

Miguel Street Study Guide

Miguel Street by V. S. Naipaul

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Contents

Miguel Street Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-6, Bogart, The Thing Without a Name, George and the Pink House, His Chosen Calling, Man-Man, B. Wordsworth.....	4
Chapters 7-11, The Coward, The Pyrotechnicist, Titus Hoyt, I.A., The Maternal Instinct, The Blue Cart.....	7
Chapters 12-17, Love, Love, Love, Alone, The Mechanical Genius, Caution, Until the Soldiers Came, Hat, How I Left Miguel Street.....	9
Characters.....	12
Objects/Places.....	15
Themes.....	17
Style.....	19
Quotes.....	22
Topics for Discussion.....	23



Plot Summary

V. S. Naipaul is an Indian writer from Trinidad who has written many novels that are set in the developing world. He is focused on writing about the history of areas and peoples that are usually forgotten. Naipaul also won the Nobel Prize for literature and a number of other honors. *Miguel Street* is his semi-autobiographical work which occurs during World War II in Port of Spain, Tobago and Trinidad. The book is set in a particular time but is not confined to strict chronological order. Instead, the book is divided into seventeen chapters which are a series of episodes in Naipaul's life, though Naipaul himself remains unnamed throughout the entire work. *Miguel Street* is the location of all the main characters of each episode, a street in the western part of Port of Spain. Naipaul writes from the first-person and describes his own experiences within each episode save towards the end of the book.

Miguel Street is the story of shattered hopes and dreams. Every major character in the book either fails to achieve their life's dream or succeeds only to the mildest degree. Many go insane. The book is full of tragedy though it is typically understated. The book supplements a focus on tragedy with highly comedic elements. These are not "laugh out loud" sorts of moments but instead light-hearted portraits of a particular time and place. The only person who really escapes *Miguel Street* is the author himself, who is a boy and teenager during most of the book and who leaves for London on a scholarship to study pharmacology.

The characters featured in each episode are very colorful. The first character is Bogart who starts off appearing to be the most boring person the author has ever met. As time goes on, it is revealed that Bogart randomly leaves *Miguel Street* to work odd jobs associated with great adventure. Mr. Popo is a tragic craftsman and carpenter who fails to create anything of value despite his best efforts. B. Wordsworth is a poet who has taken the name of William Wordsworth. His goal is to write the greatest poem in history but he never writes a line before he dies. The most insane character is Man-Man who became increasingly religious until he declared himself the Messiah and demanded that people hang him on a cross and stone him. When they actually started stoning him, he dropped the act and demanded that they let him down.

Miguel Street also contains a gang of young adults of which the author is a member. It also includes his good friend Hat and his brother Edward who both have their own shattered dreams. Each tries to pursue a more exciting and American form of life and both fail. These tragedies strike the author the hardest.



Chapters 1-6, Bogart, The Thing Without a Name, George and the Pink House, His Chosen Calling, Man-Man, B. Wordsworth

Chapters 1-6, Bogart, The Thing Without a Name, George and the Pink House, His Chosen Calling, Man-Man, B. Wordsworth Summary

Chapter 1, Bogart: The author introduces a man named Bogart, who rarely talked and made his money by tailoring. He had a number of friends, including Hat, with whom he often spent his time. They all talked and made merry but Bogart rarely laughed, told stories or anything of the kind. Instead, he was the most boring person the author had ever known. One day Bogart simply up and left his house on Miguel Street and was gone for two months. No one knew where he had gone. When he returned, it eventually came out that he had gotten a job on a ship and had gone to British Guiana where he had become a cowboy, smuggled things and had run a brothel until he had been arrested and escaped. When he returned, people no longer called him "Bogart" to mock him for being so unlike the Humphrey Bogart of Casablanca, but instead for having a life much like his. A bit later he disappeared for another four months and continued to sound more American. He started being nice to children- this occurred after his third disappearance as well. Bogart was eventually arrested by Sergeant Charles for bigamy. He had given a woman a baby and left her.

Chapter 2, The Thing Without a Name: Popo was a local carpenter married to a woman who worked as a cook. It was a rare thing on Miguel Street for a man's wife to work. Many on the Street didn't like Popo, though the author did. They thought he was a "man-woman". Popo was a nice man and a hard, happy worker until his wife left him and he took to drinking. The men on the Street liked him better, though. One day, he left them, traveled to Arima, and beat up the man who had stolen his wife. He wasn't the same man afterwards becoming angry and working constantly. Two weeks later he married the author's aunt. This caused him to settle down and continue to do carpentry work making "the thing without a name." One day, out of the blue, Popo was jailed. He had been stealing things and remodeling them to sell. Many on the Street felt he was a real man. The author's aunt, Emelda, stayed on Miguel Street and people felt sorry for her while Popo was in jail. After he came back, he was a hero, better than Hat or Bogart. He changed and worked honestly again but lost his charm.

