A Horse and Two Goats

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF R. K. NARAYAN

An avid reader but at times indifferent student, R. K. Narayan was the son of a headmaster whose own love of literature and the English language inspired his son's future career. While in high school in Mysore, Narayan read even more and began writing, inspired by his father's well-stocked library and that of his school. He received his Bachelor's degree at the Maharaja College of Mysore. Cautioned by a friend who said that he would lose his passion for literature if he decided to pursue a Master's degree, Narayan chose instead to become a school teacher for a short time, but quit after being asked to substitute for a physical education teacher. Soon after, he decided writing was the only career for him and set to work on his first novel, *Swami and Friends*. After experiencing significant trouble finding publishers for his work, a friend to whom he had sent the manuscript of *Swami and Friends* at Oxford showed the draft to English novelist Graham Greene, who recommended it to a publisher. Throughout Narayan's life, Greene remained a steadfast mentor and friend and was responsible for the publication of several of his novels, including the rest of the trilogy following *Swami and Friends* (1935): *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The English Teacher* (1945). Narayan met his wife, Rajam, in 1933. Sadly, Rajam died of typhoid in 1939, resulting in a long period of depression for Narayan. Narayan never remarried and spent the remainder of his long life writing prolifically in several genres and traveling extensively. Echoes of his deep and enduring love for his wife can be seen throughout his work as she appears as the inspiration for many of his characters. Interested readers can check out his publishing company, Indian Thought Publications, which Narayan established during World War II when he was not able to communicate as easily with his British friends and mentor. It is still operating and being managed by his granddaughter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

India won independence from the British Empire in 1947. As an elderly man at the time when this story takes place, readers may assume that Muni lived through the tail-end of British dominion over India. The author, who lived during part of the British colonization of India as well, makes numerous references to the colonial era, such as British policemen and revenue collectors, who are part of the British-instituted Indian civil service. Additionally, the red-faced foreigner himself, although American, is likened to a British colonist.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Narayan's work is often likened to that of William Faulkner and Thomas Hardy, specifically with respect to Narayan's creation of fictional towns like Kritan and Malgudi, which serve as a microcosm of Indian society. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county and Hardy's Wessex, Narayan's towns are at once removed from the chaos of "real life" and at the same time ever-changing in parallel with society's political upheavals and social revolutions. Some of Narayan's other notable stories were published alongside this one in the collections *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories* (1970) and *Under the Banyan Tree* (1985). Narayan was a pioneer in the field of Indian literature written in English; similar pioneering Indian writers of English literature include Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Horse and Two Goats"
- **When Written:** 1960
- **Where Written:** Mysore, Karnataka, India
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Early Indian Literature in English
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Kritam (fictional village), South India
- **Climax:** The red-faced foreigner offers to pay Muni for the horse statue
- **Antagonist:** The red-faced foreigner; Imperialism
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Family collaboration. Narayan was one of eight children in a family that consisted of six sons and two daughters. He was the eldest of the sons. One of his younger brothers, Laxman, became a cartoonist, and his illustrations are featured in most of Narayan's works.

Activism. Although Narayan's family considered itself "apolitical" and disapproved of all forms of government, Narayan himself was devoted to several political causes. At the age of 12, Narayan participated in a pro-independence rally. After his marriage, he became a reporter for a Madras-based newspaper called *The Justice*, which was devoted to supporting the rights of non-Brahmins in South India. When Narayan was granted a seat in the Rajya Sabha in 1980, or the upper house of Indian parliament, he campaigned steadfastly on the platform that the education system was harmful to children's creativity and ought to do more to nourish it.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens with a short description of the village of Kritam, a tiny village among India's thousands. Kritam is home to the story's protagonist, Muni. The village's name means "coronet" or "crown" in Tamil and consists of a cluster of about 30 thatched huts, the only exception to these humble dwellings being "The Big House," a grand residence that allows the villagers to retrieve water from its well and rents out pens for livestock to the village's farmers. One morning, Muni wakes up with a craving for something more sumptuous than the balls of cooked millet and raw onion he eats for his daily meal. Outside of his humble hut, he picks some drumsticks (i.e., seed pods) from a tree and asks his wife to make a curry with them. Ridiculing her husband's taste for "rich" meals despite his poverty, she nevertheless agrees to make him a curry provided he can go to the local shop and buy the necessary ingredients for it.

Muni assents but, despite his attempts to charm the shopkeeper by laughing at his jokes and engaging in gossip, the shopkeeper refuses to allow him to purchase the items on credit, as Muni has no money. The shopkeeper humiliates Muni in front of his other customers and declares him an old liar and a scoundrel for failing to pay back an "ancient debt." Feeling desperate, Muni lies and says that his daughter will soon give him money for his fiftieth birthday to purchase the ingredients and pay back the debt, but the shopkeeper refuses to believe him. Dejected, Muni returns home to inform his wife of the bad news. She exasperatedly orders him out of the house to graze his two goats, which are all he has left of a once large and healthy herd of sheep and goats that was afflicted by a pestilence. Muni's wife realizes she will have to perform some odd jobs in the village and sell the drumsticks to purchase food for their evening meal.

As Muni walks toward the **highway** with his two scraggly goats, he hangs his head, imagining all the negative tittle tattle about him circulating in the village. Once he arrives at his favorite spot, an area beside the highway that is the site of an old and grandiose **statue** of a warrior and a horse, his mood gradually improves. The statue has stood in this exact spot since Muni was a child, and he fondly remembers his forefathers handing down tales about it. Suddenly, a foreigner in a yellow station wagon comes barreling down the highway, only to stop abruptly in front of Muni after running out of gas.

A "red-faced foreigner" lumbers out of the car, questioning Muni as to whether there is a gas station nearby, but the two men are unable to communicate as the foreigner (an American tourist) speaks only English and Muni speaks only Tamil. The foreigner repeatedly questions Muni and expresses dismay and surprise that Muni speaks no English, as he has relied on it exclusively thus far in his travels throughout India. The foreigner tells Muni (although Muni has no idea what he is saying) that he decided to travel to India on a whim with his wife Ruth after having experienced what he considers a "life-changing" and monumental torment: having to work without air conditioning on a hot summer day during a brownout in New York City, where he works as a coffee trader in the Empire State Building. He states that it was during this brownout that he experienced an "epiphany" of sorts that he must "look at other civilizations." Muni is initially afraid of the foreigner, and he assumes he must be a policeman due to his khaki clothing (similar to the clothing worn by British policemen in the days of colonialism); Muni insists that he has no knowledge of a murder that occurred recently near his village, asserting that the culprit must live in the next village over.

With the foreigner's offer of cigarettes, Muni becomes gradually more relaxed and appreciative of his generosity. Later, he becomes expansive, telling the foreigner about his childhood as a stage actor performing plays based on mythological stories. Muni explains the mythological and religious significance behind the horse statue on whose pedestal he sits. He tells the foreigner, who appears interested in the statue, that it represents Kalki, the final avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu, who will return at the end of the Kali Yuga (or the darkest age of humanity) as a messiah to destroy a hopelessly benighted world and reset the cycle of time. Uncomprehending, the foreigner becomes increasingly restless and states that "we have come to the point where we should be ready to talk business." He reveals that he is interested in buying the statue from Muni, whom he assumes to be its owner. Muni again fails to understand him and, when the foreigner pets his goats, surmises that he is offering him one hundred rupees for the goats themselves, rather than the statue. Initially misunderstanding the offer of money as a request for change, Muni advises the foreigner to approach the village moneylender. After a while, Muni understands that the money is indeed for him. Taking the money, Muni walks off, leaving his goats to the foreigner.

Muni returns home triumphant, informing his wife that he has managed to sell his goats that had proven to be a curse to him as a constant reminder of how far he had fallen in the world. His wife initially assumes that he must have robbed someone, as the sum of 100 rupees is a small fortune. However, Muni's elation does not last long as, soon enough, he hears the bleating of goats at his door. The goats have, predictably, followed their owner back home. Meanwhile, the foreigner confusedly waits beside the statue, assuming that Muni has gone to get help to hoist the statue of the horse off its pedestal so that he can put it in his car. After waiting a while on the side of the highway, the foreigner manages to stop a truck passing by and pays the drivers to help him maneuver the statue into his car. He then pays them to allow him to siphon gas from their truck to restart his station wagon. The story ends with both men utterly oblivious to what the other had attempted to convey.

