An Astrologer's Day

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF R. K. NARAYAN

R.K. Narayan was born to a large, well-educated family in South India. His father was a school headmaster who constantly traveled, so Narayan spent much of his childhood in the care of his grandmother; she schooled him in mythology, arithmetic, classical music, and Indian languages (the family mostly conversed in English). Narayan earned his bachelor's degree and briefly worked as a school teacher, though he soon quit to pursue his dream of being a writer. With the support of his family, Narayan wrote several novels about a fictional Indian town, commenting on issues such as the abuse of students in schools and the imbalance of power between men and women in marriage. Though these works were rejected by many publishers, English novelist Graham Greene helped Narayan find publication in Europe. Narayan's novels were well-reviewed but did not sell. At 29, the author married and took a job as a journalist to support his new family; his wife died of typhoid five years later, however, sending him into a deep depression. Around this time Narayan produced the autobiographical fiction *The English Teacher*. The events of World War II meant that for several years, Narayan was unable to work with his English publishers. To solve this problem, he started his own publishing house, Indian Thought Publications, which still exists and is operated by his granddaughter. Narayan also began to adapt his writing to suit a more creative, less introspective style, but still made commentary on sociopolitical issues and the irony of Indian life. Narayan's prolific career spanned over six decades, producing novels, short story anthologies, and even the screenplay for the Indian feature film *Miss Malini* (1947). He received numerous awards, including India's highest literary honor and several Nobel Prize nominations, and his novel *The Guide* (1958) saw both film and Broadway adaptations. Narayan died in 2001.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Britain, as a method of culling the strength and will of the Indian population, catalyzed Hindu caste philosophy into the legally-binding system it is today. As instituted by the British rulers in the 19th century, Indian citizens are assigned a social caste (or class) from birth, depending on lineage and family ties. Higher castes are afforded more economic and educational opportunities, better support from the government, and greater freedom. Low castes are oppressed and devalued, with far fewer opportunities for success or advancement in life. Although British colonial rule was thrown off when India declared independence in 1947, and discrimination (particularly violence) based on caste was outlawed in 1989, the caste system remains a dominant social force to this day. "An Astrologer's Day" was published in 1947, a significant and tumultuous year for India: already reeling from World War II and the Bengali famine that killed millions, India also began its existence as an independent nation. The Indian subcontinent was partitioned between the Hindu and Muslim populations so that each could have their own self-governing states, creating modern-day India and Pakistan. This process of division, known as Partition, grew extremely violent, resulting in the deaths and displacement of millions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Narayan was one of three formative leaders in the development of Indian literature written in English in the 20th Century. His work stands next to the writing of his contemporaries Raja Rao, whose novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) set the benchmark for English prose in India, and Mulk Raj Anand, whose novel *Untouchable* (1935) exposed the darkest aspects of the caste system. Like Narayan, both authors gave international audiences a first-hand examination of the lives of middle and lower-class Indians and the perversities and ironies of such an ancient culture living in the modern world. Narayan, Rao, and Anand's groundbreaking work paved the way for many modern authors who do the same work of bringing Indian history, culture, and identity to the wider literary world. Examples include Salman Rushdie, whose novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) uses magical realism to tell the story of India's post-colonial struggle for independence, and Aravind Adiga, whose unflinching *The White Tiger* (2008) depicts the struggle of the poor in modern India to rise above their station.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "An Astrologer's Day"
- **Where Written:** Madras, India
- **When Published:** 1947
- **Literary Period:** Early Indian English literature
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** An unnamed Indian village
- **Climax:** Guru Nayak bets the astrologer a large sum of money that he cannot foretell anything worthwhile or true. The astrologer draws on the experience of a secret past and wins the bet.
- **Antagonist:** Guru Nayak
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Self-Deprecating. In the story, Narayan is quite critical of both religion and the practice of astrology, both of which were the domain of high-level Brahmin caste. Narayan himself was a Brahmin, though none of his family were astrologers or priests, and seems to be poking fun at his own upbringing and peers.

Natural Rebel. Though his family tried to remain apolitical, Narayan always had a progressive bent. At 12, he marched in a pro-independence rally, to his family's chagrin. After his marriage, he worked as a reporter for a journal that championed the rights of non-Brahmin citizens; his employers were ecstatic to have a Brahmin writer join their ranks.

PLOT SUMMARY

An an unnamed village in India, an astrologer lays out his **tools of the trade**, a mix of cowrie shells, obscure charts, a notebook, and other such curios. They serve no purpose but to create the illusion of mysticism. The astrologer has also painted his forehead with sacred ash, wrapped his head in a turban, and seated himself and his gear beneath a large tree. All of these things serve to give him an air of wisdom, transcendence, and prophetic power, though the narrator is quick to point out that none of these qualities actually belong to the man.

The astrologer has set up his little shop amidst a busy marketplace among people fencing stolen goods, presenting the same cheap food as a variety of gourmet delicacies, and auctioning off low-quality fabrics. The astrologer, quickly established as a fraud, is in the company of other fraudsters and spin doctors selling their wares and making their livings. The marketplace is **lit by various shop lights and flares**, the dancing shadows of which enhance the astrologer's mystical quality. He notably has no light of his own, but simply borrows that of the other vendors.