Chapter 3, George and the Pink House: George was a very scary man, scarier than anyone else the author knew on Miguel Street. He let his wife do all the family's work as a cook. He also beat her savagely, along with his two children, the elder brother Elias



and the younger girl Dolly. The family took the beating poorly and over time it only became worse. George also heaped abuse on others, like calling the author names. Eventually, George's wife died from the beating and a shabby funeral was held for her. Elias, who had become a member of their circle, dropped out of it. George began to display great guilt and drink constantly. George left for a week and came back with a new Indian wife, a bit older, but he started beating her and his daughter again. George's wife eventually left him and he started a brothel that was often frequented by American soldiers. Elias spent his time studying for an exam while Dolly cooked for the brothel. George was prospering now and got respect from women. He married Dolly off to a small, nasty man named Razor. At her wedding, she finally stopped giggling and cried when she was mocked by the crowd. She then disappeared from the street. As the months passed, the women and Americans disappeared. George was living alone and became old. He died soon after that.

Chapter 4, His Chosen Calling: It turned out that Elias was very intelligent. He started spending most of his time with Titus Hoyt at a local school that prepped kids for passing an exam to qualify to become a doctor. Elias was set on it but could not pass the exam despite his reputation as being very smart. He tried and tried until he finally gave up and became a sanitation inspector but he couldn't even pass the exam to get his full license. So he eventually settled and became a street aristocrat and drove a scavenging cart. Eventually the author sat for the Cambridge Senior School Certificate Examination and did better than Elias ever had, qualifying to become a doctor. Elias was incredibly jealous, since they had said he was the smartest boy in all of Port of Spain and Trinidad in particular.

Chapter 5, Man-Man: Man-man was always a bit frightening and odd. He very much liked to play tricks on people, particularly by using his beloved dog to put excrement on their clothes or in their shops. He and the author often interacted and Man-man would talk to him about his education. He had a perfect English accent somehow. One day, after Man-man's dog died, he became extremely depressed and then later said he saw God and turned his life around, becoming good. He started to preach on the street corner and gave away all of his possessions. His preaching was really powerful and made women cry and gave men nightmares. But one day he declared that he was the new messiah and that he would be crucified, so one day he had a cross brought to him and dragged it to another town. He then had people tie him to it and stood up. He told the people to stone him, but when they really did so, he screamed for them to stop cursing loudly. The police took him away and the authorities placed him under observation for good.

Chapter 6, B. Wordsworth: One day, a man came by the author's house. He called himself Black Wordsworth or B. Wordsworth and said he was related to the White Wordsworth. He also claimed to be a poet. B. Wordsworth spoke perfect English and told the author that he had the eye of a poet. Over time, the author spent more and more time with him and they went on long walks together. Everything B. Wordsworth did, he did as though he was doing it for the first time. He told the author one day that he was working on a poem that was intended to be the greatest poem in the world. He wrote only one line a month and intended to have a complete poem after twenty-two



years of work. After a time, however, the author heard nothing more of the poem. One day, B. Wordsworth seemed ill in his home and told the author to never come back to him. He then told him that all the things he said about poetry and the greatest poem in the world were not true. The author left the house crying. A year later, the poet and his house were gone, as if they had never been there.

Chapters 1-6, Bogart, The Thing Without a Name, George and the Pink House, His Chosen Calling, Man-Man, B. Wordsworth Analysis

Miguel Street is a fictionalized tale of V.S. Naipaul's young adulthood set in wartime Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Miguel Street is the location of a number of homes which house a number of colorful characters. Each chapter tells one of their stories. The book does not, thus far, appear to set up any sort of plot, though there are seventeen distinct chapters. The book is written from Naipaul's perspective and does not reveal more information than what he seems to have at the time. The book is not written in chronological order but instead seems to be built around character descriptions and their particular stories.

What is most striking about the book up until this point is (a) the rough nature of the characters analyzed in each chapter and (b) the ways in which they are regarded in terms of their high degree of masculinity. For instance, Bogart, the character described in Chapter 1, is initially seen as the most boring person that the author has ever met. But when it is discovered that he went off to sea, smuggled goods and ran a brothel, he earned an enormous amount of respect from everyone and became a much more highly regarded character, often referred to as being among "we men". Similarly, Popo was initially seen as somewhat feminine because his wife worked but when she left him and he beat up the man who stole her, he became more respected.

