Swami and Friends

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF R. K. NARAYAN

R.K. Narayan was born into a middle-class family of the Tamil Brahmin caste, a notably intellectual and creative group within India's system of social castes. He was raised in the city of Madras in South India and was cared for largely by his grandmother, whose stories and friends are said to inspire much of *Swami and Friends*. Although writing was an uncommon career for Indian men of his time, his family was supportive of his choice. Narayan also broke with tradition by deciding to forgo an arranged marriage and instead choose his own wife, although she died of typhoid fever in 1939, only five years after their marriage. Narayan raised his one daughter on his own and never remarried. *Swami and Friends* was Narayan's first published book and was championed by the English author Graham Greene, Narayan's friend and mentor. Narayan went on to publish 15 novels as well as a memoir and numerous essays and short stories, and he also became an activist for causes including environmentalism and children's rights.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Swami and Friends was written between the first and second World Wars, a literary period of notable creative experimentation that likely encouraged Narayan in his mission to create a uniquely personal, comedic depiction of his remembered childhood. The historical context of British colonial rule over India is also particularly crucial to the story, as Swami and his friends begin to comprehend the essential oppression of their country while simultaneously growing up loving aspects of England, in particular the sport of cricket. Britain would continue to rule India until the late 1940s, so Swami witnesses the stirrings of the independence movement—led by Mahatma Gandhi—that would come to redefine the nature of India in the coming years.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Swami and Friends is the first of Narayan's many novels set in the fictional town of Malgudi, all of which deepen and expand the themes and locations introduced in this novel. In particular, this work is often considered the first in a trilogy of Malgudi coming-of-age novels, the second and third of which are *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. Although the second two books in the trilogy concern different characters and do not extend Swami's story, they are nonetheless closely linked thematically. *Swami and Friends* also shares characteristics with a wide range of novels about groups of friends attending boys' schools and struggling for autonomy in the face of domineering authority figures. One notable example is Rudyard Kipling's story collection *Stalky and Co.*, which Narayan's friend and advocate Graham Greene saw as a parallel to Narayan's early stories about Swami. Finally, Narayan was one of the earliest Indian novelists to write exclusively in English about everyday life in India, thus paving the way for generations of Indian writers to do the same. These later writers include Arundhati Roy, a contemporary Indian novelist who gained fame for her novel *The God of Small Things*, which was based partly on Roy's childhood in India and won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1997.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Swami and Friends
- **When Written:** Early 1930s
- **Where Written:** South India (uncertain whether Madras or Mysore)
- **When Published:** 1935
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel, Bildungsroman, Sociocultural Satire
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Malgudi, in South India
- **Climax:** Swami's disappearance
- **Antagonist:** English colonial rule, oppressive educational systems
- **Point of View:** Third person limited omniscient, mostly closely focused on Swami's point of view but occasionally touching on the perspectives of other characters

EXTRA CREDIT

Write What You Know. Several of the novel's events, including the pivotal protest for Indian independence, are based on Narayan's real-life childhood activities.

The Other Side. After his wife's untimely death, Narayan become immersed in trying to communicate with her spirit and even based a Malgudi novel, *The English Teacher*, on his spiritual experiences.

PLOT SUMMARY

A young boy named Swami wakes up on Monday morning in the town of Malgudi in South India. He rushes through his homework at his desk in his father's room and then goes to the Mission School, where he is bored throughout most of his classes. Swami gets a bad grade on his mathematics homework

and then, in his scripture class, gets into an argument with his teacher Mr. Ebenezar, a Christian fanatic. Swami is offended at his teacher's dismissal of the value of Hinduism and arrives at school the next day carrying a letter from his father to the Mission School Headmaster, in which his father complains to the headmaster that the school does not welcome non-Christian boys.

Swami tells his four closest friends about the letter. These boys are Somu, the friendly class monitor; Mani, a powerful but lazy bully; Sankar, "the most brilliant boy of the class"; and a small boy named Samuel, nicknamed "The Pea," who is not remarkable in any way except that he makes Swami laugh more than anyone else. Later in the day, the headmaster scolds Ebenezar but also tells Swami not to report incidents to his father in the future, saying that the boys should instead turn to the headmaster with any problems.

On the subsequent evening, Swami and Mani sit on the banks of the Sarayu river, discussing a classmate named Rajam who Mani wishes to throw into the river. It becomes clear that Rajam is known in school as a kind of rival to Mani, due to his fearlessness, intelligence, and wealth. Rajam's father is also the Police Superintendent. Swami insists that he supports Mani more than anyone else, and when they return to school Swami begins acting as a go-between for the two rivals. Eventually, they decide to meet for a fight on the banks of the river to see who is more powerful. But when the time for the fight comes, Rajam suggests that they put aside their differences and become friends, to which Mani happily agrees. Having always admired Rajam, Swami is also delighted at this turn of events and glad to be the friend of both powerful boys.

The reader is introduced to Swami's grandmother, whom he calls Granny. She lives with Swami's family in a small passageway, and Swami feels safe and secure in her company. Swami excitedly describes Rajam to Granny and, although she tries to tell him stories of his own grandfather's similarly impressive accomplishments, Swami refuses to listen. On a Saturday shortly thereafter, Swami ignores his grandmother's requests to spend time with him and instead goes with Mani to Rajam's house, where they are impressed by his luxurious home, numerous toys, and the delicious food his cook serves.

Back at school, Swami runs into his three friends Somu, Sankar, and The Pea. However, they are unfriendly to him and make a joke about a "tail." After school, Swami makes Somu tell him about their joke, which it turns out refers to their calling him "Rajam's tail" because they believe Swami now thinks himself too good for his old friends. The rejection by his friends is the "first shock" of Swami's life, and he reflects miserably on how quickly people can change. At home, he makes a paper boat and puts an ant on it, then watches as the boat is consumed in a flood of water. As the days continue, Swami's friends continue to ignore him, and school becomes an increasingly painful experience.

On another Saturday, Swami excitedly prepares for Rajam to visit his house. He anxiously orders his father, mother, grandmother, and cook through various preparations. The visit goes well, and Rajam even charms Granny with his stories. The next time Swami attends school, he is again faced by his old friends mocking him, and he slaps both the Pea and Sankar. Joined by Somu and Mani, the group goes outside, and Swami explains to Mani that the other three call him Rajam's tail. Mani defends Rajam and fights with Somu until the other boys get the headmaster to break up the fight.

Three weeks later, Swami and Mani go to Rajam's house again, this time because Swami told them he had a surprise for them. When they arrive, they jokingly pretend to be a blind puppy and a blind kitten to get Rajam to let them in, only to discover when they open their eyes that Somu, Sankar, and the Pea are also present. Rajam serves the group food and then lectures them all on the value of friendship, offering them each a gift if they promise not to be enemies any more. One by one, each boy accepts his gift.

At Swami's home, his mother has been in bed for two days and seems confusingly changed to him. Granny tells him that he is going to have a baby brother, but he is indifferent even when the baby is born, telling the Pea that the baby is "hardly anything." The Pea assures him that the baby will grow up quickly.

In April, Swami and his classmates have only two weeks before their school exams. Swami's father forces him to study constantly, and all of his friends are also unhappy under the stress of studying. Swami only feels that his efforts are worthwhile when his father compliments his work. Shortly before the exam, Swami makes a list of supplies that he needs and, disappointed that "his wants were so few," he makes a more complicated list and brings it to his father. His father scolds him and refuses to give him money to buy supplies, instead telling him to take supplies from their desk at home.

At last, Swami's final exam is over. He worries that he finished faster than his friends and did not write enough for one question, but his worry quickly turns to excitement as the other students finish and form a joyful crowd to celebrate the end of school. The group of boys destroys paper and ink bottles, creating happy chaos until a school administrator breaks up their celebration.

Without school in session, Swami realizes that he is closer friends with Mani and Rajam than with Somu, Sankar, and the Pea. He also wishes to get a hoop to play with, and gives some money to a coachman who promises to get him one, only to realize that the coachman tricked him. Rajam forms a plan in which Mani will kidnap the coachman's son as revenge, but the plan goes awry when the boy gets away and his neighbors attack Mani and Swami to chase them away. Sitting on a road outside town and feeling frustrated, the three friends accost a young cart boy named Karuppan, frightening him with claims

that they are the Government Police before eventually letting him go.

Soon thereafter, Swami's father begins making him study again even though school is out. Feeling sorry for Swami after a long day of work, however, his father also brings him along to visit his club in the evening. Swami enjoys the visit until he realizes that the coachman's son works at the club. He becomes increasingly fearful that the boy will attack him, not even trusting his father to protect him, and cannot relax until they leave.

In August, Swami and Mani find themselves in the midst of a protest for Indian independence. Moved by the speakers, Swami and Mani swear to support India against England and boycott English goods, with Swami even burning his **cap** when someone suggests that it's foreign-made. The next day, Swami is nervous about not wearing a cap to school, but finds a crowd of protesters blocking entrance to his school. The group says that school is canceled due to the imprisonment of an Indian political worker, and Swami gets caught up in breaking windows and destroying property at both the Mission School and the nearby Board School. Eventually, the protest moves to a square in town, where Swami sees Rajam's father order his policemen to violently disperse the crowd, a sight that shocks and frightens Swami. Later, his father expresses sympathy for the protesters but scolds Swami for losing his cap, saying it was made in India all along. The next day in school, the headmaster punishes all of the students who participated in the protest and Swami angrily runs away in the middle of class.

Six weeks later, Rajam finds Swami to tell him that he forgives his political activity and to invite him to form a **cricket** team. Swami has transferred to the Board School, while his group of friends back at the Mission School has broken up: Somu was held back, Sankar moved away, and the Pea started school late. Swami agrees to join the cricket team, and he and Rajam call themselves the M.C.C. With Mani, they write a letter to a sporting goods company ordering supplies. Although the company writes back asking for a deposit, the boys continue believing that their supplies will arrive and begin practicing with improvised equipment in the meantime. Swami quickly reveals himself to be a good bowler and earns the nickname Tate, after a famous bowler.

Swami discovers that the workload at the Board School is heavier than he is used to and also that it requires him to participate in daily afterschool drill practices. Consequently, Swami leaves school too late to attend cricket practice on time, which makes Rajam angry. One evening, Swami is concerned about his grandmother, whom he ignored earlier in the day when she said she didn't feel well. He is relieved to find that she is well, but she disappoints him when she does not know what cricket is. However, Swami decides to educate her rather than scolding her. When Swami continues to be late to practice, Rajam decides to confront the Board School Headmaster and convince him to let Swami leave school early. Although Swami protests, he insists, and leads Swami to the headmaster's office. The headmaster ignores their request and Rajam eventually gives up his effort.

The M.C.C. schedules a cricket match against another local team, but Swami is still not able to get enough practice time. With only a week left before the match, he decides to try and get a pass from a physician named Dr. Kesavan. Dr. Kesavan proclaims Swami healthy but agrees to tell his headmaster that Swami should get to miss drill practice. Delighted, Swami skips drill practice every day to attend cricket, only to find at the end of the week that the doctor never spoke to the headmaster. The headmaster threatens to cane Swami, but Swami throws the cane out the window and runs away. Swami fears that his father will be too angry to let him live at home without attending school, so he decides to run away. He goes to the Mission School and, after reminiscing about how much he loved being a student there, he finds Rajam to say goodbye. However, Rajam convinces Swami to run away only briefly before participating in the match and then leaving for good.

The narration's perspective switches to Swami's father, who wanders the town alone late at night, looking for Swami. Swami has not been seen for hours and his mother and grandmother are sick with worry, with his father growing anxious as well. After looking everywhere else he can think of, Swami's father fearfully peers into the Sarayu to see if Swami has drowned. Not finding him, he continues to walk along the rail lines.

The narration returns to Swami, who is wandering on a quiet road far from home. He reflects that he was foolish to leave over such a trivial problem and wishes to be back home with his family. He decides to return home but unwittingly goes the wrong way, becoming more and more lost until he at last begins to hallucinate in despair, thinking that he is being attacked by animals. He falls unconscious after a fantasy of winning the cricket match. The next morning, a cart man named Ranga finds Swami in the road and takes him to the District Forest Office, where an officer named Mr. Nair helps Swami figure out who he is and where he is from. Soon, Swami's father takes him home with the assistance of Rajam's father, where he is content to celebrate among his family until Mani arrives and informs him that he has missed the cricket match. Having thought that the match was the next day, Swami is devastated. Mani also says that Rajam is furious, so Swami resolves to speak with Rajam the next day and repair their friendship.

Ten days later, Swami still has not spoken with Rajam due to fear of his reaction. However, he has learned that Rajam's father has been transferred and the family is about to move away. Swami searches his possessions for a going-away present for Rajam, settling on a **book of fairy tales**, and resolves to go to the train station in the morning to give it to Rajam. Swami goes to the station but is again too intimidated to talk to Rajam, who gets on the train without saying goodbye. Panicking,

Swami asks Mani for help and the two boys run alongside the train, finally giving Rajam the book. Rajam seems to say something to Swami, but his words are lost under the noise of the train. Mani tells Swami that Rajam has his address and will write, but Swami is unsure if Mani is telling the truth.

CHARACTERS

Swami – Swami is the ten-year-old protagonist of the novel. Swami is a schoolboy living in 1930, in the fictional town of Malgudi in the South of India under British colonial rule. At the start of the novel, Swami is a typical child who seems outwardly innocent, with only trivial concerns such as homework, impressing his classmates, and avoiding disappointing his father. Swami is considered average among his friends, neither especially clever nor stupid, brave nor cowardly. He is generally good-natured and gets along well with his peers and family, although he can be arrogant or deceitful at times, and is easily swept up in the plans and enthusiasms of others. As the novel progresses, Swami becomes more aware of his own identity and political consciousness and begins to define himself more in terms of his friendships and national identity than his family relationships. Swami is also a naturally good **cricket** bowler and prides himself on being nicknamed "Tate," after a famous cricket player.