The astrologer had never had any intention of becoming one, but had been forced to leave his ancestral home and travel several hundred miles away with no plan and no money. Even so, he is a convincing holy man, using his own insights into human problems to offer vague but comforting advice to people in the market. He functions as a sort of therapist, offering self-affirming advice that he wraps in the guise of astrological wisdom. He is good at his trade; he tells people what they want to hear, and they leave comforted by it. Though it is not an honest living that the astrologer makes, it is still a well-earned one.

As the marketplace is emptying and the lights are being put out, a stranger named Guru Nayak appears. In the darkness, neither can see much of the other's face. Seeing the opportunity for one more client, the astrologer invites Guru Nayak to sit and chat. The stranger does so, but is instantly skeptical of the astrologer. He aggressively wagers that the astrologer cannot tell him anything true or worthwhile. They haggle over the price and the astrologer agrees. However, when Guru Nayak lights a cheroot, the astrologer catches a brief glimpse of the man's face and is filled with fear. He tries to get out of the wager, but Guru Nayak holds him to it and will not let him leave.

The astrologer tries his usual tack of vague, self-affirming advice, but Guru Nayak will have none of it. The astrologer sincerely prays for a moment, and then changes course. He reveals to Guru Nayak that he knows he was once stabbed through the chest and left for dead, and that now Guru Nayak is here searching for his assailant. He even reveals that he knows Guru Nayak's name, something he attributes to his cosmic wisdom. Guru Nayak is greatly excited by all of this, believing the astrologer to truly be all-knowing. He presses the astrologer for the whereabouts of the man who stabbed him so that he can have his revenge. The astrologer tells him that he died several months ago, crushed by an oncoming lorry. Guru Nayak is frustrated by this, but satisfied that at least his attacker died terribly. He gives the astrologer his money and leaves.

The astrologer arrives home late at night and shows his wife the money he has made, becoming briefly bitter when he realizes that although Guru Nayak has paid him a great sum, it is not quite as much as promised. Even so, his wife is thrilled. As they lie down to sleep, the astrologer reveals to his wife that a great burden has been lifted off of his shoulders. Years ago, the astrologer was the one to stab Guru Nayak and leave him for dead, which forced him to flee his home and make a new life as a fraudulent astrologer. He had thought himself to be a murderer, but was now content that he had not in fact taken a life. Satisfied by this, he goes to sleep.

CHARACTERS

The Astrologer – The nameless protagonist of the story, the astrologer is not truly an astrologer, but a con man. He sets up shop each day beneath a tree in a market, wearing **a priest's garb and face paint** and posing as a holy man with cosmic wisdom. For a small fee, he listens to people's problems and offers what seems like sage advice, dressing his common sense and manipulations in an astrologist's vernacular. Despite having no actual astrological wisdom, he is quite perceptive and offers comfort to his customers by giving them self-affirming answers and easing their minds. It is revealed at the end of the story that the astrologer is in hiding, having fled his home and past life as a farmer after he drunkenly attempted to murder Guru Nayak. As far as he knows, he actually *did* take Guru Nayak's life, and feels a great burden at the thought of being a murderer. His burden is not borne out of pity for Guru Nayak, however, but of his own self-interest. Even when the astrologer meets Guru Nayak, he makes no attempt to atone for his crime. Although he is the protagonist, the astrologer is not the hero of the story.

The astrologer has a wife and child, neither of whom know anything of his murderous past.

Guru Nayak – Guru Nayak is the man whom the astrologer tried to murder several years before the story takes place. Very little is said about Guru Nayak other than that he has left his village and gone searching for the man who tried to kill him so that he can strangle him to death. Guru Nayak is introduced merely as an aggressive stranger who is immediately skeptical of the astrologer and his supposed wisdom. Though he is standing in front of him, due to the darkness of the evening and **the paint, turban, and long beard** that the astrologer wears, he does not recognize his attacker. He eventually believes that the astrologer is a prophet when the astrologer tells him the specifics of his attack and even Guru Nayak's own name. He is disappointed when he is told that his attacker died under the tires of a vehicle some months before, but satisfied enough that he promises to return home and never venture to this village again. Although Guru Nayak is positioned as the antagonist in the structure of the story, he actually could be considered as occupying the role of the hero in the relationship between the two characters. Although the story was written in English, Guru Nayak's name is actually two Hindi terms: "Guru" meaning teacher or spiritual initiator and "Nayak" meaning hero.

The Astrologer's Wife – Introduced only at the end of the story, the astrologer's wife is pleased that her husband has brought home more money than usual from his day's work. At the same time, she is shocked to learn that her husband had tried to murder Guru Nayak before he left his village and they were married.

TERMS

Cowrie shells – Small white shells often used in Indian astrology and by children as a substitute for dice. In astrology, the shells are held in the palm of the right hand, shaken, and thrown upon the ground, at which point the astrologer makes a reading of the manner in which they have fallen.

Cheroot – A rolled cigar with both ends open.

Lorry – A truck.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MYSTICISM AND RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY

Indian author R.K. Narayan's "An Astrologer's Day" tells the story of a fraudulent astrologer who makes his living by selling cosmic insights to gullible villagers. Although he has no knowledge of the cosmos or actual spiritual insight, the astrologer exploits his customers' search for meaning and reassurance, robing his lies in the vagaries of mystery and religion. Narayan's portrayal of astrology and holy men does not eviscerate or prosecute religion, but certainly prods at it. The astrologer is presented as a mere man, full of greed and fear and suffering from the woes of marriage, money, and tangled relationships much like any other human being. He possesses no cosmic insight of his own, and so must borrow and fabricate it. At the same time, the author recognizes that such religious mysticism, whether real or fantasy, offers an architecture of meaning for common people suffering common problems, but fearing insignificance and a lack of control above all else.