CHARACTERS

Muni – An impoverished, low-caste goat herder who lives in the fictional South Indian village of Kritam. At one time, Muni possessed a large and healthy herd of goats and sheep, but the herd dwindled away over time until only two were left. Due to his now-impoverished state and bad reputation in the village that makes it impossible to buy goods on credit, Muni barely manages to find enough to eat every day. The two scraggly goats that make up the remainder of Muni's herd serve only as a bitter reminder of how far he has fallen in the world. Despite this, he leads an emotionally rich life in which he travels each day to sit on the pedestal of a grand **statue** to graze his goats, watch the **highway** nearby, reminiscence on the past, and ponder mythological stories. Muni's desire to experience the world outside his tiny village of narrow-minded people leads him to this statue beside the highway every day. One day, he comes into contact with the vast world outside his village when he meets the red-faced foreigner, whose car runs out of gas beside the statue. Their interaction culminates in a grand misunderstanding in which the foreigner offers Muni money for the horse statue, and Muni, looking at the situation through his own cultural lens, believes that the foreigner is offering to buy his goats. Instead of viewing time as finite and linear, Muni sees it as limitless and cyclical, and instead of seeing the world in terms of monetary value, he values the emotional richness of storytelling, which is interwoven with his own Hindu spirituality. **Kalki**

The Red-Faced Foreigner – An American tourist who lives in the suburbs of Connecticut and commutes to work in the Empire State Building each day, where he works as a prosperous coffee trader. He decides to visit India with his wife on a whim after enduring what he views as a monumental torment: working for four hours without air conditioning during a brownout in New York City. He comes upon Muni after running out of gas along the **highway**. He spends quite a bit of time conversing with Muni, but the men are unable to understand one another due to their language barrier. The foreigner represents American culture, and neocolonialism more generally. This middle-class businessman views "time as money" and understands the world in terms of financial transactions and amassing material possessions. When he sees the grandiose horse and warrior **statue** at the foot of which Muni sits, he immediately sees it as an object he must possess and assumes, condescendingly and through his own blinkered world view, that Muni must be a salesman desperate to sell the statue to a rich Westerner. With his assumption that he can buy anything for a price—even an invaluable statue with enormous sentimental, religious and cultural significance—the foreigner represents the rapacious, emotionless, and mindless urge to consume that is characteristic of a relentlessly capitalistic society such as that of the United States. Thus, although the foreigner travels halfway across the world with the intent to broaden his horizons by exposing himself to other civilizations, his growth in the story is limited, just as Muni's is, by his blinkered world view and inability to appreciate another's perspective. At the end of the story, the foreigner does more harm than good to the civilization that he endeavored to appreciate when he pries the horse statue off its pedestal and drives off with this stolen artifact.

Muni's Wife – A long-suffering woman who is childless and impoverished, Muni's wife must worry each day about obtaining enough food to eat for the couple. It is often she who must go out and perform odd jobs to earn enough money to buy food as Muni, with his negative reputation in the village, is denied food and other items on credit from the local shopkeeper. Although readers may assume that Muni's wife originally began working outside the home for reasons related to survival, Muni suggests that she now wields greater power over her husband as the primary breadwinner in the family. Muni's wife reveals that patriarchal norms in Indian society are highly complex and nuanced, as she exerts more influence as the breadwinner in her family despite her ostensibly low status in society as a woman.

The Shopkeeper – The shopkeeper enjoys engaging in gossip and lighthearted banter with the other villagers. Muni uses his knowledge of the shopkeeper's dislike of the village's itinerant postman, who cheated the shopkeeper, to attempt to manipulate the shopkeeper into giving him food on credit. The shopkeeper, however, is not fooled by this ploy and pulls out a ledger documenting Muni's past fiscal indiscretions. He then humiliates Muni in front of the other villagers and declares him to be an old liar.

THEMES

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PERSPECTIVE

In R. K. Narayan's story, the main character, Muni, craves the stimulation and freedom he can experience near the **highway**, where he sits at the foot of a clay statue and watches his goats graze. This stands in contrast to the stifling atmosphere of the village, where everyone knows everyone else's business and most people seem to have a long memory for Muni's misdeeds—alleged and actual. Somewhat similarly, the "Red-Faced Foreigner," whom Muni encounters when he runs out of gas along the highway, travels to India with his wife on a whim, seemingly bored of his

mundane life: the foreigner works in New York City and lives in Connecticut and thus desires to "look at other civilizations." Both men have ambitions that strain the boundaries of their familiar worlds, yet Narayan calls into question their ability to transcend the cultural milieu of their places of origin. In the end, Narayan suggests that travel or migration alone is not enough; if one hopes to transcend one's cultural milieu, one must also learn to expand one's mind to accommodate another's world view.

Narayan hints at the isolation and insularity of Muni's village when he states that it "sprawled far from the highway." After the highway was built, the village and its people migrated *away* from it, seeking to distance themselves further from the outside world's frenetic pace of change. These details clue the reader in to the cloistered nature of Muni's village and thus help to explain his desire to escape it. But what Muni's daily migration cannot do is change his mindset, which has been shaped steadily over many years of living amongst the same people.

One aspect of Muni's village that highlights its insularity from the larger world is that its residents' favorite pastime is exchanging gossip about each other. Muni uses this knowledge to his advantage to attempt to manipulate the shopkeeper into giving him food on credit. In mentioning the postman whose wife ran off with another man, Muni draws an implicit contrast between himself and the shopkeeper, on one hand, and the postman and his wife, on the other. Muni and the shopkeeper are stuck in this village indefinitely, without the means to travel beyond the small and at times suffocating world they inhabit. In fact, Muni is so hemmed in by others' opinions of him that he begins to believe the shopkeeper's pronouncement that he is seventy years old and thus acts accordingly, even though he does not know his own birth date. By contrast, the postman is "itinerant," so even though everyone in the village knows his private business, he can slip away most days and avoid their judgment. Muni, on the other hand, is stuck with the reputation of being a scoundrel, a failure, and an impoverished man with no children, and he must face the public censure that comes with that. His ability to "reinvent" himself and alter his fortunes is thus extremely limited. Although he seems not to be aware of it, the judgments of his neighbors have negatively influenced Muni's self-perception and his worldview, limiting him even further.

The caste system that shapes life in Muni's village only reinforces the limiting nature of village life. Muni is a **Shudra**, the lowest rung in the caste system. He is a shepherd and states that he did not receive an education because only **Brahmins** were educated when he was a child. Thus, not only does Muni's caste work against him, but everyone else's knowledge of it and the importance they grant to it restricts him to a certain occupation and level of prosperity in life. Not only is Muni restricted to a sub-grouping of society, but he is also unfavorably compared to others in this grouping as the "poorest fellow" among them. Again, others' judgment of Muni based on his caste affects not only his own view of himself but his ability to transcend this worldview that sorts everyone into groupings from birth that are impossible to escape in one lifetime.

The allure of the highway for Muni becomes clear when the narrator describes how it gives Muni relief from the humiliation of being judged unfavorably by the other villagers: "Only on the outskirts did he lift his head and look up," the narrator explains. From his spot overlooking the highway, he could "see the lorries and the buses pass through the hills, and it gave him a sense of belonging to a larger world." In this way, Muni realizes that the problems with which he is burdened in the village are petty in comparison with the vast and mysterious world beyond the village limits. Muni's favorite spot on the side of the highway provides him with relief from the judgments of his neighbors, a more expansive perspective on life, and a sense that the world outside the village is changing at a rapid pace. Yet, despite Muni's daily peregrinations to this spot—and despite the broader perspective it affords him—he is still unable to transcend his own limited worldview and appreciate that of another when he encounters the foreigner. For example, Muni projects his own negative experiences with colonialism onto the foreigner rather than seeing him as a unique individual when he assumes that the foreigner must be a policeman because he is wearing khaki (like British colonial policemen). Later, with the offer of cigarettes, Muni begins to relax and attempts to regale the foreigner with stories of his past and mythological tales, thinking that he is entertaining his new friend when, in fact, the foreigner demonstrates little actual interest in (or understanding of) his tales. The biggest misunderstanding, however, occurs when Muni believes the foreigner is offering him money in exchange for his goats rather than the **Kalki** statue on which he sits. This naïve assumption that the foreigner would be interested in buying two scraggly goats reveals that Muni is interpreting the meeting with the foreigner in terms of his own cultural milieu as a poor shepherd in rural India who has had very little contact with the outside world. Muni thus interprets his meeting with the foreigner on his own terms rather than attempting to expand his mind to accommodate the foreigner's differing disposition, individuality and cultural norms.

In a somewhat similar manner to Muni, the "red-faced" foreigner wishes to escape the dull regularity of his routine as a businessman working in the Empire State Building and living in Connecticut. This man states that, despite his country's modernity and wealth, all the comforts of American life failed him one day when he was stuck in the office during a power failure. This simple failure of one of the most taken-for-granted comforts in America (that is, electricity) provides the impetus for this man to want to "look at other civilizations," thereby

broadening his own perspective. However, despite having travelled halfway around the globe to a place very different from home, the man is unable to appreciate anything beyond its face value. This can be seen when the foreigner approaches the Kalki statue as only a salesman would, saying, "I could give a sales talk for this better than anyone else [...] This is a marvelous combination of yellow and indigo." To the foreigner, the cultural and historical significance of this statue do not matter. The most important consideration to the foreigner is how much the statue will cost and how he can deliver it to his living room, where it will serve as a conversation piece at parties. His behavior is self-absorbed, culturally-blinkered, and materialistic. Thus, despite these characters' ambitions to escape their everyday lives and experience something new, Narayan shows that they are ultimately unable to transcend their places of origin, set as they are in their own world views.