Rajam – Rajam is the son of the Police Superintendent and one of Swami's closest friends. Rajam is new to Swami's school at the start of the novel, and initially Swami and Mani view him as an enemy due to his quick wits, fine clothes, and fearless nature. However, Rajam quickly becomes friends with Rajam and Swami and acts as their ringleader for the remainder of the novel. Rajam does well in school and is liked by most of his classmates, and he draws confidence from his father's prominent position (Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent), although it also causes him to oppose the political activity that his friends support. Rajam sometimes bullies his friends and acquaintances, but more often he unites them and urges them toward new goals, most notably the formation of a **cricket** team. Swami loves and admires Rajam but comes into conflict with him, first because Swami supports political action that opposes Rajam's father, and later because he doesn't live up to his promise on Rajam's cricket team. Rajam is so angry at Swami for missing the cricket match that he stops speaking to him, and it is unclear at the novel's end whether the two friends have reconciled.

Mani – Known as "the Mighty Good-For-Nothing," Mani is Swami's other closest friend. Mani is a fearless troublemaker who never does his homework, sleeps in class, and frequently resorts to violence to solve his problems. However, he is also a loyal and affectionate friend, and Swami is proud to be allied with him. Mani often plays a supporting role in Swami and Rajam's friendship, though at the end of the novel it is Mani, rather than Swami, who takes on the role of Rajam's best friend. Mani lives with a frightening uncle, but little else is known about his family or background.

Swami's Father – Swami's father, W.T. Srinivasan, is an imposing figure who works at the courts and is usually strict with Swami. Swami sometimes feels afraid of his father, but at other times he turns to him for help and support. Swami's father encourages Swami to study hard and helps him with homework and, notably, provides Swami with a study space within his own room. Late in the novel, Swami's father reveals that his concern for Swami's wellbeing outweighs his frustrations with his son, as shown when he searches for Swami all night and welcomes him home without punishment.

Swami's Mother – Swami's mother appears in the novel only occasionally, usually in the context of providing Swami with something he wants or backing him up in an argument with his father. She is presented as a mild woman who is mostly concerned with her family and managing the household. She loves Swami deeply and also gives birth to a baby boy, Swami's brother, who occupies her attention for much of the novel.

Swami's Grandmother / Granny – Swami's paternal grandmother, whom he calls Granny, is an old woman who lives with Swami and his mother and father. Swami views Granny as ancient and sometimes embarrassing, but she is also a source of comfort and security during times of change, particularly when Swami's brother is born. Granny sometimes tries to tell Swami stories about the family's past, but he usually refuses to listen, indicating his preoccupation with his own present concerns. Swami grows more concerned with Granny's needs over the course of the story, beginning to see himself as a caretaker for her and making more of an effort to meet her needs.

Swami's Brother – Swami's unnamed baby brother is born midway through the novel. While Swami at first thinks little of his brother, he soon grows fond of him and admires how quickly he learns and grows. Swami's brother also presents a unique challenge to Swami, in that he occupies the family's attention and makes it so that Swami is no longer the sole focus of his parents' and grandmother's affection.

Rajam's Father – Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent and acts as a powerful figure in the community. Swami and Mani are initially very excited to be associated with the Police Superintendent through their new friend Rajam, and Swami is impressed with the luxury of his household. Later, Rajam's father becomes a symbol of political conflict when Swami witnesses him ordering the police force to violently break up the crowd of protesters. However, Rajam's father remains kind in person to Rajam and his friends, and plays an important role in rescuing Swami at the novel's conclusion.

Somu – Somu is one of Swami's friends from the Mission School. He is the class monitor and gets along well with

everyone, students and teachers, although he does not excel academically. Swami thinks of Somu as the "uncle of the class." When Somu treats Swami unkindly, the experience is one of the first times that Swami is forced to admit that the people around him are more complex than he might have guessed. Later in the novel, Somu disappears from the group of friends after failing an exam, and thus not being promoted to the next grade.

Sankar – Sankar is one of Swami's friends from the Mission School, known as "the most brilliant boy of the class." Swami admires Sankar's intelligence and relies on him for guidance at school. Sankar eventually leaves Malgudi when his father is transferred to a new town, and although he writes to Rajam and his friends intend to reply, they fall out of touch after realizing that they don't have Sankar's new address.

"The Pea" – The Pea, whose real name is Samuel, is a small boy in Swami's class at the Mission School. Although Swami acknowledges that the Pea is ordinary in most ways, they become friends over their shared sense of humor, and Swami can laugh with the Pea in a way that he cannot with his other friends. Swami is less close with the Pea after changing schools, but the Pea still joins the **cricket** team founded by Rajam. The Pea is also Swami's only Christian friend, although he does not speak up for his Christian beliefs in the conflict between Swami and Ebenezar.

Mission School Headmaster – The Mission School Headmaster is a primary antagonist for Swami in the novel's early chapters. Although he confronts Ebenezar about his mistreatment of Swami, he also calls Swami foolish for telling his father what happened in scripture class and asks Swami to rely only on him in the future. Later, the headmaster's intimidating interrogation of the students who participated in the protest goads Swami into renouncing the Mission School and ultimately transferring to the Board School. However, in comparison to the abhorrent Board School Headmaster, Swami eventually comes to think of the Mission School Headmaster as dignified and respectable.

Mr. Ebenezar – Mr. Ebenezar is the fanatical Christian scripture teacher at the Mission School. Although Swami and his friends sometimes finds his classes amusing, he uses his lectures to degrade Hinduism and argue for the superiority of Christianity. After Swami reports Ebenezar's behavior, the Mission School Headmaster scolds the teacher, but ultimately it seems that Ebenezar is allowed to carry on teaching as before. Later, Ebenezar appears only as a benign figure in the school crowd, one who Swami even comes to view fondly after his troubles at the Board School.

Board School Headmaster – The Board School Headmaster is a strict, wizened old man who Swami thinks of as "owl-like." He is an imposing figure and frightens Swami, even preventing him from attending the **cricket** practices he loves. But when Swami and Rajam go to confront the headmaster about Swami's schedule, they find him sleeping, indicating that his strength may be at least in part a façade. The headmaster is ultimately responsible for Swami's second departure from school, when he publicly punishes Swami for missing drill practice.

The Coachman – The unnamed coachman is an acquaintance of Swami's who promises to help him acquire a toy hoop in exchange for money. He claims to be able to turn copper coins into silver, but it becomes clear that he is lying to Swami in order to get his coins. The coachman's son also becomes a menacing presence to Swami after this episode. Swami's experiences with the coachman are an early example of his increasing acquaintance with the evils and dangers of the world.

The Coachman's Son – The coachman's son is a young boy who begins to taunt and threaten Swami after his father successfully scams Swami out of his money. Rajam forms a plan in which Mani will kidnap the son with Swami's help, but the plan goes awry when the son tricks Mani and runs away with his toy top. Soon thereafter, Swami discovers during a visit to his father's club that the coachman's son works at the club, and Swami is overcome with fear that the son will attack him. This episode is one of the first instances in which Swami feels that his father is not able to protect him from harm.

Karrupan – Karrupan is a young boy who is bullied by Rajam, Mani, and Swami while out driving his cart. The three friends harass Karrupan and pretend to be government agents, frightening the boy before sending him on his way. The behavior of Swami and his friends toward Karrupan demonstrates their internalization of the colonized state's brutal power structures.

Dr. Kesavan – Dr. Kesavan is a physician whom Swami goes to in an effort to get a medical certificate saying he can miss school drill practice in order to go to **cricket**. Dr. Kesavan laughs at Swami's self-diagnosis of delirium and pronounces him healthy, but says that he will talk to the Board School Headmaster to get Swami excused from drill practice. However, Dr. Kesavan does not talk to the headmaster at all, which leads to Swami's punishment and eventual departure from school. Swami curses Dr. Kesavan for lying, and this episode is another of Swami's formative experiences of betrayal.

Ranga – Ranga is the cart man who finds Swami unconscious after his night wandering lost in the wilderness. He rescues Swami by bringing him to Mr. Nair, thinking himself too simple to know what to do. Ranga is one of few peasant characters in the novel, and notably, Swami knows little of his role in the rescue and does not think to thank him later.

Mr. Nair – Mr. Nair is the District Forest Officer who helps Swami return home after being lost. Swami initially confuses him with his own father, indicating the sense of loss and disorientation that Swami undergoes as he matures. Later, Swami feels guilty for forgetting to say goodbye to Mr. Nair and

worries that he did not show appropriate gratitude for his role, again drawing a parallel between Mr. Nair and Swami's actual father. However, Mr. Nair also lies to Swami about the day of the week, presumably to keep him calm, and causes him not to realize he is missing the **cricket** match until it is already over.

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.

THE POLITICAL AND THE PERSONAL UNDER BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

Set in a fictional town in south India circa 1930, *Swami and Friends* is defined by the pressures and complexities of British colonial rule over India. While the book's events revolve around common childhood trials and tribulations, the personal experiences of the protagonist and his friends are colored by their political context, even when the characters themselves have little understanding of it. By examining British colonial rule through the lens of an ordinary boy's relatable childhood, R.K. Narayan demonstrates the pervasiveness and subtlety of this political structure's power. Swami's story shows that the impact of colonial rule is present in every corner of Indian life during this era, and that no individual's personal life can be truly separate from colonialism's profound, sometimes contradictory effects.

The lighthearted conflicts of the book's early chapters underscore Narayan's point that that colonialism is present even in the innocent misadventures of children, although it may seem entertaining, inconsequential, or even impressive in their eyes. Narayan first addresses the influence of colonialism in the book's opening chapter, when Swami and his classmates attend scripture class with Mr. Ebenezer, their fanatical Christian teacher. Narayan notes that the students sometimes enjoy the class because of the "stirring pictures" they imagine based on Biblical tales. For Swami and his friends, the Christianity imposed on them at the mission school is initially a source of idle entertainment rather than a menace or something to contemplate deeply. Yet Swami soon perceives the way that Ebenezer's Christian teachings conflict with his own Hindu beliefs, and protests against his teacher. However, the consequences of this conflict are trivial; the class enjoys watching their teacher get scolded by the Mission School Headmaster and Swami is simply happy to escape punishment. Again, even in this direct conflict Swami is primarily occupied by childish concerns like impressing his friends and pleasing his father, and colonialism remains a backdrop that affects Swami without occupying much of his attention.

The budding friendship between Swami, Mani and their new classmate Rajam again illustrates the ways that the young boys take existing power structures for granted. Although Mani and Rajam at first intend to fight with each other, that animosity quickly dissolves into mutual admiration, leaving the boys untroubled by their initial reliance on violent dominance to solve their problems. When Swami finds out that Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent, he is impressed and excited to be associated with such power, again demonstrating his childish inability to reflect on the value and legitimacy of the powers around him.

As Swami's story progresses, however, the political context around him increasingly intrudes on his contained understanding of his life. Swami begins to take actions that appear outwardly political, but he still experiences these events in a personal, self-centered way. By blending Swami's still-childish perspective with large-scale political events, Narayan again fuses the personal with the political and illustrates the impossibility of separating them, particularly within a context of colonialism. Swami, Mani, and Rajam try out the experience of being in power themselves by bullying a young boy named Karuppan and saying that they are "the Government Police out to catch humbugs like you." The three boys make unreasonable demands and frighten the boy, but seem not to reflect on the effects of their actions. It seems, then, that Swami and his friends develop an unconscious tendency to act out the oppression they have experienced. Shortly thereafter, Swami and Mani inadvertently participate in a public protest against English oppression of Indian peasants, and become immediately emotionally attached to the cause. Swami "resolve[s] to boycott English goods" and burns his own **cap** "with a feeling that he was saving the country." At this point, Swami's emotional reaction to the notion of English oppression becomes clear, but he is not yet able to connect that feeling with his own actions more generally. When Swami finds himself caught up in a school boycott the next day, he participates actively in the increasingly dangerous event but thinks mostly of the fun he's having rather than his behavior's political meaning, as when he realizes happily that "there were many glass panes untouched yet." It is only when Swami witnesses Rajam's father "grimly ticking off seconds before giving orders for massacre" that he begins to gain awareness of the political tension present in his own life. Narayan notes that Swami "had unconsciously become defiant" through his new experience of protest. It is this subconscious change that leads Swami to run away from the Mission School, for the first time renouncing a major aspect of colonial oppression in his own life.

Though Swami and his friends gain some degree of political consciousness over the course of the story, their lives continue to be circumscribed by colonial power in ways that are largely invisible to them. Narayan illustrates this reality especially

vividly through the boys' experiences forming a **cricket** team. By highlighting the prominent and complicated role that a quintessentially English activity plays in the friends' lives, Narayan demonstrates that individuals living under colonialism often have no choice but to tolerate—and sometimes even embrace—the cultures of their colonizers.

Although Swami, Mani, and Rajam are initially excited about starting a cricket team, they quickly discover that the logistics are more complicated than they expected, and Swami in particular worries about government registration and taxes. Reflecting on these difficulties, Rajam has "a momentary sympathy for Gandhi; no wonder he was dead against the government." By equating the boys' seemingly trivial problems with Gandhi's opposition to the government, Narayan humorously points to the oppressive presence of the government in every Indian's life, no matter how slight it might seem.

The formation of the cricket team initially serves as a way for Swami and Rajam to repair their friendship after their conflict over what Rajam calls Swami's "political activities," but eventually, the cricket team is also responsible for the breakup of Swami and Rajam's friendship, when Rajam is unable to forgive Swami for missing the match. By using the game to both unite and divide the story's protagonists, Narayan indicates the extent to which the characters may be at the mercy of English influence, even as they devote themselves to an English sport with seeming freedom. Political forces work their way into the personal goals and relationships of Swami and his friends even during their leisure time, again demonstrating that no private life can be truly independent from politics in the context of a colonized state.