The astrologer's appearance, produced by **his garb and equipment**, are all designed to create an air of mysticism and power. In the opening lines of the story, as the astrologer's character is being established, he lays out his "professional equipment," which is nothing more than a number of cowrie shells, a cloth chart that is too obscure to be understood but looks sufficiently mystical, and a bundle of ancient writings and scrolls. These props help him sell the illusion that he is a holy man; he never actually uses the items. The astrologer has also painted his forehead with sacred ash and wrapped himself in a saffron turban—saffron ironically being symbolic in Hinduism of purity and the quest for light.

The astrologer seats himself beneath a large tamarind tree, drawing upon the classical image of holy men instructing their disciples beneath a grand tree, like Buddha attaining enlightenment or icons of Jesus Christ teaching his followers. By associating himself with a grand piece of nature, he further reinforces the notion that he is a man connected with and harmonizing with the world and the cosmos. Yet even as his eyes, settled between the striking colors of his headwear and his black beard, take on a sharp, otherworldly quality that evokes powerful wisdom, the astrologer is fully aware that in such garb, "even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle." In fact, the narrator notes, "half the enchantment of the place had to do with the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal **lighting**"—that is, marketplace itself only seems mystical, essentially, because it lacks adequate lighting provided by the government. Such details comically undercut any notion of the astrologer as a true mystic, and reject outward trappings of mysticism as shallow and meaningless.

The astrologer's keen insight and religious vocabulary thus mask the fact that he has no cosmic wisdom. The astrologer admits to himself that he had never intended to become an astrologer and does not understand the stars or planets nor

their astrological implication better than any other peasant. His position as a fraudulent holy man, which is a risky endeavor in a highly religious community, is only the result of unfortunate circumstances that forced him to flee his home years earlier after (supposedly) killing another villager, Guru Nayak. Even so, the astrologer has sharpened his perception and formed a broad analysis of human problems, being that they almost always center around marriage, money, or tangled relationships. With this insight and a good listening ear, he is able to give vague advice and positive affirmation dressed in astrological language. He has learned what people want to hear, though they do not know that they want to hear it. They are comforted by what he has to say and thus happy to pay him his fee.

The astrologer's guise, then, however elaborate, is dependent upon the fact that people are searching for meaning and immediately inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. Interestingly, the narrator calls the astrologer's work as honest as any man's labor and believes he deserves his wages. Indeed, the astrologer acts as a sort of therapist for the community—not a particularly good one, but one who does make his patients feel encouraged and affirmed in their struggles. His customers crave some level of cosmic significance in their life, and he offers it; there is a symbiosis to their relationship. However, the imbalance between their mundane problems and his astrological explanations is often absurd, such as when he connects a poor temperament to the position of Saturn.

The fact that the astrologer himself uses his disguise to evade punishment for his past crime presents the story's ultimate hypocrisy. In the late hours of the evening, the astrologer has an encounter with a skeptical stranger whom he recognizes as Guru Nayak, the man he had attempted to murder years before. Guru Nayak has not recognized him in return, and, knowing that he will be killed if his identity is discovered, the astrologer uses his guise as a religious man to convince the skeptic that his would-be murderer was killed months ago, ending Guru Nayak's hunt for his assailant.

Narayan, himself a member of the religious and powerful Brahmin caste, would have seen examples of holy men hiding behind their masks first-hand, and is taking the opportunity to satirize it. At the same time, the story lays some culpability for this sort of cosmic fraud on those who too quickly seek mystical solutions to their worldly problems. The readiness of people to believe that men like the astrologer have all the answers suggests an innate human desire to imbue one's life with meaning and control. Men like the astrologer, then, are simply giving customers what they want.

GUILT, FEAR, AND IDENTITY

The astrologer is not truly an astrologer, but merely a man masquerading as one. He has taken on a new, fabricated identity to escape the just consequences of his attempt at murder. The astrologer no longer has any opportunity to practice authenticity; his livelihood, marriage, and very survival are all predicated on lies. Narayan uses the astrologer to contemplate the ways in which fear and guilt can push an individual to live an unauthentic, self-deceiving life.

The astrologer's fabricated identity is a fear-driven act of self-preservation, protecting him from justice and preserving his life. The astrologer was forced to flee his home after he stabbed Guru Nayak in drunken brawl. His new profession, as well as his **makeup and turban**, conceal his old identity from anyone who might recognize him. No one will question the identity of a holy man, as they are more inclined to think of him by title only, rather than as a person with a name, a family, an origin. For those who believe that he is a man of great power, they would not dare to question his integrity. Even the narrator does not give a name to the man, he is only ever "the astrologer." He has thus escaped justice and judgment at the hands of his community. Indeed, when Guru Nayak approaches him, he does not recognize the face of the man he seeks (that is, the man who tried to murder him). This is due in part to the **failing light** at the day's end, but also in part to the clothing and equipment that the astrologer has surrounded himself with. Had Guru Nayak recognized the astrologer, he would likely have killed him on the spot. The astrologer is playing a long-practiced part and Guru Nayak, despite his initial skepticism, fell for it. His deception has again allowed him to escape justice, thereby prohibiting him from living honestly or sincerely.