COLONIALISM AND NEOCOLONIALISM

Echoes of British colonialism in India, which achieved its independence in 1947, are present throughout the story. The presence of neocolonialism is keenly felt through the appearance of the "Red-Faced Foreigner," pointing to the ways in which the U.S., replacing Britain as the dominant world superpower, has made inroads in India economically and culturally through tourism. The similarities between the two types of colonialism—old and new—are not difficult to fathom, as India (at the time of this story's original publishing in 1960) was being "reinvented" as a tourist destination for wealthy visitors from the U.S. These new visitors see the country not as it is, but in terms of their own limited cultural knowledge and the commodification of its cultural heritage. The story highlights the continuity between colonialism and neocolonialism, as one wealthy Western nation is shown to have replaced another as a world superpower, and the structures of power created during India's colonial era are shown to have remained in place, functioning to exploit the country's poor.

The story begins with a deft undermining of the British colonial legacy. The name of Muni's village is "Kritam," or "crown," a name that alludes to the Victorian conception of India as the "jewel in the crown" of the British empire at its height. Yet, Kritam, a tiny village seemingly in the middle of nowhere, asserts its superior status as a "crown" in its own right rather than a jewel in someone else's crown. Thus, from the beginning of the story, the very name of this village seems to pose a challenge to imperial power (past and present) and urges the reader to consider the value of a place irrespective of global hegemonies based on wealth and power. The story further alludes to the vestiges of colonialism in India when the narrator describes the map on which Kritam appears as a resource "meant more for the revenue official out to collect tax than for the guidance of the motorist." This statement indicates not only the remote location of the village but also the exploitative profession of the revenue official, who collects tax from impoverished villagers regardless of their ability to pay. Although this profession is now performed by an Indian member of the civil service, this system of taxation was originally implemented by the British. This detail may lead the reader to question the true meaning of independence when colonial ideologies in the form of bureaucratic procedures are still firmly in place even after independence.

The author makes the connections between British colonialism and neocolonialism very apparent when Muni's first reaction to the American tourist is one of fear. Muni notes that, with his khaki clothes and his business card (which Muni mistakes for an arrest warrant), the foreigner looks like "a policeman or a soldier" from the days of colonialism. Muni's reaction of fear and apprehension alludes to the lasting negative effects of colonialism on the minds and hearts of India's citizens, especially those who, like Muni, were alive to experience the negative effects of colonialism firsthand. Additionally, it is significant that, unlike Muni, who is the only character in the narrative with an actual name, the "red-faced foreigner" is, with this unflattering nickname, reduced to a stereotype—based in part on the color of his skin—of the "ugly American." In this way, the nickname dehumanizes and pigeonholes him into a race- and nationality-based category, much as the British colonists dehumanized their Indian subjects during the days of British dominion over India. It is a comeuppance of sorts that this character does not have a name but just an unflattering nickname; Muni, in contrast, not only has a name but one with rich significance, as the word "Muni" means a "sage or seer" in Sanskrit.

Language in this story is connected to colonialism and neocolonialism. With most of the wealthy and powerful nations of the world speaking English as a first language, English was and still is the global "lingua franca." The fact that Muni does not know much English is not only a testament to the inaccessibility of education for someone of his caste, but serves as a reminder of the ways in which Muni is unable to ascend the ranks in a global economy that rewards those with a basic level of proficiency in English—and disadvantages those without. The red-faced foreigner expresses dismay that Muni cannot speak English, as he has relied on it exclusively during his travels. The fact that he has relied solely on English with success thus far speaks to the colonial legacy of English in India as well as the language's continued dominance in the subcontinent as a language of neocolonialism. The foreigner exotifies Muni's mother tongue, Tamil, seeing it as nothing more than a source of amusement. Revealing his ignorance, the foreigner initially approaches Muni with the greeting "Namaste," a generic Sanskrit phrase that Tamil-speaking people do not use. That Muni's command of the English language is limited to the words "yes" and "no" is perhaps symbolic of India's ambivalent attitude

toward the English language itself: as the language of colonialism and neocolonialism, it is a vehicle for exploitation, economic injustice, and hegemonic rule, even as it is a useful tool that enables people to become more prosperous. Here, as elsewhere throughout the story, Narayan subtly conveys the continuity between colonialism and neocolonialism, suggesting that, for those without power or privilege (like Muni), many of the mechanisms of colonial oppression have remained in place even after independence.

MATERIALISM VS. SPIRITUALITY

Both Muni and the Red-Faced Foreigner struggle with preoccupations over possessing material objects. The foreigner struggles more with materialism as he is more prosperous and thus has more possessions than Muni, but this preoccupation figures, albeit to a lesser extent, in Muni's life as well. Unlike the foreigner, however, Muni revels in recounting his past and in discussing his spirituality in the form of mythological tales, which is shown to be at odds with the foreigner's obsession with material objects and financial matters. The foreigner is thus emblematic of the time- and money-obsessed capitalist society of which he is a part. These petty preoccupations prevent the foreigner from appreciating Muni's spiritual narrative—not only because of the language barrier, Narayan suggests, but because of their differing cultural perspectives. In this story, Narayan presents materialism and a preoccupation with ownership as obstacles to engaging with the spiritual dimension of life.

The spiritual narrative that underlies the entire story and features in Muni's dialogue is the story of **Kalki** (literally "Destroyer of Filth"), the messiah or savior and final avatar of the Hindu Lord Vishnu who is prophesied to appear at the end of the Kali Yuga holding a flaming sword atop a white horse. In this form, Kalki will trample the sinners, save the good people, and restart the cycle of time to arrive again at Satya Yuga (or the Age of Truth). In keeping with this underlying narrative, Muni recounts his own gradual decline in fortunes as his flock goes from a bountiful, healthy herd to two scraggly goats. Muni's personal hardships and his gradual decline in fortune parallels the decline that characterizes the Kali Yuga: a dark age of ignorance and sin in which people cheat, lie, and commit needless acts of violence against one another.

Although Muni himself is not prosperous and therefore does not have many possessions, he prides himself on the few possessions he does have, such as his two goats and the tree to which he ties his goats, of which he says, "although no one could say precisely who owned the tree, it was his because he lived in its shadow." Muni must worry about who owns the tree because almost everything, even in his small and insular village, is owned and assigned a price (such as the pen at the Big House, which he used to rent out for his flock). Others' fixation on ownership prevents Muni from focusing on the more spiritual matters with which an elderly man in Hindu society is supposed to concern himself. The fact that Muni does not follow the system of "varnashramadharma" (or the assignment of certain tasks and behaviors according to one's age and caste) is again indicative of Kali Yuga, a dark age in which even the elderly do not commit themselves to the holy tasks that would gain them admittance into Swarga (or "heaven") and release them from the cycle of rebirth ("samsara"). Even the shopkeeper from whom Muni requests food on credit connects materialism to spirituality when he states, "If you could find five rupees and a quarter, you would pay off an ancient debt and then could apply for admission to Swarga." This ridiculous connection between materialism and spirituality prevents the shopkeeper and Muni from recognizing how relatively petty these materialistic matters are and that spirituality has little to do with profit.

The horse and warrior statue is a powerful symbol in the story, as it portrays Kalki, the final incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who will arrive at the end of the Kali Yuga to return the world to a time of prosperity and truth. The grandiosity of the statue, making it stand out in the otherwise barren environment, is also suggestive of a "former time" of greater prosperity, as Muni suggests when he states that his ancestors have been telling tales about this statue for generations. The description of the horse "flourishing its tail in a loop" is suggestive of the cyclical nature of Hindu time. Muni insists that he had once seen the beads on the warrior's chest sparkle like gems. The deterioration of these beads on the warrior's chest into misshapen blobs of mud again evokes the decline of the Kali Yuga as contrasted with the prosperity and beauty of the former time in which the statue was made. Yet "none in the village remembered the splendor as no one noticed its existence," and even Muni, who sits on the statue's pedestal every day, fails to notice its state, again alluding to the end days of the Kali Yuga, in which people become blind to the value of spirituality. That the village well has dried up, the land around the village bakes in the relentless sun, and the village itself has moved "away" from the statue similarly suggest that the village is moving deeper into Kali Yuga. The fact that the statue is now close to the **highway**—a place of frenetic change and movement—suggests the statue's own association with the imminent future, in which the world will be destroyed so that it may begin anew.

The foreigner's sudden appearance in a strange, yellow vehicle midway through the story seems to parallel the arrival of Kalki as the messiah on a white horse at the end of the world. Yet, this foreigner is not so much a heavenly messiah as a symbol of materialism, capitalism, and neocolonialism. The foreigner's attempts to assign a price to anything and his assumption that Muni owns the statue on which he sits "like other souvenir-sellers in this country presiding over their wares" is not only condescending, but grotesquely materialistic. This materialism

and obsession with the concept of "time as money" (he offers to buy the statue because he doesn't "want to seem to have stopped here for nothing") blind the foreigner to the significance and meaning of the statue. Thus, the true value and meaning of the statue—and the traditions behind it—are obscured by materialism. Ultimately, Narayan presents a vision of the world much like the world of the Kali Yuga—in which striving for material possessions has blinded people to the value of spirituality.