EDUCATION AND OPPRESSION

Difficulty within educational settings is one of Swami's constant conflicts throughout the novel. Rather than simply depicting the ordinary childhood struggles of homework and unfair teachers, Narayan uses these familiar obstacles to enact a smaller version of the colonial oppression that suffuses the book. For Swami, school is a place of both growth and restriction, where rigid rules come into conflict with Swami's nuanced inner life. Throughout, Narayan's depictions of Swami's school days add depth and specificity to the book's larger points about the intersection of the personal and the political.

Many of Swami's most immediate experiences of oppression occur within school settings. He encounters violence, humiliation, and requirements that quash his imaginative and sensitive nature. All of these restrictions on Swami's individual life seem to mirror the dehumanizing nature of colonial power on India's larger population. At both of his schools, Swami is subject to punishments that cause him pain and embarrassment, such as being caned or being made to stand on a bench in front of the class. After he leaves the Mission School and enters the Board School, Swami's schedule becomes more restrictive, and he is required to complete drill practices and scout classes after school in addition to a heavy load of homework. Even though the Board School Headmaster is eventually revealed to be a frail older man who sleeps on the job, he still wields absolute power over Swami and will not let him leave school early to participate in cricket practice. Narayan's descriptions of Swami's engagement with academic work also hint at the way that his schools fail to engage his full humanity. Puzzling over a mathematical word problem about selling mangos, Swami feels "utterly hopeless" without deeper knowledge of who the men in the problem are and how their personalities affect the situation. With this example, Narayan hints at the ways that Swami perceives the lack of humanity in the structures he encounters at school.

However, Swami also derives meaning and a sense of belonging from his schools, even as they cause him pain. The positive aspects of Swami's educational experiences indicate that because these institutions are so deeply ingrained in Swami's life, he must necessarily learn to derive some satisfaction from them, just as the Indian people under English rule must carry on finding meaning in their lives even in unfair circumstances.

School forms the core of social life for Swami and his friends, as indicated when their friend Somu fails an exam and then vanishes from the story: "Somu was not promoted, and that meant he was automatically excluded from the group, the law being inexorable in that respect." Because Swami's friendships are so important to him, and school defines the structure of those friendships, the school plays a crucial role in developing meaning in his life. Although the Board School causes Swami more difficulty, it also helps him develop academically. He gains "rigour and discipline" where before he was unengaged with his work, which allows him to live up to his father's high expectations and gain a greater sense of self-efficacy and interpersonal connection—even in regard to his old school. When Swami prepares to run away after leaving the Board School, he stops at his old mission school and fondly remembers his time there, thinking: "All his friends were there…happy, dignified, and honored within the walls of the august Albert Mission School. He alone was out of it, isolated, as if he were a leper." His sense of belonging indicates that he considers the school a kind of home and that he is invested in the idea of its goodness, despite the pain he experienced there.

The schools' dual role as structures of both support and oppression plays out vividly in the way that the school setting can change quickly from organized to chaotic. This sense of instability and potential for confusion again functions as a microcosm of Swami's broader sociopolitical context, where the margin between safety and danger is often small. When the term ends at the Mission School, jubilant celebration rapidly turns into destructive mayhem. As Swami reflects on the rumor

that enemies stab each other on the last day of school, Narayan writes: "Swaminathan had no enemy as far as he could remember. But who could say? The school was a bad place." This scene exemplifies the uncertainty and sense of amorphous danger that pervades Swami's life at school and, as the story progresses, begins to affect him outside of school as well.

THE FLUIDITY OF IDENTITY

Although little more than a year passes over the course of Swami's story, his identity and those of his friends change and develop many times throughout the novel. By demonstrating how malleable his characters' essential traits and roles are, Narayan casts doubt on the idea of objectively "true" identity, instead seeming to argue that even core characteristics like goodness and badness can be changed and chosen according to the desires of individuals and groups. This changeability is often a positive force in the characters' lives, but Narayan also uses it to underscore the inherent instability and ambiguity that Swami and his friends must learn to face.

Swami's understanding of himself is particularly fluid throughout the novel. He often lies to others about his behavior or motivations and sometimes fools himself in the process, effectively changing himself into a different person to suit different circumstances. When Swami feels insecure about writing too little on his exam, he tells his friends that he wrote half a page and "believed it for the moment," even though he only wrote one sentence. Swami is not actually a good student, but he takes on the identity of one in order to make himself feel more confident in his group of friends. Compiling the list of supplies he needs for that same exam, Swami finds: "The list was disappointing. He had never known that his wants were so few." To cope with that disappointment, he creates a more detailed list of things he doesn't particularly need, in order to fashion himself into a more important person with more substantial wants. When Swami first begins playing **cricket**, he bowls well once and is immediately nicknamed Tate, after a famous cricket player. Although Swami attends few practices after that point and ultimately misses the crucial match, his friends continue calling him Tate and he brags about the nickname to his family. Again, Swami's identity shifts in a moment to suit the desires of himself and his friends and make them all feel more confident about their cricket team.

The malleable social roles of Swami and his friends also demonstrate the flexibility of each of their individual identities. Sometimes the friends choose to define each other in positive ways, but sometimes they choose to exclude and belittle each other. Their group dynamics illustrate how readily "good" characters can become "bad" and vice versa, again emphasizing the relative nature of each of their identities, particularly in the way they are shaped by the perceptions of others. When Swami and Mani first meet Rajam, they are convinced that he is evil and plan to fight with him. However, once Mani and Rajam face each other to fight, they quickly set aside their differences: Rajam says, "I won't mind being your friend," and Mani replies, "Nor I." With that simple exchange, the boys effortlessly create a friendship that leaves Swami in a state of "perfect peace." However, Swami soon loses the respect of his older group of friends, who begin calling him a "tail" because of his attachment to Rajam. Narayan calls this experience "probably Swaminathan's first shock in life," and describes how it leaves him wondering whether his friends are the same people they used to be. Although the friends soon reconcile, the shocking rupture shows how quickly esteemed individuals can become untrustworthy, creating danger in social contexts that had previously seemed safe.

Toward the end of the novel, Swami begins to understand the idea of identity, both his own and those of his friends, as less concrete than he has previously thought. Instead of alternating between distinct identities, Swami and his friends begin to take on multiple identities at the same time. This shift into greater ambiguity adds new depth to Narayan's examination of the changeable nature of personhood. When Swami runs away following his departure from the Board School, he becomes lost and disoriented in an unfamiliar setting. He begins to imagine terrible dangers on the dark roads around him, and he even becomes delusional in his desperation. At the height of this crisis, Swami loses his sense of himself almost completely and perceives around him "a sense of inhumanity." During this episode, Swami effectively merges with the frightening night, demonstrating that even the basic individual identity itself can vanish at times.

When Rajam moves away, he has not yet reconciled with Swami after their fight over the cricket match. With Mani's help, Swami gives Rajam a **book of fairy tales** as a going-away present, but he is not able to hear Rajam's reply over the noise of the train. The book ends with Swami uncertain of whether Rajam considers him a friend or an enemy. Similarly, the previously straightforward Mani takes on an ambiguous role at the end, refusing to give Swami a clear answer about whether or not Rajam will be in touch. Narayan writes that "for once Mani's face had become inscrutable," ending Swami's story in uncertainty and confusion. This conclusion—or lack thereof—indicates particularly clearly Narayan's point that it is impossible to define an individual's identity with any real certainty, even when the individual is a close friend or even oneself.

INNOCENCE, FAMILY, AND GROWING UP

Just as Swami's story reveals the somewhat illusory nature of personal identity, so too does it slowly strip away conventional notions of childhood innocence. While Swami seems at first to embody the quintessential idea of a

carefree child, his growth over the course of the novel shows that even children of his young age are burdened by serious concerns and real-world threats. Narayan demonstrates this gradual loss of innocence in large part through his portrayal of Swami's relationships with the members of his immediate family, which grow increasingly complicated and less protective over the course of the story.

At the start of the novel, Swami is almost wholly dependent on his family. He blithely takes them for granted while also calling on them to support his whims and desires, and their firm but kind presence grounds the seeming innocence that Swami enjoys in the early chapters. Swami's mother and father, though strict at times, offer him safety and resources to pursue his academic and social goals. Even when Swami meets Rajam, whom he views as a role model, he still requires his father's room and his mother's cooking in order to host Swami at his home. Thanks to his parents' help, the visit goes well, and Swami feels independent in his friendship with Rajam even as he relies on his family to support it. Swami's Granny, whom he considers unsightly and senile but nevertheless loveable, also offers him unquestioning comfort. She affirms Swami's stories even when they are implausible, and although she tells him stories from the family's past, Swami dismisses her words as "old unnecessary stories." Swami views his relationship with his grandmother as simply "snug and safe," but Narayan makes clear that this perception relies on Swami's ability to ignore the more complex, challenging stories that his grandmother wishes to tell. In describing the conflict between Swami and his headmaster at the mission school, Narayan hints again at the deeper reality that underlies Swami's outwardly innocent reliance on his family. After Swami brings in his father's letter complaining about Ebenezer's treatment of Swami, the Mission School Headmaster scolds Ebenezer but then tells Swami that he was "foolish to go to [his] father about this matter." The headmaster requests that Swami turn to him instead of his father about future problems, foreshadowing the novel's later events in which Swami's father is powerless to protect him.

As the novel progresses, Swami's feeling of security with his family begins to erode, as both he and the reader discover evidence that his innocent trust in his own safety may have been an illusion all along. When Swami's mother gives birth to an unnamed baby boy, Swami is initially indifferent to his new brother, calling him "hardly anything." But as time passes, Swami realizes that the baby is now the center of the household. Although Swami soon comes to love his brother, he is also forced to admit that he is no longer the sole focus of his parents' and grandmother's love and attention. Around the same time, Swami notices that his father has changed to become "fussy and difficult." His father begins to take a more active role in making Swami study for his exams, and Swami resents the realization that his father's role is not only to protect him but also to pressure him toward growth. In the middle of the novel, Swami enters into a conflict with the son of a coachman who tricks Swami into giving him money. This episode in particular illustrates the tension between Swami's youthful innocence and his dawning knowledge of the genuine danger of the world around him. The episode begins with Swami's intense desire to get a hoop, a childish wish based only on a love for simple play. However, that innocent impulse soon transforms into a violent conflict with the coachman's son; Mani beats Swami in an attempt to get the boy's attention and then, when they confront him, his neighbors throw rocks and chase them off with dogs. Most significantly of all, Swami encounters the son again while visiting his father's luxurious club, but finds that his father is oblivious to the danger. He decides to "seek protection" by telling his father, but quickly reverses his choice, deciding that "his father had better not know anything about the coachman's son, however serious the situation might be." As Swami moves away from his father's protection, Narayan demonstrates more forcefully that Swami's family is not truly the refuge that it initially appears to be.

By the novel's conclusion, Swami has experienced the genuine danger of the world around him and, at the same time, come to realize the limitations of his family's ability to comfort him and keep him safe. Through this process Narayan shows that Swami shares in the universal realities common to all coming-of-age stories, even within the unique sociopolitical context of India under English colonial rule.

After Swami and his friends form their **cricket** team, Swami discovers that his grandmother does not know what cricket is. Although he is upset by her "appalling ignorance," he is nonetheless patient with her because he remembers his recent, irrational fear that "she was going to die in a few minutes" because he refused to bring her a lemon. Swami's shift toward caring for his grandmother and her feelings marks a reversal of his previous belief that his family are the ones responsible for him. When Swami goes missing, a chapter from his father's perspective reveals that he is completely powerless to find Swami and, given that Swami actually ran away, save him from himself. His father's desolation and inability to alter the situation underscores the fact that Swami must now take responsibility for himself, rather than relying innocently on his family. When Swami is rescued by Mr. Nair, he is initially confused and calls the man Father. He is unable to understand his situation, thinking: "Who was this man? Was he Father? If he was not, why was he there? Even if he was, why was he there? Who was he?" This internal breakdown of Swami's ability to comprehend his father's role in his life represents a moment of profound growth in Swami's self-efficacy and maturity. Later, he laments that he forgot to say goodbye to the Officer, hinting at the core truth that one cannot appreciate childhood simplicity until it is gone. Swami still lives with his family at the novel's end, but he has lost the illusion that his life there is innocent or

free of worry.

SYMBOLS

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

SWAMI'S CAP

Swami's cap becomes important to the story as he begins to develop a political consciousness. Swami thinks little of his clothes until the night that he and Mani stumble on a protest against British oppression, and Swami realizes that some of his clothing may be made by British manufacturers at the expense of Indian craftspeople. When a bystander suggests that he is "wearing a foreign cap," Swami is ashamed and throws the cap into the fire—his first act in support of Indian liberation. However, the cap also comes to symbolize Swami's naivete about political matters. The next morning, Swami thinks not of his devotion to Indian independence, but of the anger his father will feel when he sees that the cap is missing. Then, even after his intense experience at the protest, Swami continues to view his fledging political activity through the narrow lens of his own self-interest, telling his father that the cap was burned by someone else in the crowd rather than owning up to his own actions. Finally, Swami's father informs him that the cap was Indian-made all along, undermining Swami's passionate destruction of what he believed to be a symbol of England. The cap thus underscores Narayan's point that Swami's actions are tied to a political context even when he is only able to engage with that context in a childish, haphazard way.

CRICKET

The game of cricket is the story's most potent symbol of the complex way that English colonization plays out in the lives of Swami and his friends. As a quintessentially English activity, cricket is closely tied to England's presence in India, but instead of rejecting it for its oppressive associations, Swami and his friends—particularly team captain Rajam—embrace the game as a means of gaining self-determination, dominance over opponents, and interpersonal connection. This paradoxical pursuit demonstrates the ways in which colonized peoples like Swami and his friends must necessarily adapt to the influences of the colonizer, even embracing aspects of the oppressive culture and subverting them into mechanisms of liberation. However, the friends' cricket team has both positive and negative effects in Swami's life; it initially helps him put aside his political differences with Rajam, but it also tears apart their friendship when Swami misses the crucial match. Through this symbol, Narayan seems to recognize the unstable and sometimes dangerous role that even the appealing aspects of colonizing nations play in the lives of the colonized.