In many cases, the author goes to lengths to explain how life can continue on Miguel Street despite the tragedies in the lives of its residents. Elias's father, George, beat him constantly and beat his mother to death and yet he persevered through failing numerous exams to make a good life for himself insofar as he was able.

Most of the characters speak broken and poor English. Having a command of the English language and having an English or American accent is highly regarded, so is having an education. Education is also seen as a way out of life in Miguel Street. Both Elias and the author go to school for enough time to try to pass various English examinations so they can go on to qualify for a number of high profile positions.

One event of significance among the chapters is the fact that the author discusses himself increasingly more, telling of the exciting but ultimately heartbreaking experience he had shared with B. Wordsworth and his passing a Cambridge Examination with sufficiently high marks to qualify for a number of important opportunities.



Chapters 7-11, The Coward, The Pyrotechnicist, Titus Hoyt, I.A., The Maternal Instinct, The Blue Cart

Chapters 7-11, The Coward, The Pyrotechnicist, Titus Hoyt, I.A., The Maternal Instinct, The Blue Cart Summary

Chapter 7 concerns Big Foot, a large, dark, scary man who lived on Miguel Street. Big Foot frightened the author immensely. He had been in jail and seemed always prepared for a fight. He also enjoyed bullying other people on the street. It turns out that his father (a priest) and his mother had beaten him regularly as a child, which hardened him. Big Foot worked a number of odd jobs and growing up on Miguel Street, the author never liked him. They connected briefly one day when they were alone on a beach and Big Foot cut his foot on a piece of glass and started crying. The author knew his secret penchant for tears. When Big Foot started boxing, he quickly grew in prominence and respect, but when he lost his first big match and cried after losing on points, everyone lost respect for him. He disappeared soon thereafter.

In Chapter 8, the reader is introduced to Morgan, the comedian of Miguel Street. The problem was that Morgan wasn't very funny and all his attempts to get people to laugh at him misfired. He was also something of a pyrotechnician and spent much of his day designing fireworks that rarely worked. Morgan also had ten children with his wife, Mrs. Morgan, a tall, strong woman. The author thought Morgan was crazy because he was given to random fits of rage, though they were often connected to times when he failed to get respect from other people. Morgan tried and tried to get people to laugh at him and appreciate his work but failed until he cheated on his wife and she held him up by his pants in front of the people who lived on the street. They all laughed at him but it broke Morgan completely. Soon thereafter he accidentally burned down his house but all his fireworks went off and everyone was impressed. He was charged with arson though was not convicted. He soon left Miguel Street.

Chapter 9 is about Mr. Titus Hoyt, a man who aspired to be a great teacher and thinker who lived on Miguel Street. The author first met him when he moved from Chaguanas after his father died. Titus saw that the author was very smart and encouraged him to become educated, sometimes against the author's mother's wishes. Titus, however, was not really qualified to become a teacher and so educated himself. He organized a few of the local boys into various clubs and study groups but they usually broke up. This cycle lasted until finally Titus got his teaching certificate (Inner Arts degree or I.A.) and set up a school where children could take the Cambridge School Certificate. Eventually the Guardian got wind of Titus's work and did a story on him. Titus was very happy to achieve such recognition.



Chapter 10 tells the story of Laura, a woman who had eight children by seven different men. She was a very vivacious and funny character and took a liking to the author. The main focus in the chapter is Laura's relationship with Nathaniel, the only man with whom she had two children. Nathaniel was a small, coarse, sexist man and Laura beat him savagely and regularly. They fought frequently. Laura always took good care of her children and seemed generally happy. However, when her daughter Lorna told her that she was pregnant, Laura was devastated and lost all of her vivacity. It wasn't clear why save that Laura did not wish her fate on her children. When Lorna drowned some time later, Laura remained despondent but thought it was a better fate for Lorna.

Chapter 11 introduces Eddoes, one of the author's friends. He was something of an aristocrat on Miguel Street. He was a very clean scavenger, who helped keep the streets clean (basically a garbage man) but he got paid good money. He would make even more money from selling rich people's trash. He was a very useful vendor of goods, often providing great goods and great prices. Eddoes was usually in good spirits until a woman told him that she was carrying his baby. She then used the baby to extract money from him, which caused him to lose his spirit. After a year or so, the baby's mother brought his daughter to him to stay. Eddoes called her Pleasure and she became the baby of Miguel Street, cared for by everyone. Due to Pleasure, Eddoes's spirit returned.