LINEAR VS. CYCLICAL TIME

Narayan employs two competing conceptions of time in the story—linear and cyclical—roughly corresponding to the characters Muni and the foreigner. Whereas Muni has a shaky grasp of linear time, being unable to recall even his own age, the foreigner seems fixated on marking and saving time, which he views as a scant and valuable resource. Muni, with his more cyclical conception of time, does not seem perturbed when he spends time doing something that has no economic value, such as speaking to the foreigner. He enjoys narrating history and his own past in more emotional terms, whereas the foreigner remains concerned with marking and quantifying time through the use of money. These two conceptions of time undoubtedly clash and are emblematic of a larger incompatibility between the two men, thereby foretelling their inability to communicate meaningfully with one another, regardless of their language barrier. Ultimately, Narayan suggests that Muni's cyclical conception of time is conducive to a richer emotional and spiritual life, as he does not seem overly preoccupied with marking and saving time or the financial concerns related to this. The foreigner, on the other hand, is always in a hurry and converses only about his material possessions, traits that make the foreigner seem flat and rather emotionless. The suggestion is that the foreigner's linear conception of time has shaped his personality to such an extent that he is trapped in its restrictive grasp.

As stated previously, Muni is not aware of his own age. But, when pressed, he attempts to calculate it from the "time of the great famine when he stood as high as the parapet around the village well." His inability to calculate his own age, even with this method, demonstrates his shaky grasp of linear time. Muni has a much better understanding of cyclical time, as it makes up the framework of Hindu mythology. In narrating the legend of Kalki, the messiah, Muni relies on cyclical time to explain how Kalki, after destroying the Kali Yuga and its unrepentant sinners, will restart the cycle of time at the purest age, or Satya Yuga. In this way, Muni serves as the embodiment of cyclical time in the story. And, through Muni's evident enjoyment while narrating these mythological tales and his own past to the foreigner, Narayan seems to suggest that Muni's cyclical conception of time has enabled this joy and has thus enriched his life. Interestingly, Muni's favorite spot near the **highway** presents him with a vision and worldview that is diametrically opposed to his conception of cyclical time. The highway, a symbol of relentless development and globalization, is representative of linear time as it privileges progress and forward motion above all else.

Amid Muni's seemingly endless reminiscences, the foreigner begins to feel restless, reasoning that "he had spent too much time already," and he then blurts out, "we have come to the point when we should be ready to talk business." In displaying this attitude toward time, the foreigner reveals that he views time as a scant resource which holds a monetary value that is wasted unless some financial transaction comes to fruition. The foreigner's conception of time makes him seem somewhat robotic and lacking in emotion, unlike Muni, who often gives his feelings full expression in his reminiscences and narrations of Hindu mythology. Narayan seems to argue here that Muni's cyclical conception of time and the foreigner's diametrically opposed, linear conception of time are representative of the men's inability to understand and appreciate each other's worldviews. Given the foreigner's negative portrayal in the story as a superficial businessman obsessed with material possessions and making the most of his time, Narayan suggests that the foreigner's linear conception of time has contributed to making him a dull and robotic character.

With these opposing conceptions of time—linear and cyclical—Narayan fleshes out another aspect of the two men's dissimilarities and their inability to understand one another. Muni's cyclical conception of time is beyond the grasp of the foreigner, just as the foreigner's mastery over linear time and monetization of time is beyond Muni's ken. With Muni's rich description of Hindu mythology, the narrator seems to suggest that the cyclical conception of time is more rewarding, as the foreigner values time as a commodity to be bought and sold like the coffee that he trades for a living. Like his unflattering nickname, his limiting conception of time places him into a box from which his movement is constricted: he is not able to unwind in a discussion of spirituality as Muni is, but remains hyper-aware of the time he is "wasting" in idle chit chat. Thus, Narayan suggests that a less ego-driven view of time as "cyclical" and not finite in nature is more spiritually and emotionally enriching because it enables one to focus on other aspects of life apart from the monetary value of things. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Narayan portrays a linear conception of time as constricting in that it encourages one to view time spent engaging in activities without monetary value (such as conversation and storytelling) as time "wasted."

RELATIONS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

Although women do not figure prominently in Narayan's story, Muni's relationship with his wife is the central pivot around which the author explores the issue of

relationships between men and women. Although women in the story are clearly subordinate to men and men often engage in misogynistic commentary regarding the women in their lives, Narayan gives readers a subtle sense that, despite all this, women have more authority than is apparent at first glance. Narayan portrays a complex reality underneath the surface of his society's patriarchal norms, suggesting that, regardless of the dictates of society, men and women forge their own relationships in accordance with their own personalities and priorities, and women, despite their subordinate status in society, nevertheless exercise power and authority.

The first meaningful interaction between Muni and his wife (who, perhaps reflecting her subordinate status in society, is not given a name in the story) occurs when Muni asks his wife to make a curry for him with the drumsticks (i.e., seed pods) he has picked from a tree outside their hut. Clearly, Muni's wife oversees the domestic task of cooking in their household. When Muni returns from the local shop, dejected that he has not been able to buy the ingredients for the curry on credit, Muni's wife seems to have expected as much. Muni orders her to sell the drumsticks to get money for their evening meal. In this way, he relies on his wife as a breadwinner of sorts, as he asks her to do the work that will ultimately put their dinner on the table.

Later in the story, Muni makes a reference to "thrash[ing his wife] only a few times in their career, and later she had the upper hand." In other words, Muni hints that he has abused his power as a male to attempt to bend his wife to his will. However, this violent display of power and authority over his wife did not have the intended effect. Perhaps in part due to the couple's childlessness and Muni's gradual decline in prosperity and reputation, at some point Muni's wife decided to work outside the home to ensure their survival. The fact that she earns her own money gives her some power over her husband as she now has economic means of her own—usually the preserve of men—and is thus able to draw attention to his dependence on her. Thus, regardless of the stringent patriarchal norms in India at this time, Muni's wife and other low-caste women like her, who are more likely than upper-caste women to work outside the home, have a measure of power in society that they can use to their advantage. Additionally, the postman's wife reminds readers that women are not entirely powerless and forced to tolerate their husbands indefinitely, as she presents the possibility of a woman running off with another man and choosing to live with him in the city.

While attempting to extract foodstuffs from the shopkeeper on credit, Muni makes a reference to a fictitious daughter who is going to send him money for his "fiftieth" birthday. As a childless man, one would expect Muni to fantasize about having sons, as the male sex is the preferred gender in societies where women are traditionally barred from obtaining independent economic means. Yet, Muni's reference to his fictional daughter and her gift of money indicates that he is not the typical man who would wish for sons. Instead, he demonstrates a fondness for daughters as he describes "the thrill he had felt when he mentioned a daughter" and mentions that "his cousin in the next village had many daughters" and "he was fond of them all and would buy them sweets if he could afford it." This thought indicates that, despite his outward displays of misogyny, Muni has not completely absorbed the patriarchal norms that dictate that a son has greater value than a daughter.

The patriarchal norms of the society Narayan describes cannot be taken at face value but must be explored with an eye for detail, as the social fabric is rich with nuance and power struggles between men and women. Although Muni had the "upper hand" at first in his marriage to his wife, his decline in fortunes and worsening reputation in the village most likely motivated his wife to seek work outside the home for survival, but not without the benefit of attaining independent economic means and a sense of empowerment and greater status when compared to her husband. In this way, Narayan delivers a nuanced and complex portrayal of relationships between men and women, in which the appearance of power does not necessarily equate with actual power.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE KALKI STATUE

The most important symbol in the story is the horse and warrior statue on whose pedestal Muni enjoys sitting and watching the highway. The warrior statue represents **Kalki**, the final avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, who will arrive at the end of the Kali Yuga (or the darkest age of humanity) as a messiah to save the virtuous and destroy the hopelessly benighted world and its ignorant, amoral people. The horse statue at Kalki's side alludes to traditional religious iconography of Kalki, in which he is shown riding a white steed and brandishing a flaming sword. In the story, the statue represents a facet of Indian culture that deals with Hindu spirituality and storytelling in which the notion of cyclical time is essential. The myth of Kalki himself and much of Hindu mythology, in fact, relies on the notion of cyclical time; in the Kalki myth, the messiah must end the Kali Yuga and return the world to the first age, Satya Yuga (the age of truth), thereby restarting the cycle of time. In fact, the statue's appearance even hints at this cyclical conception of time in that the horse's tail appears as a loop. These qualities align the statue with Muni himself, who also represents these facets of Indian culture.