THE BOOK OF FAIRY TALES

Swami's somewhat surprising choice of a book of fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen as a going-away present for Rajam acts as a symbol for the crossroads of maturity at which the two boys find themselves. Swami has struggled to enjoy reading through the novel, while Rajam has excelled at it, so Swami's sensitivity to the kind of present that Rajam would appreciate demonstrates the way that he has begun learning to think outside of himself and his own desires. However, the fact that the book includes fairy tales rather than true facts indicates that the boys' reality is still largely shaped by fantasy. Even as Swami is forced to face the painful fact that Rajam is moving away without repairing his friendship with Swami, he relies on the power of a book of imagined realities to bridge the gap between them. Finally, Swami thinks that the book is too full of "unknown, unpronounceable English words" for him to ever understand it himself, again hinting that mysterious foreign influence is present in every corner of his life, even the parts that concern fantasy rather than reality.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Chicago Press edition of *Swami and Friends* published in 1980.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Ebenezar attempted to smile. Swaminathan wished to be well out of the whole affair. He felt he would not mind if a hundred Ebenezars said a thousand times worse things about the gods.

Related Characters: Mission School Headmaster, Mr. Ebenezar, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

After Swami's father sent a letter to the Mission School Headmaster complaining about Ebenezar's discrimination against non-Christian boys, the headmaster calls Swami in for a meeting about the incident. Here, Swami desires only to leave the uncomfortable situation, not caring anymore about the religious conflict that arose between him and

Ebenezar. This quote demonstrates that at the start of the book, Swami's budding political inclinations and understanding of the world around him are usually overshadowed by childish, self-centered desires.

It also hints at the extent to which the school environment acts as a microcosm of the broader colonial rule that Swami faces, in which personal beliefs are subjugated to the overarching power of the state and individuals like Ebenezar are allowed to hold positions of power and even smile when mildly reprimanded for their misdeeds.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Swaminathan gasped with astonishment. In spite of his posing before Mani he admired Rajam intensely, and longed to be his friend. Now this was the happiest conclusion to all the unwanted trouble. He danced with joy. Rajam lowered his gun, and Mani dropped his club. To show his goodwill, Rajam pulled out of this pocket half a dozen biscuits.

Related Characters: Mani, Rajam, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Swami reacts with joy after Rajam and Mani decide to be friends instead of fighting. This moment is one of the book's earliest instances of a rapid change of identity, as Rajam goes from being an enemy to a beloved friend in only a matter of minutes. The boys' reliance on violence and even weapons to settle childish disputes also displays the way that they reenact colonial power structures in their own relationships, seeking raw dominance as a means of controlling their social environment. As the gun and club are quickly replaced with cookies, Narayan illustrates the fine line between danger and comfort, hinting that Swami's innocent childhood state may mask underlying threats.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ 'His father is the Police Superintendent. He is the master of every policeman here.' Granny was impressed. She said that it must be a tremendous office indeed. She then recounted the day when her husband, Swaminathan's grandfather, was a powerful submagistrate, in which office he made the police force tremble before him, and the fiercest dacoits of the place flee. Swaminathan waited impatiently for her to finish the story.

Related Characters: Rajam's Father, Rajam, Swami's Grandmother / Granny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Just after becoming friends with Rajam, Swami recounts his greatness to his grandmother, eager to impress her with descriptions of his new friend. She attempts to reply with stories of Swami's own family's greatness, but he is uninterested. This quote shows Swami's unquestioning submission to the authority figures around him, when he views Rajam's father's position as an impressive one. Later, Swami will come to abhor the police forces that Rajam's father leads, so his attitude here is particularly notable.

Additionally, Swami's lack of interest in Granny's stories shows his own thoughtless disregard for the past and his self-interested focus on his own present concerns. Swami feels so secure with his family, especially Granny, that he doesn't need to reflect on their past or think about how it might apply to his own life. At this point, Swami is not yet mature enough to think about his family's role as his protector and instead takes the safety of his home for granted.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ This was probably Swaminathan's first shock in life. It paralysed all his mental process. When his mind started working again, he faintly wondered if he had been dreaming. The staid Somu, the genial Somu, the uncle Somu, was it the same Somu that had talked to him a few minutes ago? What was wrong in liking and going about with Rajam? Why did it make them so angry?

Related Characters: Rajam, Somu, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing his friends calling him a "tail," Swami gets Somu to admit that they call him "Rajam's tail" because he acts like he is too good for them now that he's friends with the son of the Police Superintendent. This moment is a pivotal change for Swami in several ways. First, it is his "first shock," the first time that his safe and predictable world becomes unexpectedly painful. This small instance of

emotional danger foreshadows the greater dangers that Swami experiences later on as he gains more and more independence.

Second, his confusion over Somu's altered character demonstrates that the fluidity of identity that let Rajam go from friend to enemy can also work the other way. This is the first time that Swami begins to understand that the identities of those around him can shift in harmful ways.

Finally, Swami's obliviousness to the downside of associating with the Police Superintendent illustrates his lack of political awareness and the ease with which he accepts hierarchies of power at this point in the story.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ 'You had better prepare something very nice, something fine and sweet. Rajam is coming this afternoon. Don't make the sort of coffee that you usually give me. It must be very good and hot.' He remembered how in Rajam's house everything was brought to the room by the cook. 'Mother, would you mind if I don't come here for coffee and tiffin? Can you send it to my room?'

Related Characters: Swami (speaker), Rajam, Swami's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

As Swami prepares to host Rajam for the afternoon, he enlists the help of everyone in his family to convince Rajam that his home is luxurious. Ironically, Swami's attempt to prove his independence to Rajam depends completely on the actions of others, demonstrating how much Swami is still reliant on his family even as he tries to form an identity apart from them. His imperious orders to his mother and the cook also show how little he considers the needs of others in his family. He views them mainly in terms of how they can be of use to him.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The company was greatly impressed. Rajam then invited everyone to come forward and say that they would have no more enemies. If Sankar said it, he would get a bound notebook; if Swaminathan said it, he would get a clockwork engine; if Somu said it, he would get a belt; and if Mani said it, he would get a nice pocket-knife; and the Pea would get a marvellous little pen.

Related Characters: Mani, "The Pea", Sankar, Somu, Swami, Rajam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After tricking Swami and Mani into coming to his house and meeting with Somu, Sankar, and the Pea, Rajam gives a lecture on friendship and then offers the other boys gifts in exchange for renouncing enemies. The incident cements Rajam's place as the leader of the friends, demonstrating again how his father's powerful position passes on to the son and recreates adult hierarchies in the world of children.

Additionally, Rajam's offer of gifts indicates that the abstract value of friendship is not enough to win the boys over; rather, they require material prizes in order to make the commitment that Rajam asks for. This contrast between the mature notion of making peace and the childish desire for toys illustrates the in-between phase of growing up in which Swami finds himself at this time.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ 'I say, Swami,' said the Pea, 'these things grow up soon. I have seen a baby that was just what your brother is. But you know, when I saw it again during Michaelmas I could hardly recognize it."

Related Characters: "The Pea" (speaker), Swami's Brother, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

After Swami's baby brother is born, he tells the Pea that he thinks little of the baby. The Pea's reply that the baby will soon grow into something unrecognizable underscores the theme of constant change within an individual, offering a concrete example of how quickly and easily a person can grow from one state of being into something completely different.

Additionally, the Pea's idea that the baby will soon seem much older foreshadows the coming changes in Swami's life, in which his baby brother will become the center of the family's attention and he, Swami, will begin to strike out on his own.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Swaminathan reflected: suppose the Pea, Mani, Rajam and Sankar deserted him and occupied Second A? His father was right. And then his father drove home the point. 'Suppose all your juniors in the Fifth Standard become your class-mates?' Swami sat at decimals for half an hour.

Related Characters: Swami's Father (speaker), Sankar, Rajam, Mani, "The Pea", Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As Swami prepares for his school exams, his father motivates him to study by suggesting that he'll be left behind by his friends if he fails. The immediate emotional effect of this idea on Swami shows that as much as school is unpleasant for him, it also provides him with the friendships that form the core of his day-to-day life. This is an early example of the recurring theme of finding supportive, positive facets of oppressive systems.

This quote also shows a shift, driven in this case by Swami's father, toward Swami's understanding of the importance of his friends in his life. As Swami slowly starts to leave childhood and moves out of his family's orbit, his friends take on a greater role, and this quote hints that Swami's father himself is aware of and preparing for that upcoming change.

❝ He nibbled his pencil and reread the list. The list was disappointing. He had never known that his wants were so few. When he first sat down to draw the list he had hoped to fill two or three imposing pages. But now the cold lines on the paper numbered only five.

Related Characters: Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Preparing for his exams, Swami writes a list of all the supplies he needs to buy and finds that the list is much shorter than he expected. This quote represents the first instance in which Swami consciously realizes that his own identity, like those of the individuals around him, is not completely fixed. He expects himself to be a more complex person, and when the list disappoints him, he recreates it to match his idea of who he would like to be. This active creation of self is one of Swami's early steps toward self-determination, which will remain an ongoing struggle throughout the story.

Significantly, this moment takes place in the context of Swami's preparations for school, showing again how the school environment can promote some forms of growth at the same time that it causes stress and discomfort.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ At the end of the prayer the storm burst. With the loudest, lustiest cries, the gathering flooded out of the hall in one body. All through this vigorous confusion and disorder, Swaminathan kept close to Mani. For there was a general belief in the school that enemies stabbed each other on the last day. Swaminathan had no enemy as far as he could remember. But who could say? The school was a bad place.

Related Characters: Mani

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After the Mission School exams end, the entire school community celebrates the arrival of vacation. This quote demonstrates how quickly the ordered setting of the school can transform into a chaotic, even frightening place. Swami's nameless fear of the enemies who might harm him is one of the book's most vivid examples of the menacing nature of the school. Only by associating with the violent Mani can Swami make himself feel safe. With the school standing in for India under British rule, this quote shows the extent to which vaguely-defined danger lurks beneath even everyday facets of life.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Swaminathan stood before the gods and with great piety informed them of the box and its contents, how he expected them to convert the two pebbles in to two three-paise coins, and why he needed money so urgently. He promised that if the gods helped him, he would give up biting his thumb.

Related Characters: Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

When the coachman tells Swami that he can help him get a hoop, Swami begins a desperate search for the six paises that he needs to pay the coachman, turning at last to an attempt to turn pebbles into coins by praying to the gods. Swami's cavalier use of religion simply to find a way to get a toy is another instance of his essential immaturity at this point in the story. Additionally, his prayer takes the form of the kind of Christian prayer that Ebenezar teaches in scripture class, even though Swami spends little time reflecting on this fact. This easy integration of a religion that he recently rejected shows how unthinkingly Swami falls back on the systems imposed on him by colonialism, even when he does not mean to do so.

❝ Swaminathan began to cry. Mani attempted to strangle him. A motley crowd gathered round them, urchins with prodigious bellies, women of dark aspect, and their men. Scurvy chickens cackled and ran hither and thither. The sun was unsparing. Two or three mongrels lay in the shade of a tree and snored. A general malodour of hencoop and unwashed clothes pervaded the place.

Related Characters: The Coachman's Son, The Coachman, Mani, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

After the coachman steals Swami's money, Mani and Swami go to his house to kidnap his son, acting on a plan invented by Rajam. Mani decides without warning Swami to pretend that Swami is an urchin, and he attacks him to draw a crowd. This quote is notable in part because Mani, who usually protects Swami, becomes instead an attacker without warning. Even though Mani will later claim to have only been pretending, the attack feels real to Swami and serves as an especially painful example of a character's role in his life changing quickly and surprisingly.

Additionally, the detailed description of the coachman's unpleasant neighborhood highlights how far Swami has come from his comfortable, well-ordered home. Even in his pursuit of something so childish as a hoop, Swami finds himself subject to new dangers far from the safety of his family, again suggesting that his innocence is necessarily impermanent and even illusory.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ 'Whom do you address as "boys"?' asked Rajam menacingly. 'Don't you know who we are?'

'We are the Government Police out to catch humbugs like you,' added Swaminathan.

'I shall shoot you if you say a word,' said Rajam to the young driver. Though the driver was incredulous, he felt that there must be something in what they said.

Related Characters: Swami, Rajam (speaker), Mani, Karrupan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis

While lazing by a road outside of Malgudi, Swami and his friends Rajam and Mani encounter a young boy, Karuppan, driving a cart and force him to stop. Their aggressive, seemingly thoughtless words here offer the novel's most explicit enactment of government aggression in the boys' own lives. They effortlessly recreate the fear that they have felt from outside danger and transfer it onto the smaller boy, perfectly demonstrating the pervasive effects of harsh government control.

Furthermore, their words display their own ability to transform into aggressive version of themselves, seemingly without thought or comment. This is one of the more troubling transformations that Swami's identity undergoes over the course of the novel, and one that he seems to have no conscious awareness of.

❝ When they came to the car, Swaminathan got in first and occupied the centre of the back seat. He was still in suspense. Father's friend was taking time to start the car. Swaminathan was sitting all alone in the back seat, very far behind Father and his friend. Even now, the coachman's son and his gang could easily pull him out and finish him.

Related Characters: The Coachman's Son, Swami's Father, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92-93

Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that the coachman's son works at his father's club, Swami fears that he might be killed even in his father's company. This quote marks the first time that Swami feels beyond his father's ability to protect him. Even though no incident occurs with the coachman's son, Swami's genuine terror shows that his independent pursuits have now begun to lead him into dangers that he must cope with himself. Narayan's emphasis on Swami's being "alone" in the back seat and "very far" from his father underscores the thematic weight of this moment and expresses the symbolic distance that has entered their relationship, even though they are still physically very close together.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ Swaminathan was watching the scene with little shivers of joy going down his spine. Somebody asked him: 'Young man, do you want our country to remain in eternal slavery?'

'No, no,' Swaminathan replied.

'But you are wearing a foreign cap.'