The astrologer's fabricated identity also hides him from his own guilt for the blood he has shed. Although the narration is written in the third-person, it is reflective of the astrologer's state of mind. Before it is revealed that he tried to murder Guru Nayak, the telling of his leaving the village is written in an off-handed tone: an event which was slightly unfortunate, but necessary, and now long-past. This suggests that the astrologer has committed himself to his new identity, fraudulent as it is, in an effort to bury his guilt. At the end of the story, when the astrologer reveals to his wife that he had once attempted to murder a man, he shows no remorse or sense of responsibility. His only concern is that he is not a true murderer, but spares no thought for the toll that his actions had on Guru Nayak. Even when his wife is understandably shocked at the knowledge that her husband tried to kill another man, the astrologer brushes it off as the actions of "silly youngsters." He has separated his current self from the one who attempted murder. He has effectively buried his own guilt underneath the layers of his new identity.

Motivated as he is to deceive the world and himself, the astrologer is unable to undertake genuine introspection or

grow, let alone to take responsibility for what he has done. The astrologer is mired in deceit, every aspect of his life is a lie. His livelihood, though it does serve a function within the village, is based on lies. He has deceived himself that his crime will never need to be atoned for, nor should it. It is especially ironic that his chosen profession is that of a holy man, one whom others look to for virtue and counsel. The astrologer is trading on the esteemed role of religion and thousands of years of teaching, but is unwilling to absorb any of it himself. He has cynically compartmentalized his world.

When given the opportunity to face his victim and take responsibility for his crime, the astrologer dodges it. During his encounter with Guru Nayak, never does the astrologer even consider the possibility of confessing. Fate presents him with the opportunity to embrace the truth, to set aside his false identity and deceptions. Instead, the astrologer uses his guise as an omniscient figure to cast another lie, convincing Guru Nayak that his attacker was killed months before. With this in mind, the astrologer's fear during his meeting with Guru Nayak may be as much an existential fear of facing himself as it is a simple fear for his own life. Guru Nayak's presence resurrects the past and threatens the astrologer's own self-deceiving identity. If one piece of his identity comes loose, it all does, and his deceptions are laid bare to himself and the world. When the astrologer tells Guru Nayak that the man he used to be was killed, the astrologer *does* effectively kill him; any possibility of living as his authentic self has now been shattered.

Guru Nayak works as a simple foil for the astrologer's inauthenticity. Out of fear for his life and guilt over what he has done, the astrologer has buried his true self in the robes of religious mysticism to such an extent that Narayan never even gives him a name, referring to him exclusively as "the astrologer." This sits in contrast to Guru Nayak, whose name literally means "teacher hero" in Hindi. Fittingly, Guru Nayak is closer to being a heroic character than the astrologer ever is, because Guru Nayak is, though bent on revenge, at least true to himself. Though it may be argued whether or not Guru Nayak's cause is noble, there is a truthful simplicity to it that is wholly lacking in the astrologer's life, regardless of what "good" he may offer to others.

The astrologer's guilt and fear of retribution drive him to bury his identity until every aspect of his life is a deception. Lies must supplement lies until nothing is true, and whoever the astrologer truly is is lost. Narayan's story thus reflects the way in which guilt and fear may drive an individual to lose sight of who they are. This is true and often happens in any culture, but would have been particularly poignant in India at the time, where honor, shame, and social standing effected every aspect of life. The challenge of living a simple, introspective, and self-aware life is especially great, and takes far more courage than the astrologer has.

MODERNIZATION, TRADITION, AND INEQUALITY

Throughout the story, Narayan intentionally contrasts the mix of ancient and modern, primitive and sophisticated that makes up modern India, particularly in the rural regions. Under British occupation, India was thrust into the modern world as the ruling class introduced technology and built infrastructure to suit their own tastes. Because of the speed at which this happened, as compared to the gradual progression of technology in Europe or America, much of the development happened unevenly, with old-world ideologies and methods mixing with new-world technologies and values in dynamic, asynchronous ways. Narayan uses ironic pairings of images to depict the ways in which Indian culture, built on ten thousand years of tradition, is synthesizing with a quickly changing technological world. Rather than argue that they directly contradict each other, he shows how they interweave into daily life.

Technology and modernization are signified by the presence of gaslights, cars, and notebooks in the marketplace. As these items help people literally function in the modern world, tradition and culture help the people to find their broader place in the world, offering answers to existential questions and creating the illusion that fate can be foretold and controlled. The astrologer sets up shop beneath the tamarind tree, which sits next to a road leading to the Town Hall Park. Narayan almost humorously contrasts the mystic teacher sitting beneath the tree against all the hallmarks of modern administration and democracy, pointing to the usefulness of both. Despite the modern organization of society, newfound technology, and the quickly changing aspects of daily life, the astrologer still has a lively trade. People still seek comfort in face of marital and financial strife, and even the illusion of significance and control is a valued commodity. Even though the people of the village would have understood that the cosmos spins around the sun, they were still comforted by knowing that their bad disposition was able to be explained on cosmological events, such as the current position of Saturn in the sky.