The fact that the foreigner believes he can purchase the statue, and his condescending assumption that Muni is merely a

"peddler" desperate to sell the statue to a wealthy Westerner, signifies the foreigner's alignment with American neocolonialism, materialism and conceptions of linear time in which time is a valuable, finite resource. The statue, which is an invaluable artifact that has enormous historical, cultural and sentimental significance, is effectively stripped of these non-monetary forms of value when the foreigner believes he is purchasing the statue for 100 rupees, pries it off its pedestal and packs it into his station wagon. Despite its significance, the foreigner sees the horse statue as merely a "pretty object" he will show off to his friends at cocktail parties. At the end of the story, the foreigner drives off with the statue, still unaware of its multifaceted significance, regardless of Muni's attempt to narrate its mythology to him. The fact that the foreigner believes that he can purchase the statue (when, in fact, he is stealing it) demonstrates that, despite traveling half a world away to expose himself to other civilizations, he is unable to appreciate the beauty and nuance of Indian culture because he sees it through the narrow lens of his own cultural milieu in which money talks, time is in short supply and one's acquisition of material objects is the primary concern.

The foreigner's ignorance, selfishness and materialism seem to suggest the statue's reference to the darkness of the Kali Yuga and the need for Kalki, the messiah, to return the world to the Satya Yuga. Another detail that relates to the degradation of the Kali Yuga are the "jewels" on the chest of the warrior, which the narrator describes as "faded blobs of mud" but which Muni remembers as once "shining like the nine gems" of Hindu astrology, which correspond with the nine planets. The statue's gradual degradation (and the degradation of the jewels) parallels the deterioration of the world as it sinks further and further into the abyss of the Kali Yuga.

THE HIGHWAY

An important symbol in this story is the highway next to which Muni grazes his goats. Essentially, the highway serves as a foil to the symbol of the **Kalki statue** as it represents everything the statue does not: linear time as opposed to cyclical, development and modernity as opposed to tradition and history and homogenization as opposed to cultural specificity. The appearance of the highway itself, rushing onwards into the unknown in a seemingly endless line, suggests linear time as do the capitalist- and development-driven concepts behind the highway, which rely on a view of time as a finite and valuable resource. The purpose of the highway itself––to lessen the time it takes to travel between places––further suggests this view of linear time. Additionally, the highway symbolizes development and modernity, as land that was once most likely farmland or wilderness is being transformed into lines of asphalt on which cars and trucks may travel, connecting the hinterland of India to burgeoning cities. Moreover, the highway and the spread of others like it throughout the country will lead to a homogenization of the country's landscape rather than a preservation of its cultural specificity. The statue represents this specificity with its unique, sentimental value to Muni and its allusion to Hindu mythology and oral traditions of storytelling specific to Indian culture.

The highway, as the site on which new cars and trucks pass by every day and on which Muni can observe construction activity in the distance, is also a symbol of economic development in independent India. Muni enjoys seeing the different kinds of cars and trucks that pass by each day and the construction activity happening somewhere far away. But, after seeing so much of this, he becomes inured to it. Perhaps the message here is that the activity that occurs on the highway is not representative of progress so much as an entertaining and novel stimulus that soon grows old. The "progress," "development" and "frenetic activity" of the highway parallel the symbolism of the Kalki statue––this progress and its agents rush onward at a rapid pace, without much thought for the degradation of the environment, the exploitation of laborers and the cultural legacy of the land and its people on which they develop (and thus destroy) relentlessly. Although the progress that occurs on the highway seems impressive and "forward-thinking" at first glance, it is actually symbolic of ignorance, lack of foresight and a headlong rush to destruction that is characteristic of the Kali Yuga.

Viewed from a larger perspective, the highway's association with development, modernity, economic considerations and linear time is more aligned with the red-faced foreigner, while the statue, with its connections to tradition, history, cultural specificity and cyclical time is aligned with Muni. The fact that the statue and the highway sit so close together juxtaposes them more clearly. And, the fact that Muni and the foreigner's first meeting occurs at this exact spot––with Muni resting against the statue whose qualities align with his own and the foreigner driving along the highway––suggests that these two symbols exemplify the men's distinct cultural milieus and priorities in life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Viking Press edition of *A Horse and Two Goats. Stories.* published in 1970.

A Horse and Two Goats Quotes

Of the seven hundred thousand villages dotting the map of India… Kritam was probably the tiniest, indicated on the…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 hope to reach it since it sprawled far from the highway but its size did not prevent its giving itself the grandiose name Kritam, which meant in Tamil…"crown" on the brow of this subcontinent.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote provides vital exposition for the setting of this story. The narrator begins by describing the overwhelming number of villages that exist in India, noting, perhaps hyperbolically, that even amongst those "tiny dots," Kritam is the "tiniest." The narrator's characterization of the village as extremely small and insignificant contrasts ironically with the name of the village itself, which is grandiose in that it means "crown" in Tamil, the local language. Here, as elsewhere in the story, the author impresses upon the reader the opposing yet coexisting qualities of a person or thing, suggesting that the world of his story is one that contains contradictions and dualities. Additionally, the fact that the village's name itself means "crown" may be a subtle challenge to the Victorian-era conception of India as the "jewel in the crown" of Britain's colonial possessions. That the village sprawls "far from the highway" seems to indicate its insularity from the outside world of modernity and development, represented here by the highway.

He knew that if he obeyed her she would somehow conjure up some food for him in the evening. Only he must be careful not to argue and irritate her… 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.

Related Characters: Muni's Wife, Muni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Despite the patriarchal setting of this story, Narayan gives readers the sense that Muni's wife has more power over him than one might at first expect. In this quote, Muni has returned home after failing to procure on credit the necessary ingredients for a curry that he asked his wife to make. His wife exasperatedly orders him to graze his goats and fast until evening as the two have no food in the house and no money to buy it with. The narrator stresses that Muni feels he must "obey" his wife as he relies on her to perform odd jobs outside the home to earn money for their food, attesting to Muni's dependence on his wife's hard work and thus her greater power over him. As the primary breadwinner in the family, Muni's wife must support and take care of her husband. For those reasons, she commands her husband's respect and obedience. In this way, the narrator introduces nuance into the otherwise unquestionably patriarchal power dynamic between men and women in the story.

He passed through the village with his head bowed in thought. He did not want to look at anyone or be accosted. A couple of cronies…hailed him, but he ignored their call. They had known him in the days of affluence when he lorded over a flock of fleecy sheep, not the miserable gawky goats that he had today…but all this seemed like the memoirs of a previous birth.

Related Characters: Muni

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

After being humiliated by the shopkeeper and dismissed by his wife, Muni journeys to his favorite spot by the highway, but must pass through the village first. This quote indicates how suffocated Muni feels in this tiny village filled with judgmental and smallminded neighbors who all seem to have a negative opinion of him, perhaps based in part on his former affluence and his current impoverished state. He wishes to escape this insular environment and experience a freer atmosphere, which is why his favorite spot is far from the village, beside the highway. He ignores even the calls of his friends, feeling humiliated by the mere fact that they knew him when he was more prosperous than he is now. In

fact, his days of prosperity seem so far removed from his current situation that the narrator describes them as the "memoirs of a previous birth." With this phrase, readers get an early sense of Muni's own worldview, which is based on a cyclical conception of time, in which the soul travels from body to body throughout time in the cycle of reincarnation. This cyclical notion of time features prominently not only in Hinduism, but in the story of the statue that later becomes so central to the story.

> The shopman had said that he was seventy. At seventy, one only waited to be summoned by God. When he was dead what would his wife do? They had lived in each other's company since they were children... He had thrashed her only a few times in their career, and later she had the upper hand... He avoided looking at anyone [in the village; they all professed to be so high up, and everyone else in the village had more money than he. "I am the poorest fellow in our caste and no wonder that they spurn me, but I won't look at them either."

Related Characters: The Shopkeeper, Muni's Wife, Muni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

En route to his favorite grazing spot by the highway, Muni reflects on the shopkeeper's insulting assertion that he "must be at least seventy." Although Muni doesn't know his own age, he begins to brood on the shopkeeper's statement, allowing it to change the way he sees himself. In this way, Narayan demonstrates Muni's entrapment in the other villagers' negative opinions of him, exemplified by his rumination on the shopkeeper's assertion of his age.

Later, Muni reflects on his companionate relationship with his wife in which the two have come to depend on one another. Although he exercised his authority early in their marriage, she later became more powerful as the person on whom he could rely for daily sustenance and breadwinning. Thus, Narayan shows that the system of patriarchy that pervades the story is more amenable to women assuming positions of authority than is at first apparent. Muni feels ashamed that he is the "poorest fellow in [his] caste," and although it is never explicitly mentioned in the story, based on Muni's occupation as a shepherd, it is safe to assume that he is of the Shudra caste of laborers, the lowest caste in the general Hindu caste hierarchy. Thus, not only is he of the lowest caste in the hierarchy, he is also (in his own mind at least) the poorest member of that caste. This passage demonstrates the ways in which Muni's sense of shame surrounding his poverty impacts his self-conception and his relationships with those around him.