Chapters 7-11, The Coward, The Pyrotechnicist, Titus Hoyt, I.A., The Maternal Instinct, The Blue Cart Analysis

Chapters Seven through Eleven introduce still more characters. We can also see a general theme start to arise. Miguel Street is the location of lost dreams. Many men and women seek a better future for themselves and others but routinely fail to achieve it. Big Foot, for instance, dreams of being a hero and a boxer, but he loses his first major match. When he cries, all the respect he had earned on the street evaporates. Similarly, Morgan has two basic desires: to make people laugh and to make beautiful fireworks. But he only achieves the first goal when his wife humiliates him over an affair and his second when he accidentally burns down his house. Titus Hoyt has some success as a schoolmaster, however and so provides an example of an exception. However, it takes him some time to rise from his fake teaching abilities to having real abilities.

Laura is a particularly tragic case. She has an enormous number of children with nearly as large a group of men. She is typically happy and vivacious but secretly wants a much brighter future for her children. When her eldest daughter Lorna tells her that she is pregnant, Laura loses all of her hope and quickly despairs. She thinks that Lorna's death by drowning is a better fate for her than living as Laura has. Eddoes is a character whose story is somewhat mixed. He is happy and productive but a manipulative woman nearly brings him down for good until his little daughter makes him happy again.



Chapters 12-17, Love, Love, Love, Alone, The Mechanical Genius, Caution, Until the Soldiers Came, Hat, How I Left Miguel Street

Chapters 12-17, Love, Love, Love, Alone, The Mechanical Genius, Caution, Until the Soldiers Came, Hat, How I Left Miguel Street Summary

Chapter 12 concerns a couple with severe relationship problems, Mr. and Mrs. Hereira. Toni Hereira, the husband, was an ugly man and a terrible drunk, while Mrs. Hereira or Angela, was a beautiful, refined woman. It was a mystery to those on Miguel Street why they were together. Toni frequently beat Angela and Angela started to come to the author's home regularly as a refuge. She eventually became good friends with the author's mother. She frequently worried about Toni and whether he would kill her but she kept going back to him. Eventually she decided to leave him. It turned out that she had a husband, a doctor named Henry Christiani, who was very rich but had publicly repudiated her. He took her back. When Toni discovered that Angela had left him, he became extremely drunk and deteriorated quickly and ultimately disappeared from Miguel Street.

Chapter 13 discusses the case of the author's Uncle Bhakcu, who was a first-rate mechanic. Uncle Bhakcu worked very hard fixing cars. Occasionally he would get hurt while he worked, and people would have to come by and help him by, say, lifting cars up off of him. The most significant pieces of the story are his experience rebuilding a lorry and his fights with his wife. Bhakcu dreamed of rebuilding a very nice car and borrowed help to fix it but he couldn't quite figure out how to do it. He took out his frustrations on his very strong, sturdy wife, Mrs. Bhakcu. He beat her savagely with a cricket bat but she never relented in heaping verbal abuse on him. Eventually Uncle Bhakcu had to give up on the lorry because he had no more money to take care of the car. Instead, he started reading the Ramayana constantly and decided to become a Pundit.

In Chapter 14, the author introduces Mr. Bolo, an older, sad and suspicious man who made money as a barber. He was also something of a gambler and tried constantly to win money by participating in a "spot the football" game in the Trinidad Guardian. He never, ever won. Bolo also eventually quit barbering because he said he couldn't trust himself not to hurt people when cutting their hair. He sold his things and left the street for a while. When he returned, he didn't have much but told the author to help him check whether he would win something after buying sweepstakes tickets. For three years, the author kept his secret. He eventually won but refused to believe the author when he told



him. He then tore the ticket up. Years later, the author rarely saw Mr. Bolo save when he came out of his house to collect his old-age pension.