Modern of technology has begun to interpenetrate and even ironically enhance mysticism and the astrologer's religious practice, rather than threatening to destroy it. The astrologer's trade utilizes aspects of both modern convenience and old-world tradition. His "**professional equipment**" contains a medley of ritualistic items, such as cowrie shells and a mystically unreadable chart, as well as a simple notebook, perhaps for keeping records or remembering customers' problems so that he can keep up his appearance of omniscience. The enchanting and mystical **lighting** of the marketplace is also only the result of gas lights and naked flares on torches, sputtering their chemical flames. Yet, ironically, if there were proper municipal lighting (the full extent of

technological progress and administration), it is implied by the text that the marketplace would take on a more anti-septic quality and the astrologer's work would be more difficult to convincingly sell. Although the marks of modernization are laced throughout the story, Narayan gives no indication that the astrologer's trade is reaching the end of its day. Villagers are just as happy to pay their meager livings for some cosmic comfort, and poor, flickering light only helps to sell the image.

Modern development, happening at such an extreme rate, leaves many people economically behind, including the astrologer himself. A consequence of non-gradual technological progress is that inequality increases, evidence by the fact that, within the astrologer's earshot, people are driving cars to work, (assumedly) spending their days in electrically-lit administrative offices. Narayan further demonstrates inequality by describing how, in the din of the crowd, the honking of car horns is listed alongside *jutka* (a two-wheeled carriage) drivers cursing their horses. Meanwhile, the astrologer himself does not have a shop or even a simple flare to light his work, borrowing the light of others and the shelter of a tree to do his business.

Yet the astrologer's appeal is that he offers something timeless, a cultural anchor that has lasted millennia in the face of rapid changes and modernization. The astrologer is markedly poor—his wife is thrilled with the extra money he earns from Guru Nayak because she will be able to buy her daughter the small luxury of sweets—as are his clientele, shopping in such a marketplace. Economically unstable and watching the world change very quickly, the future would have felt incredibly uncertain. Being able to put some faith in wisdom gleaned from the orientation of the stars, which have been moving in the same way since the dawn of civilization, may have been a needed comfort.

Narayan's depiction of the clash between the old world and the new in India does not fit into a simple framework. At times, the mysticism and religiosity that pervades Indian life is enhanced, sometimes ironically, by the presence of new technological development, and in such a quickly-changing landscape, the familiarity of ancient tradition is needed. At the same time, modernization is deepening the divides of economic inequality as the rich are now able to afford amenities and luxuries that create a massive qualitative difference in day to day life, which perhaps increasing the need for mysticism and meaning to unite the country across different social groups. Ancient tradition and religion, then, maybe be a means to help people stay connected to the social fabric of their country.

SYMBOLS

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

THE ASTROLOGER'S GARB AND EQUIPMENT

The astrologer's garb and equipment—including cowrie shells and mystical looking charts—represent the artificiality of much religious practice and, in turn, the ability to take advantage of people's desire for faith. Using his clothing and wares like a costume, the astrologer offers to tell people the truth yet gives only vagaries produced by sharp observational skills and a practiced mind. His customers are rarely skeptical of the astrologer, having been sold on the truth of his words before he even says them due the compelling, seemingly holy nature of his appearance.

In the greater meaning of the story, the astrologer's garb speaks to Narayan's perception of the mystics and holy men in India and the position that religion holds in that culture. The greatest deception of the astrologer's garb is that it transforms the astrologer, in the eyes of his customers, into a figure of divinity, something otherworldly, powerful, and pure. This suits the astrologer's purposes, as no one thinks to question the integrity of a holy man. Yet the astrologer, like every other simple, common person that he interacts with, is just a man. He is prone to the same ills that he identifies in his customers: problems with money, marriage, or twisted human affairs. The astrologer's garb, as a symbol, thus prods at the role of religion and religious men in India, reminding the reader that they are nothing more than human—as petty, greedy, and selfish as anyone else. In the Indian caste system, where the religious leaders rule the social order, this is a particularly poignant jab at the egos of the elite. While Narayan is not putting religion itself down with the use of this symbol, he is at the very least injecting it with a sharp dose of reality and speaking against the deification of mere men.

THE MARKETPLACE LIGHTS

The lights in the marketplace represent the illusion of enlightenment from which that the astrologer profits. It is the light in the astrologer's eye that convinces his customers that he is possessed of a cosmic and prophetic intelligence. The shifting light and dancing shadows in the marketplace create a mystical, enchanting atmosphere that further lends to the false credibility of the astrologer. Tellingly, although most of the other vendors in the marketplace have various lights, gas lamps, or flares, the astrologer has none of his own. He simply profits off of the light put off by the other vendors. In the same way, the astrologer, fraudulent as he is, merely borrows on the preeminence of religion in that society and on the perception by others that he is a man of great wisdom to make his living. He notably starts at midday, when the crowd is thick and the light is full. As the day goes on and customers leave, so also do many of the marketplace lights begin to fade, reflecting the way in which his cosmic wisdom, so

dependent as it is upon the perceptions of gullible customers, also fades with the crowds.

When Guru Nayak arrives, there is but one small shaft of light left, which he obscures with his formidable presence as he displays clear skepticism of the astrologer's authenticity. As they speak, the last light is distinguished. However, when Guru Nayak strikes a match to light his cheroot, his face is briefly illuminated. For the first time in the story, there is a light originating from the astrologer's place, a symbol of the new opportunity for the astrologer to confess to his crime and accept the just punishment for what he has done. But the match goes out quickly, as does any notion of the astrologer revealing himself. Any question of enlightenment or virtue is extinguished with it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Indian Thought Publications edition of *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* published in 1981.