Swaminathan quailed with shame. 'Oh, I didn't notice,' he said, and removing his cap flung it into the fire with a feeling that he was saving the country.

Related Characters: Swami (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

Swami and Mani stumble upon a protest for Indian independence happening at the Sarayu river, and both boys eagerly join in, swearing to boycott English goods. The joy that Swami feels watching the protest speaks to his innate excitement at his first true act of political engagement, though he does not yet have a deep understanding of the issues at hand. Narayan suggests that even for a relatively naïve young boy, the wish for independence rings true and inspires action.

These lines also introduce the symbol of the cap, which recurs throughout the sequence of Swami's political actions. Here, Swami's impulsive behavior burning the cap and his simplistic belief that doing so has saved the country shows that his childish habits of thought persist even as he enters the more adult pursuit of political engagement.

❝ When he turned his head Swaminathan saw to his horror that it was Rajam's father! Swaminathan could not help feeling sorry that it should be Rajam's father. Rajam's father! Rajam's father to be at the head of those traitors!

The Deputy Superintendent of Police fixed his eyes on his wrist-watch and said, 'I declare this assembly unlawful. I give it five minutes to disperse.' At the end of five minutes he looked up and uttered in a hollow voice the word, 'Charge.'

Related Characters: Rajam's Father (speaker), Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

Following the protest at his school through town, Swami finds himself in a public square where police have gathered to break up the protest. There, he realizes that Rajam's father is the leader of the police. Although he has often bragged in the past about his association with the powerful Deputy Superintendent of Police, this passage marks the first time that Swami actually sees what that title means in real life. In an instant, his horror shows him the terrible truth that, like anyone else, Rajam's impressive father also has a dark side.

Swami's understanding of authority figures and government power also changes in this moment as he witnesses the brutality of the police treatment of the protestors. Rather than being figures to admire, Swami now intuitively grasps that those in positions of power may in fact be more traitor than hero.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ Rajam realized at this point that the starting of a cricket team was the most complicated problem on earth. He had simply expected to gather a dozen fellows on the maidan next to his compound and play, and challenge the world. But here were endless troubles, starting with the name that must be unique, Government taxes, and so on. The Government did not seem to know where it ought to interfere and where not. He had a momentary sympathy for Gandhi; no wonder he was dead against the Government.

Related Characters: Rajam, Swami

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 113-114

Explanation and Analysis

After agreeing to form a cricket team together, Swami and Rajam discover how complicated the process will be, in large part because of the role that they imagine the government will play in regulating their activity. Rajam's simple, reasonable idea of forming a casual team becomes immediately overcomplicated, demonstrating both the extent to which the government inserts itself into the private lives of citizens and the extent to which the boys fear this intervention, even when it is not actually happening in the moment.

This passage also introduces the game of cricket as a symbol for British colonial power and its complicated effects on the lives on the colonized. Here, the game brings camaraderie at the same time that it causes stress and strife, suggesting that these effects are a scaled-down version of the broader national impact of colonial rule.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ The headmaster was sleeping with his head between his hands and his elbows resting on the table. It was a small stuffy room with only one window opening on the weather-beaten side wall of a shop; it was cluttered with dust-laden rolls of maps, globes, and geometrical squares. The headmaster's white cane lay on the table across two ink-bottles and some pads. The sun came in a hot dusty beam and fell on the headmaster's nose and the table. He was gently snoring. This was a possibility that Rajam had not thought of.

Related Characters: Mission School Headmaster, Rajam, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

When Swami continues to miss cricket practice due to his school schedule, Rajam takes Swami to confront the headmaster and ask permission to leave school early. The two boys have prepared themselves for a confrontation but they find the headmaster sleeping, revealing the frail, vulnerable essence beneath the imposing exterior. Although the headmaster continues to maintain control over Swami's schedule, Narayan seems to say that his power is hollow rather than legitimate, a notion that also undercuts the validity of the broader power structures the book deals with. Through the vivid descriptions of the dusty, stuffy room, Narayan also hints that this kind of absolute power is outdated and growing obsolete.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ Another moment and that vicious snake-like cane, quivering as if with life, would have descended on Swaminathan's palm. A flood of emotion swept him off his feet, a mixture of fear, resentment, and rage. He hardly knew what he was doing. His arm shot out, plucked the cane from the headmaster's hand, and flung it out of the window. The he dashed to his desk, snatched his books, and ran out of the room.

Related Characters: Mission School Headmaster, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146-147

Explanation and Analysis

After Dr. Kesavan lies to Swami about getting him permission to leave school early, Swami misses several drill practices and is confronted in his classroom by the headmaster. The headmaster seeks to demonstrate his power by caning Swami, but when Swami throws the cane out the window, he robs the powerful figure of both his weapon and his physical support. Swami's ability to wrest some small measure of power away from the oppressive school environment highlights the potential of small acts of rebellion and also marks a new level of self-determination for Swami.

Notably, Swami begins to feel his sense of self slip away even as he takes this action, as he "hardly [knows] what he [is] doing." By tying those two experiences together, Narayan indicates that growth and maturity may necessarily go hand in hand with an ability to take on new and confusing identities.

Chapter 16 Quotes

He had walked rather briskly up Hospital Road, but had turned back after staring at the tall iron gates of the hospital. He told himself that it was unnecessary to enter the hospital, but in fact knew that he lacked the courage. That very window in which a soft dim light appeared might have behind it the cot containing Swaminathan all pulped and bandaged.

Related Characters: Swami, Swami's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

While out searching for Swami after his disappearance, his father admits to himself that he is not brave enough to face the prospect of seeing Swami injured. This passage adds depth and complication to the character of Swami's father, who had previously been a somewhat straightforward authority figure, and furthers the novel's central idea that no one person has a fixed or simple identity.

Although it illuminates the emotional bond between Swami and his father, this moment also shows just how far Swami has gone in moving out of his father's sphere of protection. Despite his best efforts, Swami's father is now totally unable to care for his son, leaving Swami to face the dangers of the night on his own.

Chapter 17 Quotes

The only important thing now was home, and all the rest seemed trivial beside it. The Board School affair appeared inconsequent. He marvelled at himself for having taken it seriously and rushed into all this trouble. What a fool he had been! He wished with all his heard that he had held out his hand when the headmaster raised his cane. Even if he had not done it, he wished he had gone home and told his father everything.

Related Characters: Mission School Headmaster, Swami's Father, Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Almost immediately after running away from home, Swami regrets his actions and wishes to be at home again, though he has already wandered far away. Swami's wish that he had taken the punishment from the Board School headmaster illustrates the difficulty and danger of rebelling against the ingrained power structures at school. Simultaneously, Swami's desire to have been able to rely on his father shows his wish to return to a previous phase of immaturity, one that he has partly lost as he moves out of childhood.

The phrasing that Swami "marvelled at himself" is also significant, as it indicates that Swami continues to be somewhat unsure of who exactly he is and what motivates him. This thought foreshadows the more complete breakdown of identity that occurs soon thereafter.

The demons lifted him by his ears, plucked every hair on his head, and peeled off his skin from head to foot. Now what was this, coiling round his legs, cold and slimy? He shrank in horror from a scorpion that was advancing with its sting in the air. No, this was no place for a human being.

Related Characters: Swami

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Wandering lost in the night, Swami succumbs to the imagined beasts that he perceives menacing him. This passage represents the moment in which Swami's identity, which has become more and more fluid over the course of his story, at last breaks down into a state where he cannot tell himself from the outside world. Again, it seems that the concept of a coherent, discrete self turns out to be an illusion.

The intensity of the demons that Swami faces straying only a relatively short distance from the safety of Malgudi also points to the reality that the broader country of India is, at the time of Swami's life, full of abstract menaces. Narayan seems to say that the country itself is "no place for a human being," given the hidden demons that imperil every citizen.

Swaminathan was considerably weakened by the number of problems that beset him: Who was this man? Was he Father? If he was not, why was he there? Even if he was, why was he there? Who was he? What was he saying? Why could he not utter his words louder and clearer?

Related Characters: Swami (speaker), Mr. Nair, Swami's

Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After being rescued by Ranga, Swami wakes up in the company of Mr. Nair, the District Forest Officer and initially thinks that the man is his father. The repetition of the question "Who was he?" highlights the depth of Swami's confusion and his inability to understand what role his father now plays in his life. Swami begins to see what the reader learned in Chapter 16: Swami's father's identity is as complicated and subject to change as anyone else's. As he works through this realization and attempts to process what it means for his own life, Swami is rendered unable to speak clearly, showing the intensity of the shock that Swami undergoes.

Chapter 18 Quotes

Swaminathan had a sense of supreme well-being and security. He was flattered by the number of visitors that were coming to see him. His granny and mother were hovering round him ceaselessly, and it was with a sneaking satisfaction that he saw his little brother crowing unheeded in the cradle, for once overlooked and abandoned by everybody.

Related Characters: Swami's Brother, Swami's Grandmother / Granny, Swami's Mother, Swami

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

After returning home from his ordeal, Swami enjoys a brief period of happiness at home with his family before discovering that he has missed the cricket match and fallen out with Rajam. This passage is notable mainly for its vivid depiction of the kind of simple satisfaction that Swami enjoyed at the beginning of the novel; even the permanent addition of Swami's baby brother is symbolically reversed here, as the family ignores the baby in favor of celebrating Swami's return.

However, while this comfort was thorough and genuine in the book's early chapters, here it is quickly revealed to be false: the thing that Swami fears the most—missing the cricket match—actually has happened and he just doesn't know it yet, although the reader does. By juxtaposing this happy scene with the reader's knowledge of the upset to come, Narayan undercuts Swami's simple innocence and demonstrates more forcefully before that it can never truly last.

Chapter 19 Quotes

Mani ran along the platform with the train and shouted over the noise of the train: 'Goodbye, Rajam. Swami gives you this book.' Rajam held out his hand for the book, and took it, and waved a farewell. Swaminathan waved back frantically.

Swaminathan and Mani stood as if glued where they were, and watched the train. The small red lamp of the last van could be seen for a long time, it diminished in size every minute, and disappeared around a bend. All the jarring, rattling, clinking, spurting, and hissing of the moving train softened in the distance into something that was half a sob and half a sigh.

Related Characters: Mani (speaker), Rajam, Swami

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

After being too intimidated to approach Rajam on his own, Swami enlists Mani's help to give Rajam the book of fairy tales as a going away present. After the novel's seemingly endless shifts in the characters of Swami and his friends, from bad to good and back again, this moment stands apart for its utter ambiguity. Swami gives Rajam the book but does not get the resolution he hopes for; at the same time, he does not get rejection, either. It is unclear, at the end, how Rajam feels about Swami and whether he is ultimately a friend or an enemy. Nowhere in the book is this sense of uncertain identity as strong.

The lack of motion from Swami and Mani as they watch the train depart also indicates a new maturity and ability to tolerate and even accept the uncertainty of their situation. Rather than taking rash action to solve his problems as he has done throughout, Swami stands still, alongside a friend rather than a family member, and at last begins to take on his own more complicated, less innocent identity as well.

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.

CHAPTER 1

A schoolboy named Swami wakes up on Monday morning, reluctant to get out of bed. He dreads facing his school, teacher, and the Mission School's Headmaster, especially since he has left all of his homework to do in the two hours before school starts. He settles into his desk in a corner of his father's dressing room and begins to work.

The opening scene establishes Swami's character as youthful and self-centered, with only childish concerns like finishing his homework on time. This small travail sets the stage for Swami to develop a much greater sense of responsibility and awareness of the world around him.

Swami sits in his classroom, bored throughout the first few hours of school. He can only stand to be at school at all because he enjoys watching the toddlers in the nearby Infant Standards classroom. His teacher, Vedanayagam, appears very ugly to him and pinches his hand when he finds that Swami's math homework is incorrect. Swami enjoys his next class more, because it is a history class taught by a kind man named D. Pillai who tells stories of great battles in history rather than following any "canon of education."

Swami's boredom during most of the school day introduces Narayan's skepticism of the value of conventional education settings. Rather than wise authority figures, the teachers appear as comic caricatures, frightening demons like Vedanayagam, or loveable buffoons like D. Pillai.

The final class of the morning is scripture class, taught by Mr. Ebenezar, a religious fanatic. Swami and his classmates sometimes enjoy the colorful Bible stories they learn there, despite the fact that Mr. Ebenezar insults the beliefs of the non-Christian students. Mr. Ebenezar launches into a rant about the failings of the Hindu god Krishna in comparison to Jesus, which causes Swami to stand up and argue against his teacher. Mr. Ebenezar twists Swami's ear as punishment.

Ebenezar's fanaticism is the novel's first example of an oppressive colonizing force in Swami's life. Although he does not yet know about the movement for Indian independence from England, Swami intuits that Ebenezar's forceful rejection of Hinduism constitutes an offensive threat to Swami and his values. Swami is physically punished for speaking up, an early example of the way that colonialism's violence manifests in every corner of even a seemingly carefree Indian life.

Swami arrives at school the following day, feeling guilty about a letter that he carries in his pocket. He thinks that he is an idiot for telling his father about the trouble with Mr. Ebenezar. Swami delivers the letter to the Mission School Headmaster, at which point the reader learns that Swami's father has complained to the headmaster about discrimination against non-Christian students. The letter states that the school should be more tolerant of students of other religions and requests that the headmaster inform Swami's father if Hindu boys are not welcome at the school, so that he can send Swami to school elsewhere.

Swami's father's intervention from a more mature perspective clarifies the point that Swami's school acts as a microcosm of colonial oppression of Indian life. The letter also demonstrates that, at this point in Swami's life, his father acts as his trustworthy protector. This initial relationship is important because Swami's ability to rely on his family, especially his father, changes substantially over the course of the story.