The story of Edward, Hat's brother, is told in Chapter 15. Edward was an artist who often decorated his friends' clothes. But he was also interested in making money, particularly working for Americans stationed there. Edward said they paid well. He quickly took to imitating American culture, acting more like them, talking more like them, dressing like them, and so on. He increasingly spent less time with his friends and family on Miguel Street. One day he told Hat that he had gotten an American girl pregnant. She moved in with him but was very sickly and pale. It turned out that she was not pregnant and was suicidal. Edward became miserable despite getting so close to the Americans. Eventually his wife left him for an American man, which made Edward very sad. He had tried to be American but felt rejected by them. So Edward left Trinidad. The last the author heard of him, he had gotten an American woman pregnant.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, the author discusses Hat, the man to whom he was closest on Miguel Street. Hat loved to make life a mystery and a game. He met the author when he took him and other boys to cricket matches. Hat loved to make bets, particularly impossible ones. He loved life, had animals and sometimes got in trouble with the law. Hat was a medium-sized, middle-aged and self-sufficient man. When Edward started spending time with Americans, though, Hat had a sort of mid-life crisis and started partying a lot in the city. One day he brought a woman home with him named Dolly. Dolly kept to herself, was lazy and seemed to have a stable life with Hat. They never fought. But eventually she left him, stole his things and went to another man. When Hat found them, the man ran and Hat nearly killed Dolly. Hat got four years in jail and was sent to a small island prison named Carrera. He was gone for three years. In that time, the author grew from fifteen to eighteen years old. He had become a man and when Hat returned he had lost his former brightness. A part of the author had died when Hat left. He was now a different person.

The final chapter explains how the author left Miguel Street. The author was eighteen and had gotten a bit wild, often partying too much for his mother to handle. She decided that he should leave the Street and took him to Ganesh Pundit, a religious and political leader who ensured that the author could get away and go to England on a scholarship to study pharmaceuticals. All the necessary paperwork went through and the author was set to leave. Some of his friends were angry, others pretended not to care. His mother threw a party for him on his last night, but it felt more like a wake. He received gifts from friends and family. Almost everyone came. People knew he would probably never come back. After a day or so, he indeed left for good.



Chapters 12-17, Love, Love, Love, Alone, The Mechanical Genius, Caution, Until the Soldiers Came, Hat, How I Left Miguel Street Analysis

All but the final chapter of the book continues the book's overarching theme of broken dreams. Just to explain each example, case by case, let's begin with the Hereiras. In Chapter 12, the author introduces Angela Hereira, a refined woman who is inexplicably in a relationship with a very ugly, violent drunk man. It turns out that she is married to a rich doctor but had rebelled against him and run off with a man for whom her husband had been caring medically. She starts to visit the author's house constantly and becomes friends with the author's mother and constantly complains about abuse. She frequently fears for her life yet she continually returns to her husband, Toni, somehow expecting things to be different. In Chapter 13, Uncle Bhakcu becomes confident enough in his mechanic skills to buy an expensive car to repair but his repairs fail when the engine appears too complicated. He is ultimately made worse off by the endeavor. In Chapter 14, Mr. Bolo gambles constantly in order to make it big. And the one time he wins something, he won't believe it and rips up his ticket before cashing it in.

Edward, Hat's brother, forms the dream of becoming, in effect, an American and spends a lot of time around Americans stationed near Miguel Street. He even meets and marries a sickly white American woman and cares for her despite her being suicidal. But, she leaves him and all the acceptance Edward had been getting from the Americans disappears. Edward eventually leaves Miguel Street as a result. Similarly, in Chapter 16, Hat tries to live it up due to a mid-life crisis and then gets married to a woman who eventually leaves him. In a fit of rage, he nearly kills her and goes to jail. His dream of finding meaning in his life leads tragically to prison.

The book tells story after story of broken dreams, save the last chapter where the author escapes via a pharmacological scholarship to England and away from the Trinidad area. The author is the only one who finds success and a genuinely transformed life, with very few exceptions. There is no real climax to the book save perhaps the author's final journey in his move away from home.



Characters

The Author

V.S. Naipaul is the author of *Miguel Street* but remains in one sense anonymous throughout the entire book. He interacts with others but none of them refer to him by name. Instead, for most of the book the author simply tells the story of other individuals and interweaves his experiences throughout each of the episodes. The author's personality is never quite explained, nor are his interests or intelligence except in a few places. One example would be when the author spends an enormous amount of time with B. Wordsworth who says that he is a poet by nature. Another time is when everyone praises Elias's intelligence despite the fact that he fails the Cambridge Exam on numerous occasions. When the author passes it, the reader should glean from this that he is very intelligent.

The author's personality is developed most toward the end of the book. In the penultimate chapter, the author explains that he had been rather close to Hat and was fifteen when Hat went to prison. When Hat got out of prison, the author was eighteen. He notes that he was no longer a child, but a man working a job. And he explains how when Hat went to jail "part of me" died. In the final chapter, it becomes clear that most people on Miguel Street would like to leave, including the author, who is the only person of the whole community ever to escape.