An Astrologer's Day Quotes

His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermillion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced by their position—placed as they were between the painted forehead and dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks: even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting.

Related Characters: The Astrologer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

From the outset of the story, Narayan is quick to depict the astrologer as an impressive presence, a man who gives off a supernatural impression by his very appearance. People want to believe the things he has to say because he looks like he possesses keen cosmic insight. The irony is that the astrologer is just a regular man and his supposed insight is actually just his ability to find customers to exploit with his ruse.

This description is the first declarative statement about the astrologer's fraudulence and the way in which he uses a powerful costume and the revered position of religion in Indian culture to conceal who he is. The truth about his true identity and the crime he committed, as well as the truth that he has no astrological wisdom and power whatsoever, are both obscured by the appeal of his appearance. The astrologer himself is fully aware of this, realizing that, so painted and clothed, any man could be an astrologer.

To crown the effect he wrapped a saffron-colored turban around his head. This color scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park.

Related Characters: The Astrologer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues the description of the astrologer as he readies himself for his day's work. The astrologer is here, too, trading on centuries of religious imagery to sell his trade. Turbans are often associated with wisdom or shrewdness, and for Hindus, saffron is a significant and sacred color associated with purity, honesty, and the quest for light—making the astrologer's use of the color all the more deceptive and ironic.

Seating himself under a tree, the astrologer aligns himself with images of holy teachers that have been venerated for centuries. Buddha is oft pictured sitting beneath a tree, considering enlightenment and teaching his followers. So too is Christ often pictured in classical icons beneath a tree, teaching his disciples. The astrologer's use of such imagery plays to his advantage and causes people to implicitly trust in his knowledge. The trust that may have been offered to Buddha, Christ, or some other mystic leader using the same imagery is also extended to the astrologer.

> Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights. One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps, and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering crisscross of light rays and moving shadows.

Related Characters: The Astrologer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Having completed the description of the astrologer himself, the narrator turns his attention to the marketplace in which the astrologer has set up shop. It is interesting to note that the marketplace's enchantment can both benefit from modern technology and suffers from it. Gas lamps and flares on poles provide an unsteady, multi-hued light that give it a storybook, mysterious feel. However, these are only in place because proper municipal lighting has not yet been installed, in which case it is implied that the market would have a more austere, modern feel to it. This detail not only makes an interesting inference to the relationship between the craft of mysticism and technology, it also provides more details that help the astrologer to keep up his guise as a holy man.

It is noteworthy that the astrologer has no light of his own but only borrows that of his neighbors and depends on the flicking light of the marketplace itself. This reflects the similar manner in which he has no virtue or wisdom of his own. It is all borrowed from the millennia of religious tradition and cultural reverence given to the astrological profession.

> He had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life; and he knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew of what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice, and shrewd guesswork. All the same, it was as much an honest man's labor as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day.

Related Characters: The Astrologer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator notes how the astrologer came into his current profession. There is a humorous irony in the fact that the astrologer, who presents himself as an icon of foresight and wisdom, had no intention of being an astrologer for most of his life. This is also the first point at which the author outright claims the astrologer as a fraud, with absolutely no special knowledge or insight. The author out him as nothing more than a common man, the same as any other walking around the marketplace.

It is interesting, then, that the author also sympathizes with the astrologer in the next breath, arguing that he does an honest day's work. He is a fraud, but is not treated by the author as an utter swindler. The astrologer does provide comfort to the people he talks to, after all. He labors throughout the day as much as anyone, and provides a service in exchange for a fee. The author, though certainly making fun of religion and pointing to its hypocrisy, is not lambasting the people who practice religion or calling for its abolition. These lines underscore that the story is taking a more nuanced, playful approach in its critique.

> He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money, and the tangle of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices. When he told a person before him gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results of for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him [...] Or he gave an analysis of character: "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for even the mildest of us loves to think he has a forbidding exterior.

Related Characters: The Astrologer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The social function of the astrologer is here described. He is a type of therapist, a comfort to poor people in a rapidly changing world. For some he offers the brief illusion of significance to meaningless pain, and so people are happy to pay him. For others, his vague foresights offer the illusion of control. On occasion he gives a reading of character, sharing with someone how their selfishness or bad temper are causing the troubles that plague them. However, he is quick to attach an astrological explanation to it, removing the responsibility of the criticism from his own shoulders and relieving his customers of the weight of blame.

The way in which the astrologer endears customers to himself is particularly catching. In the way that it is told, the reader is apt to even briefly consider their own rough and forbidding exterior, before the narrator exposes it as another of the astrologer's ruses. This section underscores that the astrologer is largely able to fool people because he tells them what they want to hear; they are not actually looking for cosmic wisdom, but a listening ear and reassurance.

"Stop," said the other. "I don't want all that. Shall I succeed in my present search or not? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge all your coins." The astrologer muttered a few incantations and replied: "All right. I will speak... You were left for dead. Am I right?"

"Ah, tell me more."

"A knife passed through you once?" said the astrologer.

"Good fellow!" He bared his chest to show the scar. "What else?"

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead."

"I should have been dead if some passer-by had not chanced to peep into the well," exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by enthusiasm. "When shall I get at him?" he asked, clenching his fist.

"In the next world," answered the astrologer. "He died four months ago in a far-off town. You will never see any more of him."