> Only on the outskirts [of the village] did he lift his head and look up... He sat on [the statue's] pedestal for the rest of the day. The advantage of this was that he could 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.

Related Characters: Muni

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

As soon as Muni arrives at his favorite spot by the highway, where the statue of the horse and warrior stands, he is unburdened of the great weight of the other villagers' narrow-minded judgments of him. Finally, at this spot, Muni can breathe a sigh of relief that here, at least, he is no longer just an impoverished, low-caste shepherd, but a man like any other who is curious about the world around him. Part of the reason Muni enjoys sitting at this spot is that he is diverted by the sight of the "lorries and buses" that pass by on the highway. In this story, the highway is a symbol for development, modernity, and the culture of materialism that necessitates this network of roads, which connect cities to villages, facilitating the transportation of goods. The statue, another important symbol in the story, acts as a foil to the highway, representing everything that the highway does not: tradition, cultural and religious heritage, and spirituality. If the highway represents the future, the statue represents the past. It is in this spot that Muni is able to feel as if the suffocating world of the village is not the entire world, but only a small and insignificant part of a much larger and more varied world.

> The horse was nearly life-size, moulded out of clay, baked, burnt, and brightly coloured, and reared its head proudly, prancing its forelegs in the air and flourishing its tail in a loop; beside the horse stood a warrior... None in the village remembered the splendours no one noticed its existence. Even Muni, who spent all his waking hours at its foot, never bothered to look up… This statue had been closer to the population of the village at one time, when this spot bordered the village; but when the highway was laid through (or perhaps when the tank and wells dried up completely here) the village moved a couple of miles inland.

Related Characters: Muni

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the author describes the appearance of the horse and warrior statue in detail. He emphasizes the horse statue's tail "flourishing…in a loop," which may be a reference to the Hindu conception of cyclical time upon which the legend of the horse statue is based. This notion of cyclical time stands in stark contrast to the highway, which, because it represents progress and development, signifies a much more linear conception of time. Although the statue is perhaps the only notable landmark for miles, the villagers—Muni included—have forgotten about it almost entirely, and have failed to notice its gradual deterioration. As Muni's narration of the legend connected to this statue will show, the statue's unseen deterioration as well as the degradation of Muni's fortunes seem intertwined as symptoms of the Kali Yuga, or the darkest age of humanity, in which people's souls and the environment become corrupted. It is thus not surprising that this statue's decline, as well as Muni's, have occurred gradually and unnoticed, as the people of Kali Yuga become progressively more blind to the spirituality that the statue represents. It is also significant that the village moved farther away from the statue when the highway was constructed, suggesting that it caused them to move further away from the values of spirituality and cultural heritage that the statue signifies.

> Muni shrank away from the [foreigner's] card. Perhaps [the foreigner] was trying to present a warrant and arrest him. Beware of khaki, one part of his mind warned. Take all the cigarettes or bhang or whatever is offered, but don't get caught. Beware of khaki.

Related Characters: The Red-Faced Foreigner, Muni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Suddenly, a yellow station wagon barreling down the highway comes to a stop in front of Muni, having run out of gas. A red-faced foreigner lumbers out of the vehicle, asking Muni if there is a gas station nearby and then proceeding to converse at length with him, despite the language barrier between the two men. Muni's initial reaction to the red-faced foreigner is one of fear and mistrust, as he associates him with the British colonial policemen who wore khaki. Muni's negative reaction to the foreigner is strong and he continually makes comparisons between the foreigner (who is American) and colonial officials, suggesting not only that Muni has had negative firsthand experiences with colonialism, but that there is some continuity between British colonialism and American neocolonialism. Although the United States has not colonized India in any official capacity, it is an immensely powerful country that controls global flows of capital and exerts a great deal of power in India. By making these comparisons between the foreigner and colonial officials, the narrator suggests that, to Muni, they are indistinguishable, and that perhaps the continuity between British colonialism and American neocolonialism is based on the same mechanisms of inequality, economic exploitation, and power.

> "Please, please. I will speak slowly…Can't you understand even a simple word of English? Everyone in this country seems to know English. I have got along with English everywhere in this country, but you don't speak it. Have you any religious or spiritual scruples against English speech?"

Related Characters: The Red-Faced Foreigner (speaker), Muni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the red-faced foreigner expresses incredulity that Muni cannot speak English. In fact, he seems to think that Muni knows English, but is refusing to speak it due to "religious or spiritual scruples." In this way, the foreigner assumes that, due to the prominence of English as the language of global commerce, everyone, including poor shepherds who live in remote corners of India, should know at least some English. That the foreigner has successfully relied on English thus far throughout his travels in India is a testament to the colonial legacy of English in India. Lastly, when the foreigner asks whether Muni is refusing to speak English due to "religious or spiritual scruples," he seems to be exotifying the lives of Indians, as if their lives are hopelessly and illogically circumscribed by religion and spirituality.

"You see, last August, we probably had the hottest summer in history, and I was working in shirt-sleeves in my office on the fortieth floor of the Empire State Building. We had a power failure one day, you know, and there I was stuck for four hours, no elevator, no air conditioning. All the way in the train I kept thinking, and the minute I reached home in Connecticut, I told my wife Ruth, 'We will visit India this winter, it's time to look at other civilizations.'"

Related Characters: The Red-Faced Foreigner (speaker), Muni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the foreigner details his impetus for traveling to India with his wife, Ruth. He describes what he experienced as the torment of being forced to work for four hours without the modern amenities that have become a taken-for-granted staple of American life. The foreigner's life of modern comforts and privilege contrasts starkly with the life of his interlocutor, Muni, who lives in a simple thatch hut, works as a shepherd, and can barely find enough to eat each day. Not only do these statements reveal the foreigner's obliviousness and self-centeredness, but they also reveal his assumption that his own lifestyle and priorities might be shared by this person, to whom these ideas are in fact utterly strange and foreign. Thus, despite the foreigner's attempt to appreciate other civilizations by traveling to India, this desire remains superficial and unfulfilled because, instead of attempting to appreciate the authenticity and nuance of Muni's mindset and way of life, he projects his own lifestyle and perspective onto his interlocutor.

"I don't want to seem to have stopped here for nothing. I will offer you a good price for this," he said, indicating the horse. He had concluded without the least doubt that Muni owned this mud horse. Perhaps he guessed by the way he sat at its pedestal, like other souvenir-sellers in this country presiding over their wares.

Related Characters: The Red-Faced Foreigner (speaker), Muni

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

With this passage, the foreigner reveals his preoccupation with making the most of his time—suggesting that time is a finite and valuable resource that should not be wasted. He repeatedly interrupts Muni throughout their conversation, insisting on purchasing the statue quickly for a "good price." In addition, he assumes that Muni owns the statue, like other Indian peddlers he has seen who are desperate to sell their wares to a wealthy Westerner such as himself. In making this assumption, the foreigner only reveals his own biased belief that a poor man from a poor country must be desperate to avail himself of the wealth of an American. Muni, of course, remains oblivious to this demeaning assumption and its implication that the horse and warrior statue is merely a "trinket" or "handicraft" that can be purchased for a price rather than a monument to the cultural and historical heritage of the region.

"This is our guardian, it means death to our adversaries. 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 called 'Kalki'; this horse will come to life and gallop and trample down all bad men... [T]he oceans are going to close over the earth in a huge wave and swallow us—this horse will grow bigger than the biggest wave and carry on its back only the good people and kick into the floods the evil ones."

Related Characters: Muni (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19-20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Muni finally explains the religious and spiritual significance of the horse and warrior, or Kalki, statue. He describes a version of the legend that is a bit different from the most common one, which states that Kalki is the warrior, the last avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu, who manifests on earth as a messiah to obliterate the corruption of the Kali Yuga and its evil denizens, thus restarting the cycle of time at the purest age of truth, or Satya Yuga. This legend depends on a conception of time as cyclical, as it is Kalki's mission to destroy the last age or Kali Yuga and restart the cycle of time at the first age, or Satya Yuga. This description, of course, is utterly incomprehensible to the English-speaking foreigner who, in any case, is focused on the statue's monetary value and the logistics of transporting it back home. The gap in understanding highlights the stark difference between the way two men view the statue, revealing their most deeply-held underlying values in the process.

"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…the TV may have to be shifted too… 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."

Related Characters: The Red-Faced Foreigner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

With this quote, the foreigner reveals the depths of his materialism as he goes on about rearranging his numerous possessions to make way for his newest acquisition: the horse statue. Although the foreigner attempts to appear cultured and well-read by boasting of the number of books he owns and book clubs of which he is a member, his materialism is the most noteworthy element of this passage. His classification of the horse statue as just another pretty object becomes very evident when he states that he will place the horse in the middle of the room so that it can spark conversations at his house parties.

"Lend me a hand and I can lift off the horse from its pedestal after picking out the cement at the joints. We can do anything if we have a basis of understanding" … He flourished a hundred-rupee currency note… The old man now realized that some financial element was entering their talk. He peered closely at the currency note, the like of which he had never seen in his life… He laughed to himself at the notion of anyone coming to him for changing a thousand- or ten-thousand-rupee note.