Hat

Hat makes an appearance in almost every episode. He is a happy-go-lucky man who works odd jobs to make ends meet. He enjoys life more than anyone the author has ever known and does so despite many challenges and heartache that he feels. One tragedy of Hat's arises when his brother Edward starts trying to become American. Hat has a kind of mid-life crisis and starts going into the city to party and meet women. Eventually he decides that he needs to settle down, so he marries a woman named Dolly. When Dolly cheats on him, he scares off her lover and almost beats her to death. The incident results in a four year prison sentence, which puts Hat out of communication with everyone on the street since the prison, Carrera, is on a small island a good distance away from Miguel Street.

Hat's ubiquitous appearances outside of the chapter of which he is the focus show him to be the leader of the group of friends on Miguel Street that contains Eddoes, Elias, and the author, and a few others, including Bogart early on. Hat is in some ways the running commentator on all the characters and is clearly the most vocal and most quoted character in the entire book. Hat is also partly responsible for giving the book its oft understated description of tragedy, since he often makes light of people's struggles.



Edward

Edward is Hat's brother, a painter, who struggles to become American but to no avail.

Bogart

Bogart is a stupid and boring man who earns the respect of the street for his occasional dangerous adventures.

Mr. Popo

Mr. Popo is a failed carpenter constantly making "the thing without a name".

Man-Man

Man - Man is a strange member of Miguel Street who eventually declares himself a prophet.

Mr. Morgan

A comedian and fireworks craftsman, Mr. Morgan fails in both of his endeavors save when he is humiliated by his wife.

Uncle Bhakcu

The author's Uncle Bhakcu is an excellent mechanic. Nonetheless, he cannot fix a lorry that he bought and thus fails one of his greatest goals.

The Author's Mother

The author's mother supports him in various ways and makes sure he gets off the island. She also supports other members of the street with room in her home and kind words.

Mr. Titus Hoyt

Titus Hoyt is an aspiring teacher who eventually opens a school which the author uses to qualify for a scholarship to leave Miguel Street.



Big Foot

Big Foot is a bully and prankster who becomes a professional boxer and loses his first match. This causes him to cry and lose all the respect he had earned on the street.

B. Wordsworth

An enigmatic, aspiring poet with whom the author spends a lot of private time, B. Wordsworth has a goal of writing the greatest poem ever written but never writes a line.

George

George is a troubled man who constantly beats his family and beats his wife to death. He is Elias's father.

Elias

Elias grows up in a troubled home and is savagely beaten by his father. He is nonetheless determined to qualify to become a doctor but no matter how hard he studies, he simply cannot pass the exam.

Eddoes

Eddoes is a street aristocrat who runs a scavenger cart. He is perhaps one of the happier members of the street.

Laura

A mother of many children who lives a chaotic life, having had seven children by six men, Laura is heartbroken when her eldest daughter gets pregnant because she doesn't want her to have a similarly tragic life.



Objects/Places

Miguel Street

The street in west Port of Spain where the book is set and from which the book derives its name is Miguel Street.

Port of Spain, Trinidad, Tobago

The geographical locations of all the major events in the book are Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Tobago.

The Author's House

The place where the author and his mother live and where he spends a lot of his time is referred to as the author's house.

Titus Hoyt's School

Titus Hoyt creates a school where the author qualifies for scholarships to go to England to study.

The Cambridge Exam

The Cambridge Senior School Certificate Examination was a qualifying exam for a number of good jobs and educational opportunities. The author passed with distinction while Elias did not.

The Thing without a Name

A habitually unfinished project of Mr. Popo's is called "The Thing without a Name".

The Greatest Poem Ever Written

A poem that B. Wordsworth aspired to write but never did is referred to as "The Greatest Poem Ever Written".

Uncle Bhakcu's Lorry

Uncle Bhakcu acquires a lorry to repair but he failed to do so.



Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is rampant on Miguel Street and its horror is vastly understated in the book.

Broken English

All the people on Miguel Street seem to speak a kind of broken English.

The Americans

A constant presence in the background of the book's many stories, the Americans are seen as kind, wealthy, and worthy of great admiration and imitation.



Themes

Masculinity

Miguel Street has many characters and nearly all of them are men. These men are very diverse but they share some key characteristics. They are poor, and are habitually out of work. They rarely achieve their aims and they have poor and dysfunctional relationships with women, relationships that often include numerous affairs and routine domestic violence. But one source of hope and admiration among these men is their concept of manliness. The idea of manliness on Miguel Street is complex. First, it involves being somewhat adventurous. Bogart is not highly regarded until it is discovered that he engages in wild, dangerous adventures when he would disappear for months at a time. Big Foot is given an enormous amount of respect as his boxing career expands but loses all of his respect when he cries after losing his first big match.