When Swami exits the Mission School Headmaster's room, his classmates crowd around to find out what happened. However, Swami refuses to tell anyone but his four best friends, who are introduced one by one. The first friend is Somu, the class monitor, who is a mediocre student but relaxed and well-liked by everyone, including the teachers. The next friend is Mani, described as "the Mighty Good-For-Nothing." Mani is a powerful bully who never does his homework but is never punished. Swami is especially proud to be Mani's friend. The third friend is Sankar, known as the smartest boy in class, and whom Swami greatly admires. Swami's final close friend is Samuel, who is known as "the Pea" because he is small and unremarkable. The Pea has "no outstanding virtue" but gets along well with Swami because they have similar senses of humor.

The introduction of Swami's friends as simple characters with clear defining traits shows that, at this early stage, Swami views identity as fixed and straightforward. This perspective is essentially childish and will be increasingly challenged in later interactions with these same friends.

Swami tells his friends about his father's letter and all four of them approve of his telling his father about Ebenezar's behavior, although Mani wishes he could have attacked the teacher himself. The Pea feels embarrassed because he himself is a Christian and agrees with Ebenezar, but he does not say so to his friends. The day's scripture class proceeds normally at first, with Ebenezar vigorously denouncing Hinduism, but then the Mission School Headmaster enters the class and criticizes Ebenezar's teaching, embarrassing the teacher.

Like Swami, most of his friends are comfortable with the idea of relying on their fathers for support. Only Mani, who is noted for making trouble, would consider handling the situation himself, again showing that Swami and his friends have not yet achieved much of a sense of autonomy.

At the end of the day, Swami is called to see the Mission School Headmaster, who has Ebenezar waiting in his office. Swami is uncomfortable talking with Ebenezar present and wishes to leave, but the headmaster keeps him in the office long enough to tell him that, in the future, Swami should trust the headmaster and come to him with complaints instead of telling his father. The headmaster gives Swami a letter to give his father and Swami runs home, relieved.

Despite the headmaster's scolding of Ebenezar, Swami discovers in this conversation that the oppressive force of the school is still essentially intact. Furthermore, the headmaster's request that Swami not turn to his father with problems is the story's first indication that Swami will have to learn to grow into the ability to face issues on his own. However, he runs away after this conversation without reflecting much on its meaning, simply happy to have escaped punishment. This reaction further illustrates Swami's relatively innocent perspective at this point in the story.

CHAPTER 2

Swami and his friend Mani are sitting on the banks of the River Sarayu, a pleasant area near the center of their town, Malgudi. Mani tells Swami that he wants to throw Rajam, a new student at their school, into the river. Rajam dresses well, speaks good English, gets good grades, and has impressed the class enough to be a rival to the powerful Mani. Swami points out that Rajam's father is the Police Superintendant, but Mani says that he doesn't care and hints that he might beat up Swami if Swami gets too friendly with Rajam. Swami protests that he hates Rajam, convincing Mani that he, Swami, is on Mani's side.

Mani's reaction to the threat of Rajam is an early instance of the ways in which Swami and his friends re-create their conflicted political context within their own relationships. Mani relies on violence to express dominance, while Swami perceptively notes that having a powerful father makes Rajam less vulnerable. Swami's eagerness to please Mani also hints at the slowly increasing importance of Swami's friendships, which will begin to overshadow his family connections over the course of the novel.

As the conflict between Mani and Rajam grows in the following days, Swami acts as their go-between, passing notes full of insults and challenges from one to the other. During class, Swami is forced to stand on a bench as punishment for getting a question wrong. At the end of the day, Swami, Mani, and Rajam gather and Mani and Rajam challenge each other to a fight at the river the following evening. Mani asks Rajam to promise not to tell Rajam's father about the fight and Rajam agrees.

Swami's continued experiences of humiliating punishment at school furthers Narayan's depiction of it as an oppressive, harmful place. Meanwhile, Rajam's father's stature continues to cast a shadow over the conflict between the boys, with even brave Mani expressing nervousness that the powerful Police Superintendent might find out about his misdeeds.

The next evening, Mani arrives at the river carrying a club, ready to fight Rajam, and Rajam himself arrives with an air gun. The two talk awkwardly for a few minutes and then Rajam asks Mani what he has done to offend him. Mani answers that he had heard Rajam had called him a sneak behind his back, but Rajam denies doing so and says that he wouldn't mind being friends. Mani agrees that he would also be glad to be friends, and the two drop their weapons. Swami, having secretly admired Rajam, is delighted at the turn of events, and the new friends sit by the river eating cookies that Rajam brought to share.

By bringing weapons to a fight between children, both Mani and Rajam demonstrate that they have internalized the necessity of using violence to solve problems, which they likely learned from the political environment in which they've grown up. However, their awkward conversation and reluctance to use the weapons shows that they are essentially still children, unsure of what to do with the tools of their society. Rajam's rapid transformation from enemy into friend also underscores the central theme of fluidity of identity, showing that an objectively "true" identity of good or evil may be an illusion.

CHAPTER 3

The reader learns about Swami's grandmother, who lives with him in a passageway of his parents' house and whom he calls Granny. Swami spends time with his grandmother after eating dinner, feeling warm and safe with her. He tells his grandmother about his new friend Rajam and how wonderful he is, and he expresses particular excitement that Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent. Swami goes on to list all of Rajam's good qualities, often cutting his grandmother off rudely when she tries to speak. She tells him about his brilliant grandfather, but Swami ignores her and continues talking about Rajam.

This first scene featuring Swami's grandmother shows again how reliant Swami is in these early chapters on the unfailing comfort of his home and family. Still self-centered, Swami seems barely aware of his grandmother's personhood but nevertheless derives security from her presence. Swami's enthusiasm for befriending the son of the Police Superintendent shows that he is not yet skeptical of those in power.

Swami becomes suspicious that his grandmother is not listening to him and that she does not believe how wonderful Rajam is, but she emphasizes her approval of Rajam and Swami is comforted. She begins to tell him a story that Rajam reminded her of, but Swami falls asleep halfway through her telling.

By falling asleep during his grandmother's story of the past, Swami again shows that he has little conscious understanding of history's influence on his own life.

Swami sits at home studying at his father's orders, trying to understand the meaning of a poem. His mother brings him a snack and then, finally, his father leaves for work at the court. As soon as his father is gone, Swami runs out of the house to visit his friends, ignoring Granny when she calls to him. He goes first to Mani's house and then, together, they go on to Rajam's house. Although they are nervous at first, the policeman outside Rajam's house is polite to them and takes them inside to see Rajam.

Unable to leave home without his father's permission, Swami is at this point still defined by his role within his family. He remains disrespectful of his grandmother, taking her love for granted. Mani and Swami's slight nervousness upon meeting the policeman outside Rajam's house also shows that they are beginning to sense the first inklings of threat from the powerful enforcers of their community.

Swami and Mani are impressed by Rajam's house, which is large and tidy. Rajam comes to meet them and shows off his amazing collection of toys. Then, Rajam orders his cook to bring in a plate of snacks. Rajam bullies the cook in order to impress his new friends, but the cook talks back to Rajam, at which point Rajam brings the snacks in himself while telling his friends that he left the cook lying unconscious in the kitchen.

This encounter seems to cement the close friendship between Swami, Mani, and Rajam, setting them on the path that will lead Swami away from the safety of his family and into a more complex understanding of the world. Rajam's desire to impress his friends with acts of violence again illustrates the boys' enmeshment in their society's notions of power and importance.

CHAPTER 4

Between classes on a Wednesday, Swami is unable to find his friends and wanders alone around his school. He stops to look at the younger children in the Infant Standards area, feeling "filled with contempt" at how small and unintelligent they are. Eventually he happily runs into Sankar, Somu, and the Pea, who he had thought were not at school. However, his three friends barely acknowledge Swami and refuse to let him join their game. They call Swami a "tail," saying that it means "a long thing that attaches itself to an ass or a dog." Swami doesn't know what this means but he feels upset and embarrassed. On his way home, he catches up to Somu, who tells Swami that they now call him Rajam's Tail, because he acts like he is too good for his old friends now that he spends time with the police superintendent's son.

Swami's contempt for the younger children is an ironic foreshadowing of his own vanishing childhood; soon, he will come to view himself as he does these children. The quick transformation of Somu, Sankar, and the Pea into people who are cruel to Swami rather than kind furthers the idea of identity and social roles as constantly changing. Instead of steadfast friends, Swami finds himself facing people who seem to be strangers, all because he unwittingly allied himself with a symbol of power by befriending Rajam.

This experience is Swami's "first shock in life." In particular, he feels unsure of who his friends are and confused that someone as nice as Somu could be so angry with him. Swami returns home and watches water and debris rush through a gutter by his house. He builds a paper boat and places an ant inside it, then launches the boat into the water. Swami watches in excitement as the boat progresses, recovering from several dangerous turns. Finally, however, a leaf falls onto the boat and overturns it, and Swami is unable to find the boat or the ant. He pinches some dirt in the gutter and says a prayer "for the soul of the ant."

This upsetting experience is a key turning point for Swami. By facing the reality that even someone as kind as Somu can quickly become cruel, Swami begins to lose his belief that his friends play static roles in his life. By encountering a painful problem that no one in his family can help him solve, Swami is also forced to face the reality of his own autonomous life for the first time.

Over the next few days, Swami gets used to being cast out by his friends but still finds himself wishing to talk to them. At times, he thinks that they might be looking at him in a friendly way, but at other times he sees them reject him and feels self-conscious walking near them. He walks behind them leaving school, but he reflects on how frightening they have become to him and wishes to get away. Swami finally pretends to have left his notebook at school and runs away from his former friends.

Unsure of whether his friends might be considering treating him nicely again, Swami grows unable to tolerate their ambiguous role in his life, literally running away rather than facing them. Because Swami's ability to tolerate such ambiguity plays an important role later on, this early inability is particularly important.

CHAPTER 5

On Saturday, Swami prepares excitedly to host Rajam, who has promised to come to his house that afternoon. Swami wonders where to host Rajam and realizes that, because his father will be out at court, he can host Rajam in his father's room, pretending that the room is Swami's own. Swami's grandmother is also excited about the visit and asks Swami to bring Rajam to see her, but he refuses, telling her not to interact with Rajam because she is "too old."

Swami's decision to use his father's room to host Rajam and pretend it is his own demonstrates that, although he wishes to appear independent, his ability to do what he wants still depends on his father's resources.

Swami continues to prepare for Rajam's visit, demanding that his mother make good coffee and something "fine and sweet" for the afternoon snack. He also tells the cook to change into clean clothes and asks him to bring the food directly to him and Rajam. Finally, Swami asks his father if he can use his room to host Rajam, and his father agrees when he hears that Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent.

Again, Swami's preparations for Rajam's visit keenly illustrate how Swami is stuck between childish reliance on his family and a desire to impress Rajam with his maturity. He does everything he can to make a good impression, but he requires help from everyone in his family to do so. Swami's father's submission to the importance of the Police Superintendent is also a reminder that imperial power structures remain influential even within Swami's home.

To Swami's surprise, Rajam's visit goes well, with all of Swami's demands met except for the fact that the cook does not change his clothes. Rajam and Swami talk happily for hours, until Rajam notices Swami's father's large books and asks Swami if he reads them. Embarrassed that Rajam has discovered the room is not his own, Swami admits that the table belongs to his father and, in order to distract Rajam from asking about his own possessions, he mentions his grandmother. Rajam says that he would love to meet her and Swami runs to see Granny, hoping that she is asleep. Swami is disappointed to find her awake, but she is delighted to meet Rajam and impressed with the luxurious details of his life.

Swami's embarrassment at Rajam's finding out that the room and books do not belong to him underscores his desire to be impressive in and of himself, rather than relying on his family. However, Rajam's enthusiasm for meeting Swami's grandmother repairs the situation, though Swami is surprised to find Granny acting as a social asset when he expected her to be an embarrassment. This moment again develops the idea of quickly changing identities and continues Swami's journey toward valuing his grandmother as a person rather than a simple comfort in his life.

On a subsequent school day, Swami enters class to find that "TAIL" is written on the blackboard. Swami's whole class giggles at him and Swami slaps the Pea and Sankar in anger. The three begin to fight in earnest and they only stop when Somu and Mani enter the classroom and separate them. Swami, Mani, Somu, Sankar, and the Pea all go outside the school, where Mani accuses Swami's former friends of writing the word on the board. They all deny it and Swami, crying, explains to Mani that "tail" refers to him being Rajam's tail. Mani angrily defends Rajam and Somu tells Mani that he thinks too much of himself. The two begin to punch and kick each other, at which point Swami, Sankar, and the Pea run in panic to get the Mission School Headmaster, who breaks up the fight.

The fight between Swami and his friends acts as the culmination of their increasingly antagonistic relationships. Though they wish to resolve the tension through violence, they are ultimately unable to, requiring the intervention of an authority figure. This scene hints at the futility of attempting to gain power within an oppressive setting, even in interpersonal relationships.

CHAPTER 6

Three weeks later, Swami and Mani are on their way to Rajam's house. Rajam has invited them to his house, telling them that he has a surprise waiting for them. On the way, Mani muses about the ways that he'd like to inflict violence on Somu, Sankar, and the Pea. When they arrive at Rajam's house, Rajam peeks out but then closes the door again. To get him to let them in, Swami pretends to be a blind kitten and Mani and blind puppy, mews and barking at the door. Rajam opens the door and the two enter, still pretending to be animals with their eyes closed, while Rajam barks and mews in response.

Swami and Mani's humorous transformation into baby animals is one of the more comedic instances of fluid identity. Their joking willingness to give up their true identities allows them to enter a situation where their friendships will be repaired, showing that changing identities can function in positive ways as well as negative ones.

When Swami and Mani open their eyes, they discover that Somu, Sankar, and the Pea are in the room with Rajam. Swami is embarrassed at his behavior and Mani becomes angry at Rajam, threatening to leave. Rajam comforts both and convinces them to stay, offering everyone a snack. After they all eat, Rajam gives a long lecture on the value of friendship and all the terrible things that the Vedas say will happen to a person who makes enemies. At the end of his lecture, Rajam asks the other five boys to swear that they won't have enemies any more, and offers them each a gift if they do so.