Related Characters: The Astrologer, Guru Nayak (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Guru Nayak appears in the marketplace and bets the astrologer that he cannot tell him anything worthwhile. The astrologer realizes who he is speaking to only after Guru Nayak steps into the light, and—though the reader does not realize it at the time—uses his personal history with Guru Nayak to feign wisdom.

Guru Nayak stands as a foil to the astrologer. Not only are their goals diametrically opposed—the astrologer hopes to survive by escaping justice, Guru Nayak hopes to do justice and kill the man who tried to kill him—but their characters are as well. Guru Nayak is an instant skeptic, a man seeking to live by the truth. His life, as the reader is allowed to see it, is simple, honest, and angled towards a singular goal. The astrologer is a fraud. Nothing in his life is true, nothing that he says is true. Even his own wife does not know of his past life.

The confrontation with Guru Nayak offers the astrologer the chance to confess, to take responsibility for the crimes of his youth and live authentically and honestly, even if only for a moment. But not only does the astrologer not take the chance offered to him, he uses what he knows from experience—that Guru Nayak was stabbed and left for dead—to cement his own lie and fraudulent life, putting Guru Nayak permanently off of the hunt for his assailant and his quest for justice. The astrologer has killed off his only opportunity to live an honest life and embrace the principles he espouses to others. He has doomed himself to a life of falsehood and insincerity.

After dinner, sitting on the pyol, he told her: "Do you know a great load is gone from me today? I thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all these years. That was the reason why I ran away from home, settled here, and married you. He is alive."

She gasped. "You tried to kill!"

"Yes, in our village, when I was a silly youngster. We drank, gambled, and quarreled badly one day—why think of it now? Time to sleep," he said, yawning, and stretched himself on the pyol.

Related Characters: The Astrologer (speaker), Guru Nayak, The Astrologer's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

With Guru Nayak deceived and dealt with, the astrologer returns home. His rejection of sincerity and responsibility for his past are complete. When he tells his wife of his day, he also offhandedly tells her that he tried to commit murder, and indeed thought that he was a murderer for all of the years that she had known him. He does not consider the shock that this news may be to her, realizing that the man she has slept next to and had a child with tried to kill someone.

Even she expresses her brief shock and dismay, the astrologer merely brushes it aside. He dismisses his own actions as the folly of youth, and therefore as irrelevant now, giving no consideration or admission to the fact that he changed Guru Nayak's life forever and nearly took it from him completely. The astrologer, having now committed himself to insincerity, cannot see the gravity of his own crimes beyond their direct and immediate effect on himself. He does not recognize or care about the impact of them on his wife or Guru Nayak. He is not a holy man at all, but merely a man as concerned with self-interest as anyone else. He is certainly no hero.

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.

AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY

At midday, the astrologer lays out his equipment and readies for the day. He has brought a dozen cowrie shells, mystical-looking but unreadable charts, parchments, and other accoutrements. His forehead is painted with sacred ash and he wears a saffron-colored turban. **The astrologer's garb**, in combination with his keen eyes and long beard, give him an enigmatic and comforting appearance to potential customers. He seems prophetic and wise, though "even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting."

Narayan vividly describes the way in which the astrologer's appearance and equipment lend him a quasi-supernatural presence. Although the author leaves no room for doubt that the astrologer is indeed a fraud, the description of him is so compelling that it is easy to see how people would be fooled into regarding him as more than a mere man.

The astrologer is seated beneath a large tamarind tree near a road that leads through the Town Hall Park. Around him is a marketplace with similarly fraudulent characters, including an auctioneer of cheap cloth and a man who sells the same fried food every day but each day gives it a new luxurious name such as "Bombay Ice-Cream." The **lights in the marketplace** flicker and dance from dozens of sources, creating an enchanted feeling—a feeling bolstered by the fact that the marketplace lacks "the benefit of municipal lighting."

All the vendors are in the practice of overselling their own value. Both the cloth vendor and the food seller create the illusion of luxury, while the astrologer creates the illusion of wisdom and power. Catering to a poor demographic, each vendor exploits a desire for the trappings of a more privileged life. Note the contrast of the astrologer, representing ancient tradition, with the Town Hall Park, representing modern administration.

The astrologer prefers the indirect **lighting**, since he never aspired to be an astrologer at all, nor has he any business being one. He does not know any more about the stars than any customer who may come to him. Rather, he has a store of general platitudes and a practiced ear for guessing at people's problems, since they are very often all the same. He tells people the things they want to hear. Even so, the author surprisingly interjects, his labor is as "honest" as any other, and his wages were earned.

The astrologer's preference for indirect, arguably poor lighting is two-fold. It both enhances the mysticism and helps conceal the fact that he is not actually a true astrologer at all. Despite this, the author sympathizes with him, noting the ways in which he acts as a therapist, listening to the problems of his customers and offering advice that may soothe them for a time.

Years before, the astrologer had to leave his home suddenly, without telling anyone and without preparation. Had he stayed, he would have been a farmer like his forefathers, working, marrying, dying, but it was not to be. Instead, he had to flee several hundred miles, an immense distance for a villager, and take up a new life.

Though it is later revealed that the astrologer fled after attempting murder, this foreshadow of it is dismissive, reflecting his own current feelings toward the situation. He seems to blame his departure on fate. Yet, he left the only honest life he could have lived.