Men are frequently mocked when they are excessively subservient to their wives. For instance, Mr. Morgan is mocked when his wife humiliates him in front of the people of Miguel Street. But even more minor types of servility are mocked. The response for real men to "upstart" wives is to beat them, sometimes savagely. The men of Miguel Street make almost no apology for domestic violence and it is a key part of their sense of themselves as men—dominating "their" women. There are exceptions, however. The men of Miguel Street will often gang up and beat men who severely beat their wives.

Understated Tragedy

Miguel Street is in a poor area of a power geographical location, in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. While no one is starving, the author recalls being amazed that everyone had enough food to eat. Many families are broken up, with men disappearing after they "make baby" with women, leaving the women alone to care for often many children (six, seven or eight). Domestic violence, as noted above, is very common. In fact, it is so common that the author seems to think there is nothing unusual or inappropriate about some mild forms of domestic violence. In this way, many tragedies in the book are understated. Domestic violence is presented as a background feature of the culture in Miguel Street, not as an abject horror.

But what's more important in some ways is that nearly none of the characters the author discusses achieve their dreams. These tragedies are also understated. The author simply moves from character to character, telling their stories and then moving on. The author intersperses humor among his descriptions of them as well. This helps to understate the suffering of the people of Miguel Street. In general, there is a sense that the people of Miguel Street do not understand how difficult their lives are, even though sometimes they realize their level of deprivation when they compare themselves to the Americans stationed nearby.



Shattered Dreams

The major, main and central theme of Miguel Street is the theme of shattered dreams. It is the theme of nearly every short story or episode in the book. Each character usually has some goal of becoming rich, famous, respected, beloved, excellent in a craft or art, successful in their social relationships (like marriage, fatherhood, motherhood) and yet all fail and sometimes fail repeatedly. One tragic case is that of Elias. He grows up being heavily and regularly beaten by his father, George. He is bound and determined not to live the same sort of life and starts studying hard at Titus Hoyt's school to pass the Cambridge Exam. If he passes, he would go on to qualify for high-paying jobs and make his way out of Miguel Street. However, he does not pass initially. Elias takes the test over and over and over again and either fails consistently or passes with a very low score. Afterwards Elias rounds down his dream of being a doctor to being a sanitation inspector but he fails in this endeavor as well.

Another tragic case is that of B. Wordsworth. B. Wordsworth describes himself as the "black Wordsworth", a world-renowned poet. B. Wordsworth, however, has never written a poem. He is a strange man who seems to enjoy each of his experiences as if he is encountering them for the first time. He impresses the author in his youth due to his focus, kindness and seriousness. B. Wordsworth has a dream, though, a dream of writing the greatest poem ever written. But he never writes a line before he dies.

Style

Point of View

The author of *Miguel Street* is V.S. Naipaul, a Trinidad writer who has won the Nobel Prize for Literature along with many other prestigious awards for his writing. Most of his books focus on the lives of peoples who are often forgotten in richer and more fortunate parts of the world. *Miguel Street* is no exception save that it is semi-autobiographical. Naipaul places himself in the story within a context that is partially true to his own youth in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Naipaul never names himself. Instead, while the book is written in the first-person, the author remains anonymous. He is not omniscient. Instead, everything he knows about the characters comes from his direct observation or stories and descriptions he remembers hearing from others.

The author is a character within the story, though, and he does reveal features of his personality and life within the book. It is clear that he had been unusually fascinated with intellectual matters as a young man, which explains the reason that he had been in Titus Hoyt's school and passed the Cambridge Exam with distinction. It also explains his fascination with B. Wordsworth. Often the author goes out of his way to understate his character's role in the story. For example, Naipaul often tells stories through observation and extended commentary from Hat who will do a lot of talking throughout the episode. What is perhaps most significant about the author is that he presents himself as the only individual to escape *Miguel Street*, though it is not wholly clear how this fact relates to his point of view within the book.

Setting

Miguel Street is set within modern day Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. *Miguel Street* is a street in western Port of Spain. The period ranges throughout much of World War II and after the war. Many Americans are stationed in the area but by and large the people are the darker skinned, poorer people of Port of Spain. V.S. Naipaul, the author, indeed grew up in these circumstances. Naipaul has a habit of writing novels about forgotten peoples around the world. *Miguel Street* is partly autobiographical but also continues Naipaul's theme of focusing on the forgotten.