Rajam's eloquent defense of friendship, drawn from a classic Indian text, is an example of the boys' growing maturity and attempts to relate to each other in ways not defined by Britain's influence on their country. However, Rajam's authority still derives in part from his father's powerful position, which complicates his pacifistic request.

The Pea is the first to accept his gift and the other four boys soon do the same. The Pea receives a fountain pen, Somu gets a new belt, Mani gets a new knife, Sankar receives a bound notebook, and Swami gets a green clockwork engine.

The boys' acceptance of gifts from Rajam adds an ironic spin to Rajam's convincing lecture. Perhaps the boys have matured enough to take his argument seriously, but perhaps they simply want the gifts. Again, Swami and his friends are stuck between childish desires and newfound maturity.

CHAPTER 7

Swami's mother has been in bed for two days and he misses the attention that she usually pays to him. He sees her lying in bed looking unwell and speaks to her coldly, thinking that she "seemed to be a different Mother." His Granny tells Swami that he will soon have a baby brother, but he is not excited about this news.

Swami's confusion at his mother's changed appearance highlights the fact that he cannot yet tolerate the truth of his family's complicated identities. His indifference at the news of his brother also shows a lingering self-centered immaturity.

Swami sleeps in Granny's room, listening to people moving around throughout the night and seeing a female doctor entering his mother's room. Although Granny asks, they get no news of what is happening. Swami feels safe and comfortable with Granny and does not worry about what is happening to his mother.

Despite the change occurring all around him, Swami does not think to feel fear or anxiety. His ability to feel completely safe with Granny stands in contrast to his later realization that his family cannot necessarily keep him safe.

In school the next day, the class grows restless during a boring lesson. Swami sits next to the Pea and tells him about the birth of his new brother early that morning. Swami tells the Pea that the baby is "hardly anything" and "such a funny-looking creature." The Pea laughs and tells Swami that the baby will grow up quickly.

Although Swami cannot yet comprehend the role that his brother will play in his life, the Pea's words underscore the fact that, again, identity is far from constant. His emphasis on the speedy passage of time also foreshadows how quickly life will change for Swami in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 8

Two weeks before his April school exams, Swami notices that his father is becoming more strict about making him study. He pesters Swami frequently, eventually pointing out that Swami will have to be in a different class from his friends if he fails the exam. At that point Swami listens to his father and begins to study harder.

In this chapter, Swami's father becomes a more antagonistic presence as the pressure of Swami's schoolwork increases. His convincing point that Swami needs school to maintain his friendships also illustrates the paradoxical truth that school, while often harmful to Swami, also fosters some of the most important parts of his life.

All of Swami's classmates and friends are overwhelmed by the pressure of the upcoming exams. Mani is particularly worried and attempts to get information about the exam questions from the school clerk, who is rumored to know everything. He bribes the clerk with food and although the clerk is pleased, he tells Mani that he doesn't know anything about the test questions. Mani persists, and eventually the clerk gives him advice about what to study, despite not actually knowing what will be on the exam. Mani is pleased with the information he gets from the clerk and shares his knowledge with Swami.

Mani's foolish attempt to cheat at the exam points to the impossibility of true success in the boys' academic environment. Even an important school administrator does not know how to achieve success, and talking to him only gives Mani false hope.

Swami arrives home feeling bored and is disappointed that his Granny doesn't feel like talking to him. He goes to look at his brother, who is now six months old. Swami now finds his brother charming and "love[s] every inch of him." However, the baby is asleep and Swami, even more bored, wishes that his father would let him go out to play with Mani. Swami tries to study a map of Europe and wonders about the people who live there, and about how the people who make maps know the shapes of countries. He thinks that perhaps they look down from a high place to see the shape. He eventually finishes his map and his father comes home to compliment him on his work, which Swami feels is "worth all his suffering."

Swami's growing affection for his brother proves the Pea's claim that the baby and Swami's feelings for him would change rapidly. Swami's ability to feel comforted by his father's acceptance here shows again how reliant he is on his family's support. At the same time, his dreamy analysis of the European map demonstrates his budding, if uninformed, interest in the ways that power is controlled and shaped in different countries.

Two days before the exam, Swami makes a list of everything he will need for the exam and is disappointed that he can only think of five things, thinking that he had "never known that his wants were so few." Swami makes his list longer and more complicated and then brings it to his father, who is busy working. Swami tries to go away and not interrupt him, but his father hears him at the door and calls him in, demanding to see the paper he's holding. Swami's father calls his list "preposterous" and tells Swami to take supplies from his desk instead. Although Swami gets most of what he needs, he is sad not to be able to go and buy everything on his list. As he leaves his father's office, his father asks him to move the baby out of the hall so that his father won't have to hear the baby crying.

Swami's surprise at learning something about himself through making the list is an early example of his fluid identity. Swami's discovery that he does not know himself as well as he expected leads him to fashion a new, more admirable self through the creation of a new list. However, his father undermines this initial effort of self-determination, effectively bringing Swami back under his control and constraining him within the family system. All of this plays out through an academic task, again showing the dual role of support and restriction that school plays in Swami's life.

CHAPTER 9

Swami exits his classroom after taking his final examination. He waits outside, worrying because he turned in his exam 20 minutes early while most of the other students were still working. He reflects on the exam questions and feels especially confident about the last question, which involved explaining the moral of a story about a man who is fooled by a tiger offering him a gold bangle. Swami wrote a simple, single-line answer: "Love of gold bangle cost one one's life." Then, he sat restlessly pretending to revise his work until he saw a few other boys leaving, at which point he did the same.

Swami's simplistic interpretation of the story's moral again shows his childish view of the world, in which facts seldom hide deeper meaning. His eagerness to leave school also shows that he feels freer outside its walls, even when he perceives that he should stay longer as the other students do.

The exam ends and the rest of Swami's class comes outside. Swami asks a classmate what he wrote for the last question, and the classmate reveals that he wrote a full page. Swami tells Rajam and Sankar about the classmate and they reply that they wrote only half or three-quarters of a page for the last question. Swami tells them that he also wrote half a page, fooling even himself into thinking he actually did so.

Swami's unease as he discovers his classmates' answers to the last exam question indicates that, although he does not yet understand why, he is beginning to become aware of the more complicated meaning of outwardly simple events. Swami's easy lie, with which he deceives even himself, also demonstrates his growing ability to shape his own identity at will, which he began to exercise when making the list of supplies before the exam.

The rest of Swami's friends arrive and they discuss their feelings about the exam and their excitement that school is now over for the time being. Fifteen minutes later, the whole school goes back into the hall, where everyone is laughing and joking, even the teachers. The Mission School Headmaster announces that the school will be closed until the nineteenth of June and tells the students that he hopes they will continue to read over the vacation. The assembly ends with a short prayer.

The most notable aspect of this scene is the jollity of the teachers and headmaster, who are also happy to leave school. Narayan hints that even those in positions of power, both at the school and perhaps in more complicated political structures beyond it, are in some way limited by rigid, hierarchical social systems.

At the end of the prayer, the boys begin tearing up paper, smashing ink bottles, and destroying whatever they can find. Swami sticks close to Mani at first, afraid of the rumor that enemies stab each other on the last day of school, even though he doesn't think he has any enemies. Then as the excitement builds, Swami joins in the destruction and even pours his ink bottle over his own head. Mani calls jokingly to a policeman to arrest the rowdy boys and then threatens to steal the turban of the school peon and dye it with ink. The peon breaks up the crowd of boys.

As the students' excitement grows, the school transforms from a place of boredom and routine into one of ecstasy and chaos. Swami is initially unsettled by this change but he quickly embraces it, demonstrating how easily individual identity may be influenced by the emotions of a group, adding nuance to the idea that identity is never truly individual.

CHAPTER 10

Swami realizes that his friendships with Somu, Sankar, and the Pea are not meaningful to him outside of school. His friendships with Mani and Rajam are "more human" and the three spend nearly all of their time together with school out. Without school to worry about, Swami wants a hoop to play with more than anything and thinks constantly about getting one. He tells a coachman about his wish and the coachman claims that he can get Swami a hoop quickly in exchange for five rupees. Swami can barely imagine having that much money, but the coachman says that he has a way of converting copper coins into silver, so all Swami needs to do is bring him six paise (a smaller denomination) to start the process.

In this section, Swami gains a new understanding of how important social context is in determining the roles that people play in one another's lives, as he sees that some of his close friends no longer feel important outside of school. His intense desire for a hoop—an essentially useless plaything—reinforces the image of Swami as childish, but at the same time his methods for getting the hoop quickly become somewhat adult, illustrating the ongoing change in Swami's maturity.

Swami is convinced of the coachman's plan and immediately begins trying to find six paise, which the coachman says he needs within six hours. He asks his Granny first, but she has no money to give him, even though she wants to. Swami's mother and father also refuse his request. Unable to find any coins in his house, he remembers that Ebenezar claimed that God would help those who pray to him and wonders if he might be able to perform magic. He gathers six pebbles and puts them in a box with sand, then prays over them in the room where his family keeps images of gods and idols. He decides to wait for half an hour but only lasts ten minutes before opening the box. He is at first enraged to find pebbles instead of coins, but then he becomes afraid that the gods will punish him for his anger and instead buries the box reverently.

After his family's refusal to help him, Swami turns almost thoughtlessly to the kind of Christian practice that he earlier opposed in Ebenezar's class, showing that his burgeoning political awareness is still rather self-serving. Somewhat irrationally, Swami still fears the gods' anger after they too fail to give him what he wants. This disjointed view of reality illustrates the growing pains of Swami's increasingly complex understanding of the world around him.

Swami departs for Mani's house and arrives to find a large, imposing man at the door who initially frightens him but turns out to be Mani's uncle. Swami asks Mani to lend him six paise, but Mani has no money and refuses to look through his uncle's possessions. Two weeks later, Swami goes to Rajam and asks to borrow a policeman, saying that the coachman robbed him. Rajam suggests attacking the man but Swami says that he is frightened to confront him. Swami then confesses to Rajam that he ended up giving the coachman twelve paise after being told that six was not enough. Finally, he mentions that the coachman's young son makes faces and threatens him whenever he tries to go to the coachman's house.

Interestingly, Swami does not reveal how he ultimately obtained enough money to pay the coachman. Through this omission, Narayan hints that Swami may be beginning to solve problems on his own, rather than relying on his family or even his friends to help him get what he wants. However, his request to his powerful friend Rajam to "borrow" a policeman demonstrates that he continues to rely on the force of existing power structures even as he seems to become more independent.

The next day, Swami and Mani go to the coachman's house. Rajam has made a plan for Mani to befriend and then kidnap the coachman's son, with Swami going along to point out the correct house. On the way, Swami gets frightened and tells the Mani that the coachman returned the money, but Mani doesn't believe him and insists on continuing with the plan. Swami points out the house and Mani decides at the last minute that Swami should come to the door with him.

Despite his fears, Swami puts himself almost completely at the mercy of Rajam and Mani in this section, going along with their plan even though he is clearly anxious about it. Swami wishes to appease and impress his friends even more than he wishes to get his money back, and his earlier goal of getting a hoop is essentially forgotten. Now, Swami's concerns are somewhat more adult, focusing on his relationships with Rajam and Mani, the two most powerful figures in his immediate surroundings.

Outside the house, Mani hits Swami and yells at him until a crowd gathers, including the coachman's son. Mani tells the crowd that Swami is a stranger who has demanded money from him, and the coachman's son says that Swami should be sent to jail. Swami turns and confronts the son about his missing money that the coachman took, but Mani interrupts by offering the boy a toy top and promising him a bigger one if he leaves with them. The boy agrees but then runs back into his house with the top. Mani knocks on the door until the coachman's neighbors violently drive Swami and Mani from the neighborhood, throwing rocks and chasing them with dogs.

The final phase of this confrontation vividly shows the transition from Swami's childish wish for the hoop to his involvement in a clearly dangerous situation. This dual meaning indicates that Swami's seeming innocence may have been something of an illusion all along, if something so simple as wanting a hoop can lead so easily to a violent confrontation. Swami is also forced to accept that his strong friend Mani is not all-powerful, again complicating his understanding of his friends' identities.

CHAPTER 11

Although many people view Swami's hometown of Malgudi as intolerably hot in the summer, Swami, Mani, and Rajam enjoy going out together in the summer afternoons and barely notice the heat. They sit together just outside town and discuss the ways that their plan with the coachman's son went wrong, with Mani admitting that he was wrong to give the boy the top so quickly. Swami complains that his neck still hurts where Mani attacked him, but Mani says that he only pretended to attack Swami.

This scene again underscores the way that even a good friend like Mani can behave in ways that are clearly harmful to Swami. Learning to accept this kind of complexity is key to Swami's development over the course of the story. At the same time, the boys' tolerance of the heat despite the adults' hatred of it reveals their continued separation from the fully adult world.

A young boy driving a cart pulled by a bull comes down the road toward the boys, and Rajam yells at him to stop the cart. The boy pleads that he has to leave, but Swami and his friends make him stay, saying that they are the Government Police and threatening to arrest him. The continue to harass the boy, whose name is Karuppan, before finally writing him a fake pass and allowing him to pass.

Perhaps more than any other, this scene illustrates the ways in which Swami and his friends recreate the brutality imposed on them by English colonial rule. Without even discussing it with each other, the boys effortlessly take on the role of police and inflict their own fear and oppression onto Karuppan, a smaller, weaker boy than they. This incident passes without comment or consequence, showing that the boys' internalized sense of the workings of power is both casual and pervasive.


As the summer continues, Swami's father stays home on vacation from his job at the courts. On his third day at home, Swami's father tells Swami that he cannot go out to meet Mani and Rajam but instead must stay at home and study. Swami protests that he should not have to read when school is out, but his father disagrees and makes him sit down with his books. Asked to find a cloth to clean off his dusty books, Swami grabs a cloth from under his baby brother, causing his mother to scold him. His father sits with him while he attempts to solve a math problem involving two men selling mangos. Swami is unable to understand the problem and gets distracted thinking about the characters of the two men in the problem, frustrating his father, who calls him an "extraordinary idiot." Swami's father walks him through the problem step by step, and Swami bursts into tears when he finally gets the correct answer half an hour later.