The astrologer has formed a "working analysis" of humanity's problems, being as they all relate to marriage, money, or messy human affairs. When someone comes to him, he first listens for ten minutes before speaking, by which point he has many things that could be said and passed off as cosmological wisdom. Often his answers are vague but sufficiently satisfying to give comfort to people; otherwise, they are self-affirming to the listener and as such leave them satisfied. He endears his customer to himself, but is careful to tie such praise to a cosmological symbol, such as the position of Saturn.

Although the astrologer has no ancient wisdom, he does not seem to need it. The problems of mankind are the same as they have always been. Perhaps the astrologer's customers do not actually need an astrologer at all, but merely a listening ear and a soothing voice to calm their nerves. But recognizing the desire for the illusion of control and significance, the astrologer manipulates his customers to their mutual benefit.

At the day's end, the nuts vendor next to the astrologer blows out his flare and goes home, meaning it is time for the astrologer to go home as well. There is no more **light** available to him, save for a small shaft of green light that strayed to the ground in front of him.

With the fading of the light, the astrologer has successfully upheld his ruse for another day. Yet under the cover of darkness, he is perhaps now bolder than he ought to be.

As the astrologer is packing **his garb and equipment**, a stranger blots out the green **light**. The astrologer summons him to sit down, hoping to make money off of him. The stranger resists but the astrologer presses, until finally the stranger steps to him and aggressively offers a challenge.

Ironically, it is the astrologer's greed which brings him to an encounter that almost costs him both his false identity and his life. That the stranger blots out the light is significant, given that light throughout the story has signified the illusion of cosmic wisdom; the blocking of the light aligns with the stranger's skepticism.

The stranger offers a large sum on the cynical wager that the astrologer cannot tell him anything worthwhile. They haggle over the wager, eventually raising the price and the stakes.

An immediate contrast to everyone else in the story, the stranger is instantly skeptical of the astrologer's authenticity, and rightly so. Again, the astrologer's greed intervenes as he keeps haggling for greater sums.

The stranger strikes a match to light his cheroot, and the brief **light** of the flame illuminates his face enough for the astrologer to see his identity. The astrologer gets very uncomfortable and tries to wriggle out of the wager and go home. The stranger will not allow it, grabbing him by the arm and keeping him there, determined to expose the astrologer as a fraud or learn something useful.

Had the astrologer not pushed the stakes so high, it is possible that the stranger—later revealed to be Guru Nayak, a man the astrologer thought he'd killed—would have let him leave, but his self-interest has trapped him. The fear he now feels is in part for his own safety, but also of the prospect of shedding his false identity and facing his past, as well as his guilt.

The astrologer, fearful now, tries several times to offer the same vague, placating advice that has satisfied other customers in the past. The stranger, however, will have none of it. The astrologer says a silent prayer and then changes tactic, revealing to the stranger that he knows that he was stabbed and left for dead some years ago.

Although the astrologer has been offered the opportunity to take responsibility for his crimes and be an honest man, he never even appears to consider it. Instead, he goes the opposite route, using his own experience to craft a more convincing lie.

The stranger is now filled with enthusiasm, convinced that the astrologer must truly possess cosmic wisdom. He inquires when he will be able to find the man who attacked him, so that he may kill him. The astrologer replies that it will not be until the next life, because his attacker died several months ago in a different village. The stranger is disappointed at this news. However, the astrologer offers him some satisfaction by telling him that the man he seeks was crushed under a lorry, and at least met a grisly, undignified end.

Guru Nayak nearly exposed the astrologer and forced him to the truth. Alas, the astrologer misses his chance to live with sincerity. Worse yet, he uses his past connection with Guru Nayak to permanently put to death his true identity. The astrologer will never live up to what he has done; he has killed the man he used to be and sated Guru Nayak with false justice.

The astrologer reveals that he knows the man's name is Guru Nayak as well, crediting his own omniscience. He warns Guru Nayak to return to his village and never venture this way again or great harm will befall him. Guru Nayak concedes, for now that his assailant is dead he has no more reason to wander about. Guru Nayak gives the astrologer a fistful of coins and leaves while the astrologer packs **his equipment**. The last shaft of green **light** has also vanished.

The use of Guru Nayak's name implies that the astrologer had a reasonably close relationship with him. He was not a stranger when the astrologer tried to murder him, making the astrologer a fairly villainous character. Beyond rejecting his chance for confession, the astrologer delivers what amounts to an astrological threat to Guru Nayak to give up his search. The light has all gone from the marketplace, as has the astrologer's potential for virtue.

The astrologer returns home to his wife and daughter in the dark of midnight. His wife is angry at him until she sees the money he has made from Guru Nayak, though the astrologer curses Nayak when he realizes that Nayak has slightly underpaid him. She remarks that her husband seems troubled, though he brushes it off. As they are lying down to sleep, the astrologer tells his wife that a great weight has been lifted from him today. For years he had believed he had murdered Guru Nayak when he lived in his home village, but now he sees that he is not a murderer after all. His wife is shocked at the revelation that her husband once attempted murder, but the astrologer dismisses his crime as the folly of youth.

Though it could be surmised earlier, his wife's response to the money confirms that their family is quite poor. The astrologer is also quite petty for a holy man, cursing Guru Nayak that his large sum of money wasn't large enough, rather than being thankful for escaping with his life. When the astrologer reveals his past crime, his wife is shocked, but he does not seem to understand the severity of what he has done. He is satisfied merely in the fact that he is not a true murderer, and goes to sleep a thoroughly false and hypocritical man. He has destroyed any opportunity for an honest, authentic life.

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