The people of *Miguel Street* are an interesting bunch. The characters are very colorful. However, the culture is somewhat brutal and lacks a stable family structure. The men of *Miguel Street* fight, steal and beat their wives seemingly without remorse. They have a hierarchy of masculinity that includes disreputable behavior. One of the most important settings of *Miguel Street* is Titus Hoyt's school since it is the place where Elias and the author could learn to pass the Cambridge Exam and escape *Miguel Street*. The street itself contains a tight community of people. Everyone knows everyone else and Naipaul has a number of close friends in his rag-tag gang. An important feature of the setting is that it reflects the fact that opportunity is sought after on *Miguel Street* but rarely



achieved. Something about the social and political culture of the area seems to hold them back.

Language and Meaning

Miguel Street has a very important and distinct linguistic style. The reader will notice immediately that nearly all of the characters speak an extremely broken form of English. The book is not intended to be an English translation of the spoken languages of Trinidad but rather the English pidgin language that developed in Port of Spain. Full sentences are often downgraded to phrases like "they have bag" instead of "they have a bag" or they sometimes replace singular and plural linking verbs with one another, like "They is big crab" instead of "they are large crabs". It is not entirely clear why the people of Miguel Street bother to speak English at all but throughout the book the reader will notice that the people of Miguel Street see the British and the Americans as potentially providing a path out of poverty. Perhaps one reason they speak English is to gain opportunities with the British and the Americans.

The meaning of the text seems to reflect the deep theme of broken dreams. Their English is aspirational; members of Miguel Street speak broken English partly in the hopes of seeming better than they believe themselves to be. They admire people who speak English naturally, the author especially. The broken English therefore seems to be the linguistic representation of the broken dreams of the people of Miguel Street. Thus the meaning of the content and the meaning of the text are directly related.

Structure

Miguel Street contains seventeen chapters. Each chapter is an episode that focuses on the life of a single character or a small set of characters like a couple. Episodes are basically character sketches that are intended to paint a broader picture of life on Miguel Street and the common struggles that the people of the Street face on a regular basis. Of course, the author is out to entertain so the characters he records/creates are very flamboyant and some quite unusual.

Prominent examples include Man-Man, B. Wordsworth and Bogart. Man-Man is a relatively strange but minor character on Miguel Street until he decides that he is a religious prophet. He begins to preach in a particularly magnetic fashion and gains disciples as time progresses. But he eventually declares himself Messiah and has the people hang him on a cross and stone him. When they start to pelt him hard, he tells them to stop and gives up the act. B. Wordsworth is a very enigmatic figure who enters the author's life. He calls himself a poet but in fact he has never written a poem. He is set on writing a single poem, the greatest poem ever written, which he insists he will write over a twenty-two year period. However, he never writes a line before he dies. Finally, Bogart is described as an incredibly boring man until the author and his friends discover that Bogart goes off on incredible adventures for months at a time. Each

chapter continues in this way until the final chapter, which explains how the author escapes Miguel Street.

Quotes

"He was the most bored man I ever knew." (Chapter 1, 10)

"To be a man, among we men." (Chapter 1, 16)

"Ha, boy! That's the question. I making the thing without a name." (Chapter 2, 17)

"She ain't giggling, you know. She crying really." (Chapter 3, 34)

"No theory here. This is the practical. I really like the work." (Chapter 4, 45)

"Man-man announced that he was a new Messiah." (Chapter 5, 52)

"The past is deep." (Chapter 6, 62)

"The secret I had held for Big Foot was now shown to everybody." (Chapter 7, 77)

"Both of Morgan's ambitions were fulfilled. People laughed at him, and they still do. And he made the most beautiful fireworks in the world. But as Hat said, when a man gets something he wants badly, he doesn't like it." (Chapter 8, 91)

"It good. It good. It better that way." (Chapter 9, 117)

"Is love, love, love, alone. That cause King Edward to leave the throne." (Chapter 12, 136)

"I never knew a man who enjoyed life as much as Hat did." (Chapter 16, 202)

"When Hat went to jail, part of me had died." (Chapter 16, 214)

"I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a dancing dwarf on the tarmac." (Chapter 18, 222)



Topics for Discussion

Name three of the most flamboyant characters in the book and discuss their character flaws and failed accomplishments.

What are the greatest tragedies and dysfunctions among the characters of Miguel Street? To what extent are they understated? Why do you think the author understates the tragedies, like domestic violence?

Who do you think is the most tragic character in the book? Who is the least tragic? Why?

What do you think is the main theme of Miguel Street? Defend your answer in detail.

What is significant about Miguel Street? What elements tie together the main characters on the street?

What accounts for the frequently broken speech of the characters in the book?

What is the role of the Americans mentioned in the book? How do the people of Miguel Street think of them?