1990s: Approximately 52 percent of the adult population is considered literate (64 percent of the men and 39 percent of the women).

1951: Approximately 80 percent of Indian adults live in poverty. The percentage is higher for children. Few of these people have access to clean water.

1997: Due to the spread of technology and a growing educated class engaged in international trade, only one-third of India's population lives below the poverty line. Most villages have access to safe drinking water.

1950s: One hundred rupees is enough money for Muni to think about building a small thatched roof and opening a small food stand. It is twenty times his debt to the shopman.

1998: One hundred rupees is equivalent to approximately $2.35 in American dollars.

1950s: Agricultural yields are low, and insufficient to feed India's 400 million people. Monsoons in 1951 and 1952 add to the country's food deficits. By 1960, food grain production is increasing.

1990s: India grows enough food to feed its 935 million people, and also produces its own steel, computer software, and nuclear energy.

What Do I Read Next?

Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories (1985) is one of Narayan's best-known collections of short stories and includes many brief pieces that are little more than character sketches, originally written for *The Hindu* in Madras during his early career. One of them, "Like the Sun," gives an Indian version of the often-told tale of a man who can only tell the truth.

Of his fourteen novels, Narayan has said that his own favorite is *A Tiger for Malgudi.* Set in the same fictional town as most of his fiction, this fable incorporates Indian folktales and myths and is narrated by Raja, a tiger.

Saros Cowasjee has edited two collections of Indian short fiction, *Stories from the Raj: From Kipling to Independence* (1982) and *More Stories from the Raj: From Kipling to the Present Day* (1986). Although both volumes are out of print, they are available from most good-sized libraries, and they demonstrate the variety and strength of the short story in India.

Many critics have compared Narayan's fiction-al town of Malgudi to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, though most find that Faulkner's vision is darker than Narayan's. Faulkner's *Collected Stories* (1950, 1977) offers many stories set in his fictional landscape and features recurring characters.

Published in 1924, before Indian independence from Great Britain, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is a novel about the difficulties of interracial friendship in colonial India. During this time of heightened tension, even the most tolerant of the British find their compassion and common sense overrun by their racial prejudice.

The *Ramayana* tells the adventure story of the ruler Rama, who loses his kingdom and joins forces with the monkey king Sugriva to regain his wife and his throne. Written in about 300 B.C., the *Ramayana* exists in many English translations, including Narayan's own *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (1972).

Considered the longest poem ever written, the *Mahabharata,* or the Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty, was composed between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. It contains many of the most well-known stories and legends of Indian civilization. It, too, has appeared in many English versions, including a 1978 translation by Narayan, *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Prose Version of the Indian Epic.*

Clear Light of Day (1980) by Anita Desai, an important female Indian novelist and short story writer. Two sisters, Tara and Bim, suffer through family conflicts, political violence and an epidemic in early twentieth-century India, and learn that forgiveness can heal old wounds.

Further Study

Johnson, Gordon. *Cultural Atlas of India,* New York: Facts on File, 1996.

A thorough introduction to the rich cultural and political history of the Indian subcontinent, featuring detailed maps and many illustrations showing the area's ethnic and religious diversity.

Kain, Geoffrey, editor. *R. K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993.

Nearly all of the essays in this collection focus on Narayan's novels and his short fiction of Malgudi, but they provide useful insights into his overriding themes and techniques. The volume includes John Lowe's interview with Narayan, in which the writer reveals himself to be strangely and fascinatingly uninterested in his own writing processes.

Narayan, R. K. *My Days: A Memoir,* New York: Viking, 1974.

This award-winning autobiography covers Narayan's first 67 years and first 17 books in under 200 pages. His stories of life in India, and the influence of his family on his work, read like the best of his fiction.

Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Although no longer up to date, this is the most readable overview of Narayan's life and work. It includes an insightful biography and an interpretation of "A Horse and Two Goats."

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Ramana, P. S. *Message in Design: A Study of R. K. Narayan's Fiction,* New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1993, pp. 131-32.

Shack, Neville. A review of *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories,* in *Times Literary Supplement,* October 18, 1985, p. 1168.

Taliaferro, Frances. A review of *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories,* in *Book World—The Washington Post,* July 28, 1985, pp. 7, 13.

Trivedi, H. C., and N. C. Soni. "Short Stories of R. K. Narayan: An Estimate," in *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan,* edited by Atma Ram, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981, p. 191.

Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 100.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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