Related Characters: The Red-Faced Foreigner (speaker), Muni

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of the foreigner and Muni's conversation, the foreigner becomes more assertive and asks Muni to help him hoist the statue into his car. With the author's characteristically potent irony, the foreigner states that "we can do anything if we have a basis of understanding," which is, of course, impossible as neither man has the faintest idea of what the other is trying to communicate. Even after the foreigner has tried to communicate rather forcefully that he wants to take the statue and be on his way, Muni still does not comprehend the foreigner's intentions until he flourishes a 100-rupee note. Muni's lack of materialism is evident in that it takes quite a while for him to realize that the foreigner has been conversing about a financial transaction for some time. Yet, instead of assuming that the money is for him, Muni believes that the foreigner must be asking for change. Narayan seems to be suggesting that the only basis of understanding these two men can achieve is monetary, and even this understanding proves to be deeply partial and incomplete.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A HORSE AND TWO GOATS

The narrator begins by stating that, of the thousands of villages in India, Kritam was "probably the tiniest," and noting that its presence on the map was more for the benefit of tax collectors than motorists, since the village is far from the **highway**. Despite its modesty, Kritam means "crown" in the language of Tamil. The village consists of less than thirty thatch houses and one majestic brick construction called the Big House. Muni lives in one of these thatch houses, and in more prosperous times owned a flock of 40 sheep and goats, which he would take each day to graze near the highway while he sat, watching them, at the foot of a clay **statue** of a horse and warrior. Muni's wife takes care of him by cooking him breakfast and lunch each day: a ball of cooked millet and sometimes a raw onion. The couple are elderly, and Muni depends entirely on his wife's care to "be kept alive."

The village's name, Kritam, seems to be an allusion to historical conceptions of India as a "jewel in the crown" of Britain's colonial possessions. Thus, the village's proclamation of its status as a "crown" in its own right may be read as a challenge to this colonialist conception of India. The author, who uses dramatic irony throughout the story as a source of humor, establishes an ironic contrast here between the village's grandiose name and its tiny size and insignificance. The author also describes the village's insularity in terms of its inaccessible location, far from the highway, thereby creating an association between the highway and the rest of the world—an association which proves important as the highway becomes one of the story's main symbols.

Over time, Muni's fortunes have dwindled. His once large flock now consists of only two goats, and he can no longer afford to rent a pen at the Big House, so he keeps them tied to a "drumstick (seed pod) tree" in front of his house from which he occasionally harvests drumsticks. This particular morning, he is able to shake down six, and brings them home triumphantly to his wife. Muni's wife takes care of him each day by waking at dawn to light the domestic fire and cooking his breakfast and lunch. Instead of his usual humble fare of cooked millet and a raw onion, he asks her to make a sauce with the drumsticks. She assents to satisfying his "unholy craving" for such a fancy meal if he brings her the necessary ingredients. Muni agrees and sets off.

With this passage, the narrator provides evidence of this couple's crushing poverty. Muni's wife has total control over the domestic arena, as it is she who performs all the cooking and other chores. Thus, despite the patriarchal setting of the story, Muni's wife has power over her husband in the sense that he depends on her for daily sustenance, whereas she does not depend on him in the same way. Muni's "big ambitions" (an extension of which is his desire to escape the insularity of the village and experience the world beyond) are hinted at in this part of the story when he craves a rich curry rather than his daily fare of boiled millet.

Muni goes to the local store and attempts to charm the shopkeeper by laughing at his jokes and engaging in gossip about the traveling postman's wife, who ran away to the city with another man. Although the shopkeeper enjoys hearing ill of the postman, who cheated him, he nevertheless refuses to allow Muni (who has no money) to purchase the items on credit. The shopkeeper humiliates Muni in front of his other customers and declares him an old liar (the shopkeeper even asserts that Muni must be seventy years old although Muni doesn't know his exact age) and a scoundrel for failing to pay back an "ancient debt." Feeling desperate, Muni lies and says that his daughter will soon give him money for his fiftieth birthday to purchase the ingredients and pay off the debt, but the shopkeeper refuses to believe him.

For the first time in the story, readers get a sense of how the other villagers perceive Muni. Muni refers to the itinerant postman's wife, who ran away with another man to the city, in an effort to manipulate the shopkeeper, who hates the postman for being a cheat. Narayan hints that, despite highly restrictive patriarchal norms, daring women such as the postman's wife can still make their own choices in life and alter their futures. Furthermore, with this piece of gossip, Muni draws an unintentional contrast between himself and the shopkeeper, who are stuck in their tiny village, and the postman, who is able to escape the censure of the other villagers because he must travel for his job. Unlike the postman, Muni, a poor shepherd who owes the shopkeeper money, feels afflicted by the villagers' negative opinions of him, as when the shopkeeper asserts that Muni "must be at least seventy."

Dejected, Muni returns home to inform his wife of the bad news; she exasperatedly orders him out of the house to graze his goats and fast until evening. Muni's wife realizes she will have to perform odd jobs in the village and sell the drumsticks, as per Muni's order, to purchase food for their evening meal. As Muni walks toward his favorite spot by the **highway** with his two scraggly goats, he hangs his head, imagining all the negative gossip about him circulating in the village. En route to the highway, Muni reflects on his glory days when a famous, out-of-town butcher would buy his sheep and ponders bitterly that his once large herd began to dwindle due to a pestilence. He wants to be rid of his two remaining goats, as they only serve as a reminder of how far he has fallen in the world.

Despite Muni's imperious demand that his wife sell the drumsticks to get money for food, Muni is not as powerful as he may at first appear. He relies on his wife to work outside the home to earn money, and his wife is thus the primary breadwinner in the family. Hence, despite the patriarchal norms of the village, Muni's wife clearly has power over her husband. In Muni's journey through the village, he is unwilling to engage with his small-minded and judgmental neighbors and seems to hold his breath until he can experience the freeing atmosphere of the highway.

As Muni approaches the highway, he feels defeated by the shopkeeper's assertion that he must be "at least seventy" and surmises that death is close at hand. This leads him to worry about what his wife will do when he dies, as they have been married since they were children. Although he had beaten her a few times early in their marriage, she developed more authority over him later. Their lack of children is a source of shame and regret for Muni. Once Muni arrives at his favorite spot, an area beside the **highway** that is the site of an old and grandiose **statue** of a horse and warrior, his mood gradually improves as he finally feels "a sense of belonging to a larger world." The narrator describes how the statue used to look even more opulent, although no one in the village, not even Muni, remembers its former appearance.

Muni feels hemmed-in by the other villagers' negative opinions of him, as evidenced by his devastation at the shopkeeper's assertion of his age. As someone who has lived in Kritam all his life and has no hope of leaving, he is particularly vulnerable to his neighbors' negative opinions. When Muni arrives at his favorite spot, his mood improves and perspective shifts, reflecting his ambitions to see beyond the confines of the suffocating world of his tiny village.

Suddenly, a yellow station wagon comes barreling down the **highway**, only to stop abruptly in front of Muni after running out of gas. A "red-faced foreigner" lumbers out of the car, questioning Muni as to whether there is a gas station nearby, but the two men are unable to communicate as the foreigner (an American tourist) speaks only English and Muni speaks only Tamil. Abruptly, the foreigner looks up at the horse **statue** and becomes utterly entranced by it, exclaiming "Marvelous!" repeatedly. Muni is afraid of the foreigner, who is wearing khaki like colonial policemen and soldiers used to wear, and contemplates edging away but realizes he won't be able to flee due to his "advanced" age. After gazing at the statue some more, the foreigner suddenly greets Muni directly, and Muni responds with the only English expressions he knows: "yes, no."

Here, the narrator introduces a major source of irony around which much of the story's humor revolves: the language barrier between the two men. The foreigner immediately gives more focus to the statue than to Muni, treating it as an enthralling and "exotic" object, thus revealing his materialism. Muni's fearful reaction to the foreigner suggests Muni's own negative, firsthand experiences with colonialism. This story was originally published in 1960, only 13 years after India achieved independence, meaning that colonialism is still a very recent and relevant history to this nation and its people. Muni's grasp of only two English words––yes and no––may suggest the ambivalent attitude of some Indians toward the English language in general as a language of exploitation as well as a language that provides access to global wealth and power.

Muni, not understanding the foreigner's English, asserts defensively that the two goats nearby are indeed his, although many slanderous people in his village might argue otherwise. The foreigner, equally puzzled by Muni's Tamil, politely offers him a cigarette, and Muni becomes a bit more relaxed at this friendly gesture. Then, the foreigner says that he comes from New York and offers his business card, which Muni mistakes for an arrest warrant. Thinking he is in trouble, Muni states that he knows nothing about a recent murder that took place on the border of Kritam and the adjoining village, Kuppam. The foreigner continues with an unrelated conversation, asserting that Muni must know when the horse **statue** was made and expressing dismay and surprise that Muni speaks no English as he has relied on it exclusively thus far in his travels throughout India.

Muni's defensive assertion of his ownership of his goats again suggests his entrapment in the other villagers' negative views of him. Later, the foreigner's offer of cigarettes to Muni is the first time readers see friendliness and understanding in the interaction between the two men. However, when the foreigner produces a business card, Muni reverts to fearfulness as he mistakes the card for an arrest warrant, which speaks volumes of his negative experiences with colonialism. Muni's comparisons of the foreigner to a colonial official, with his khaki clothing, business card/arrest warrant, and reliance on English, draws attention to the continuities between British colonialism and the American-led era of neocolonialism. In addition, the foreigner's reliance on English during his travels in India hints at the colonial legacy of English in India. The foreigner makes an ignorant assumption that a poor, Indian shepherd would speak English, alluding to the global hegemony of English as a neocolonial language of economic power and cultural capital.

The foreigner tells Muni (although Muni has no idea what he is saying) that he decided to travel to India on a whim with his wife Ruth after having experienced what he considers a "life-changing" and monumental torment: having to work without air conditioning on a hot summer day during a brownout in New York City, where he works as a coffee trader in the Empire State Building. He states that, it was during this brownout that he experienced an "epiphany" of sorts that he must "look at other civilizations."

The minor discomfort of working for four hours without air conditioning motivates the foreigner to "look at other civilizations," but he appears to engaged in an at-best superficial attempt to appreciate other cultures, without any real desire to broaden his worldview or appreciate others' perspectives and ways of life. The foreigner's comfortable life of taken-for-granted wealth and access to modern amenities contrasts sharply with the life of Muni, who lives in a hut with no money to his name and barely enough to eat every day.

Muni tries to make an excuse to leave, thoroughly mystified by the foreigner's conversation, but the foreigner detains him, questioning him as to whether the **statue** belongs to him; the foreigner assumes that Muni is "like other souvenir sellers in this country presiding over their wares." Gesturing toward the statue, the foreigner suggests that Muni sell it to him. Muni, finally understanding the foreigner's interest in the statue, begins to narrate legends about it, which have been passed down for generations in his family. Listening to Muni's long speeches, the foreigner becomes increasingly restless and more assertive about buying the statue quickly, saying "I don't want to seem to have stopped here for nothing."

In this passage, the foreigner assumes that Muni must be like any other Indian peddler who is desperate to sell a valuable "handicraft" to a rich Westerner. In this way, the foreigner makes an assumption about Muni based on his appearance: Muni, a poor man from a poor country, must want to avail himself of the foreigner's American wealth. The fact that Muni is more multifaceted than the materialistic foreigner becomes apparent as he spends much of his time talking about his memories, religion, and spirituality, while the foreigner seems fixated on acquiring the statue as quickly as possible to avoid wasting time. While Muni describes the statue by referring to it as a subject of legends in his family, the foreigner understands the statue in materialistic terms as a pretty object that can be acquired for a price. Lastly, the foreigner's preoccupation with "not wasting time" suggests that he views time as a precious and scant resource like money, whereas Muni reveals later that he views time as something that endlessly renews in cycles.

The foreigner marvels at Muni's Tamil as one would take delight in a sideshow attraction. Yet, the foreigner assumes that Muni's chatter is just "sales talk" to promote the horse **statue**, which the foreigner assures Muni is not necessary. Muni explains apologetically to the foreigner that he was not allowed to go to school in his youth, as only Brahmins were permitted access to education at that time. Instead, from a very young age, Muni had to work from dawn till dusk in the fields, which is why he doesn't know the foreigner's "parangi" or "foreign" language. He adds that only learned men and officers know English in India. The foreigner continues with an unrelated monologue about how he could sell the statue better than anyone.

Although the author uses the men's language barrier as a source of humor, there are several less humorous implications to the foreigner's exoticization of Muni's language and his insistence that he must somehow know English. Rather than respectfully appreciating Muni's language, the foreigner marvels at it in a similar way to how he marvels at the horse statue: as an exotic object that is appreciated for its superficial attributes rather than its deeper cultural and historical significance. The foreigner further imposes his view of Muni as a poor man from a poor country who must be desperate to make money off a wealthy foreigner when he assumes that he must be trying to sell the statue to him. This assumption lays bare the foreigner's own materialism.

Once again misunderstanding the foreigner's reference to the statue that stands beside the **highway**, Muni begins to explain its mythological and religious significance. He tells the foreigner that it represents **Kalki**, the final avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu, who will return at the end of the Kali Yuga or the darkest age of humanity, as a messiah, to destroy a hopelessly benighted world and reset the cycle of time at Satya Yuga, the age of truth.

With Muni's explanation of the Kalki statue's significance, readers may begin to appreciate the symbolic value of this statue, especially in its opposition to the neighboring highway, a powerful and opposing symbol in the story. The Kalki statue is a symbol of tradition, history, cyclical time (in that the Hindu legend of Kalki relies on the notion of cyclical time) and spirituality, and stands in opposition to the highway, which represents modernity, development, linear time, and materialism. The deterioration of the statue and Muni's decline in fortunes parallel the deterioration of people and the environment that occurs during the Kali Yuga. Yet, like Muni's decline in fortunes, the statue's own deterioration has occurred gradually and without attracting attention, suggesting that perhaps the villagers, in the depths of Kali Yuga, have become progressively more blind to the values that the statue represents.

Ignorant of the meaning of Muni's speech and the religious and cultural significance of the **statue**, the foreigner begins outlining a plan to rearrange his other material possessions, such as piles of books and a TV, and place the statue in the middle of his living room so that it can function as a conversation piece at cocktail parties. Muni obliviously begins narrating the other avatars of the Hindu God Vishnu and telling of his childhood as a stage actor performing plays based on mythological stories.

Here, the author again emphasizes the stark contrast between the two men: while Muni spends much of his time reminiscing and talking about his religion and spirituality, which depend on the notion of cyclical time, the foreigner speaks only of the possessions he owns and how he will have to rearrange them to accommodate his newest acquisition: the horse statue. The foreigner clearly sees the statue as a pretty object with no other value beyond its ability to facilitate conversation at a party. Regardless of the foreigner's attempts to make himself sound cultured and well-read by referring to the number of books he owns, his exaggerated materialism becomes evident through this relentless discussion of his possessions.

The foreigner, becoming even more restless, states that "we have come to the point where we should be ready to talk business" and flourishes 100 rupees for the **statue** in front of Muni. Muni has never seen so much money in his life. Thinking that the foreigner is asking for change, Muni recommends that he visit the village moneylender. When Muni mentions the moneylender's dislike of him and his goats, whom the moneylender once accused of stealing pumpkins, the foreigner pets his goats hoping that this will speed up the transaction. Seeing this, Muni surmises that the foreigner is offering him one hundred rupees for the goats, rather than the statue. Muni is ecstatic that he is finally getting rid of the goats, that served only as a reminder of his impoverished state, and will be able to use the money to open a small shop along the **highway**. Taking the money, Muni walks off, leaving his goats to the foreigner.

This grand misunderstanding is the end result of the men's unintelligibility to one another. The fact that Muni did not previously foresee any financial transaction is a testament to his preoccupation with his inner life, especially when compared to the foreigner, who seems to think only of "time as money" and acquiring material possessions. In this passage as well, Muni's more relaxed attitude toward time as an abundant resource stands in stark contrast to the foreigner's rush to buy the statue and his view of time as a limited resource that must not be wasted. Muni's reflections on his dream to open a shop near the highway may seem like a modest ambition to some, but for Muni it would be a chance to reinvent himself, become more prosperous, and escape the suffocating village atmosphere.

Muni returns home triumphant, informing his wife that he has managed to sell his goats. The foreigner continues to wait confusedly by the **highway**, assuming that Muni has gone to fetch help. Eventually, the foreigner flags down a passing truck and pays the laborers therein to pry the **statue** from its pedestal and place it in his car; he also pays them to siphon gas from their truck to restart his engine. Back in the village, Muni's elation does not last long as, soon enough, he hears the bleating of goats at his door—the goats have followed their owner back home. His wife assumes that he must have robbed someone to get so much money, and threatens to flee to her parents' home should the police come.

The misunderstanding that occurs between Muni and the foreigner exemplifies their conflict of perspective: although the foreigner tries to learn about other civilizations by traveling to India, he fails to see the deeper significance of Indian civilization because he remains stuck in his own money- and time-obsessed mindset that enables him to flourish as a coffee trader in New York. Similarly, although Muni desperately wishes to escape the narrowmindedness of the village and experience a larger world, he is unable to understand the foreigner because, language barrier aside, his perspective is limited by his life as an impoverished and uneducated shepherd. Thus, neither man is able to broaden his perspective enough to encompass another's worldview. The foreigner's actions amount to a defacement and theft of the statue, and are thus emblematic of the destruction and commodification of the cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage that the statue represents.

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