Swami's father's unexpected insistence that Swami continue studying shows how Swami's old ties to his family come into increasing conflict with his newer ties to his friends. Swami's interpretation of the math problem also shows his sensitive, imaginative nature and how poorly suited that kind of thinking is for conventional academic work. Again, Narayan suggests that the school environment does not educate Swami so much as suppress his naturally positive attributes.


Later that evening, Swami's father feels sorry for making Swami study all afternoon and invites Swami to join him at his club. Swami changes his clothes and gets in the car with his father. Swami is "elated" to go to the club and wishes his friends could see him traveling in the car. When they arrive at the club, Swami happily watches his father play tennis, but his mood changes when he discovers that the coachman's son works at the club as a ball boy. The boy sees Swami and turns to smile at him, holding up a pen knife. Swami is terrified and sticks close to his father as they leave the tennis courts.

Again, an object of childish happiness—visiting the club with his father—becomes a cause for fear and danger as Swami discovers the coachman's armed son at the club. This surprise shows that Swami's powerful friends were truly unable to help him solve the problem of the coachman's son.

Swami feels safe again when he is inside with his father in the card room, but it is dark outside by the time they leave the club and Swami becomes afraid again. He begins to imagine that the coachman's son has a gang waiting to attack him and almost tells his father about his fears, before changing his mind and staying silent. Swami sits in the back of the car, feeling very far from his father and his father's friend in the front seat, and he cannot relax until they pass through the gates of the club.

This episode marks a crucial shift in the relationship between Swami and his father. Whereas before his father could keep him safe from anything, now Swami feels that his father can do nothing to protect him from the coachman's son. This scene completes the thematic development begun in the previous chapter, as Swami's childish pursuit of the hoop transforms fully into a more adult situation that feels genuinely dangerous to Swami.

CHAPTER 12

While sitting on the bank of the Sarayu one August evening, Swami and Mani encounter a large group of people protesting the arrest of a political worker. They listen to an activist saying that the people of India are slaves and should remember their own value and power. He asks the crowd to defy England and its rule, a speech that Swami and Mani find very moving. They get upset about Indian peasants and vow to boycott English goods, especially certain kinds of cloth made by particularly despicable Englishmen. Mani tells Swami that he is wearing a coat made of that English cloth, which makes Swami feel ashamed. A bonfire is lit and the crowd begins to throw articles of clothing into it, and when someone points out that Swami is wearing a foreign **cap**, he throws it into the fire "with a feeling that he was saving the country."

This chapter sets in motion the clear turning point in Swami's changing understanding of the world around him. For the first time, he takes to heart the impact that English colonization has on his country, and he eagerly allies himself with the independence movement even without really understanding what he's doing. His sense of agency remains shallow, as he feels that he has saved the country just by burning his cap, but his emotional commitment is genuine and meaningful, showing a new maturity in Swami's development as an autonomous individual.

The next day Swami wakes up feeling anxious and remembers that he has no **cap** to wear for school. He leaves for school anyway and is happily surprised to find a crowd blocking the gate of the school. A student tells Swami that the school is closed due to the jailing of the political worker, and Swami is relieved that he won't get in trouble for not wearing his cap. He sees the Mission School Headmaster and some of the teachers standing on the school veranda, calling for the students to go to their classes and threatening punishment.

As before, Swami's commitment to a cause larger than himself quickly turns back to self-interest, as he worries what to do without his cap. When the school is closed, Swami is excited not because he believes in the protest, but because he is happy he won't get in trouble for missing the cap. Through this dichotomy, Narayan shows how deeply entwined Swami's political awakening is with his ongoing youthful self-centeredness. This scene also establishes the school as a clear microcosm of political activity, as has been hinted at throughout.

The self-appointed leaders of the crowd of students yell that it is a "day of mourning" and should be observed in silence. However, other students are throwing rocks at the windows of the school. Swami joins in and he is excited to be able to break the ventilator in the Mission School Headmaster's room, finding the experience of being in the crowd "thrilling."

Again, Swami is profoundly caught up in the emotions of others, thoughtlessly losing his identity to that of the crowd and experiencing again how easily his sense of self can change. Further, Swami continues to engage in the protest with a childish mindset, enjoying breaking windows most of all.

Someone runs into the crowd and announces that classes are happening at the Board High School, so the crowd, including Swami, moves to that school. A representative from the crowd asks the Board School Headmaster to close the school, but the headmaster refuses and threatens to call the police. The crowd angrily begins to vandalize the Board School, joined by many of its own students. Swami enthusiastically joins in the shouting and destruction, feeling happy at how much glass there is left to break. He even threatens the children in the school's Infant Standards and stomps on the **cap** of one small child.

Swami continues his enmeshment with the crowd, even going so far as to menace younger children. This moment is an extension of the scorn he felt for the young children in Chapter 4, demonstrating how easily emotional violence can transform into actual, physical violence, even for someone as relatively innocent as Swami.

The crowd moves on to the square in the center of town, where a large group of police is waiting. Swami realizes that Rajam's father is leading these menacing men, a fact which horrifies him. Swami watches as Rajam's father orders the crowd to disperse and, when it doesn't, orders the troops to charge. The policeman run into the crowd, "pushing and beating everybody," and Swami begs them to leave him alone because he knows nothing. The policemen taunt Swami but let him run away.

Witnessing the cruelty of Rajam's father is a crucial moment of understanding for Swami. Because he admired Rajam's father so deeply before this experience, gaining the knowledge of his capacity for evil is especially painful for Swami. Unlike any previous moment, this one causes Swami to realize how nuanced personal identity can be and forces him to accept that no one person can be completely good or completely evil.

Swami plans to keep his experiences in the riot secret from his father, but upon arriving home his father immediately begins talking about how Rajam's father is "a butcher," which Swami finds himself agreeing with as he remembers his brutal behavior. Swami's father asks him if he was involved in the riot, in which many people were injured and a few may have died. Swami realizes that he now has an excuse for losing his **cap** and tells his father that someone tore it off in the crowd because it was made of foreign material. His father tells him that it was made in India and that he would never buy his son something made abroad. Swami lies in bed thinking about all the injuries he got during the day, and is especially angry at the policemen for hitting him and calling him a monkey.

Even after his momentous—and very dangerous—experience at the protest, Swami returns again to thinking about his cap and whether he will get in trouble for losing it. This turn shows how deeply Swami is caught between innocence and understanding, childish concerns and adult dangers. Furthermore, his father's claim that the cap was Indian anyway undercuts the value of Swami's political act and demonstrates afresh how tied to his father Swami still is.

At school the next day, the Mission School Headmaster enters Swami's class and reads a list of all the students who were missing the day before, forcing them to stand on their benches as punishment. One by one, he asks them to explain why they weren't in school the previous day, with each giving a different excuse. The headmaster punishes each boy in turn, rejecting their excuses. Swami gets more and more nervous, and when the headmaster gets to him, he gives a confused, muddled answer using pieces of his experiences at the recent protests. The headmaster hits Swami with his cane as punishment for not speaking clearly and says that he saw him breaking the ventilator in his office. The headmaster hits Swami several more times until Swami grows desperate and runs out of the school, saying to the headmaster: "I don't care for your dirty school."

Swami's confused reply to the headmaster's questions clearly shows just how ill-equipped he is to understand and explain his role in society and the actions he takes. Again, Swami's feelings are real, but he does not yet know how to transmute them into meaningful behavior. As before, his school does not help him ease his confusion but rather punishes him for it, leading to Swami's most drastic act of self-determination yet.

CHAPTER 13

Six weeks pass, after which Rajam comes to Swami's house to tell him that he forgives him for everything, from his political activities to his new status as a student at the Board School. The reader learns that Swami refused to return to the Mission School and that his father sent him instead to the Board School. Swami quickly found himself happily the center of attention at his new school, though he does not yet have close friends there. Back at the Mission School, Somu was left behind after failing an exam, Sankar moved away after his father was transferred, and the Pea began school months late due to mysterious causes. Swami still sees Mani every day but had not seen Rajam since leaving the Mission School.

Rajam's casual acknowledgement of the way that political differences separate him and Swami underscores the theme that the pressure of English colonization appears everywhere, even in close boyhood friendships. The sudden disappearance of Sankar and Somu also shows how easily a person can go from close friend to distant memory, again challenging Swami to accept the changing identities of those around him.

Rajam finds Swami trying to build a camera, and Swami explains that a boy in his new class had done so. Rajam criticizes Swami for thinking that his new school is superior and Swami, wanting to win Rajam over, agrees that he does not like the Board School but says that he had no choice in leaving the Mission School. Rajam tells Swami that he should have stayed away from politics in the first place, and Swami agrees. Rajam is convinced by Swami's consent and tells him that they should go back to being good friends.

Just as Swami's friends earlier accused Swami of thinking he was too good for them by hanging out with Rajam, so too does Rajam accuse Swami of thinking he is superior. That even the powerful Rajam would make this accusation shows the depth to which external ideas of power structures are embedded in the boys' lives. Swami's desire to please Rajam wins out over his political convictions, again showing the confusion that Swami feels as he attempts to take charge of his own priorities.

Rajam suggests forming a **cricket** team, and although Swami initially feels that he's not good enough to play, Rajam convinces him to try. Rajam says that the team will be called the M.C.C. but Swami worries that they could get into legal trouble, since there is already a professional cricket team using that name. Swami suggests some other names for the team and they make a list of all the possibilities, choosing Victory Union Eleven as an additional name. Swami brings up the idea that they might need to pay a tax to the government, concerned that their name will not be reserved unless they do so. Considering all of the Swami's points, Rajam reflects that starting a cricket team is "the most complicated problem on earth" and feels sympathetic toward Gandhi's opposition to the government.

Rajam and Swami's plan to form a cricket team introduces the novel's most important symbol, the English game of cricket. The boys do not discuss the fact that cricket comes from the country of their colonizers; rather, they simply embrace it as a way to enjoy themselves and legitimize their pursuits outside of their families. However, with his concerns about government regulations, Swami intuits that even in this harmless pastime, the effect of political structures will still be present. By somewhat ironically equating the cricket team with Gandhi's fight for Indian independence, Narayan shows the inextricability of the political from personal life.

Swami and Rajam go to Mani's house to choose **cricket** equipment from a sporting goods catalogue. Mani insists that a certain kind of bat, the Junior Willard Bat, is the best kind and that their team must order them. The three friends choose the goods they need from the catalogue, arguing good-naturedly about how many bats they need, and then settle down to write a letter ordering the supplies. Swami at first agrees to write the letter but becomes overwhelmed by the task, at which point Rajam takes over, writing a letter from both M.C.C. and Victory Union Eleven. They complete the letter and agree to mail it.

The act of choosing equipment and writing to the company serves as an important act of self-determination for the boys. They are excited to have chance to choose their own name and do not feel concern about the team's ties to British culture. This lack of worry illustrates the paradoxical point that colonized people like Swami and his friends can and sometimes must adapt to the culture of the colonizer and even embrace aspects of it in order to lead normal, enjoyable lives.

The postman arrives with a card for Rajam, which turns out to be from Sankar, who says that he is also playing **cricket** now. The three friends are excited to hear from Sankar and immediately write letters in return, only to realize that they do not have an address to mail them to.

Here Swami and his friends demonstrate both deep affection for their friend Sankar and, ultimately, a lack of concern for him when they give up on writing back. With this, Sankar's identity in their lives slips fully from friend to memory, never to be mentioned again. This moment shows how the actions of others can define a person's identity, even when those actions are careless or out of line with the actor's true feelings.

Soon thereafter, Rajam receives a reply from the sporting goods company addressed to the captain of the M.C.C. The friends are delighted to have their team recognized by the company and the postal service. The letter from the company asks for a 25% payment, which confuses them and leaves them unsure how to respond. Eventually, they conclude that the letter was sent to them by mistake, even though Swami points out that it is addressed to the captain of their team. They write back to the company returning the letter and asking that their **cricket** supplies be sent quickly.

While the friends are excited that an adult organization like the sporting goods company has recognized their team as legitimate, they are not able to respond to the company's request, showing how far they are from becoming truly autonomous. Their irrational belief that the letter was a mistake also shows the persistence of childish magical thinking in their lives.

Swami, Rajam, and Mani continue to believe that the **cricket** supplies will arrive soon, and that perhaps the company is even making them especially for their team. In the meantime, they make bats from a wooden box and get used tennis balls from Rajam's father's club and begin practicing without their complete supplies. The Pea joins their team, along with a few boys that Rajam chooses from his class.

Swami and his friends remain intent on playing even without ideal equipment, perhaps symbolizing the way that the citizens of India must make do with lesser versions of the cultural artifacts brought to them by the English. The boys also end up needing help from Rajam's father, demonstrating another way that their families of origin are still crucial to their pursuits.

The team assembles for its first practice. The Pea arrives late without the stumps he promised to bring, but says that he will bring them to the next practice. Rajam and the others are at first upset not to have the supplies they need to play a full game of **cricket**, but they manage to continue when someone suggests using the wall as a temporary wicket. As practice starts, Swami bowls very well and is immediately given the nickname Tate, after a famous bowler.

Swami's sudden transformation, after a very short time playing, into the cricket star Tate indicates that not only is identity fluid, but it can also change based on scant evidence or even happenstance. Over the course of the rest of the novel, Swami is a continual disappointment to his cricket team, so it is noteworthy that he keeps the nickname Tate nonetheless.

CHAPTER 14

Swami discovers that the workload and pressure of his new school are much greater than those he experienced at the Mission School. Swami is also obligated to attend mandatory drill practices and scout classes after school, and the punishments for missing a class are harsh. Swami's days are now full of rigor and work, and he is a more attentive student than he had been previously. After his after-school obligations, he runs home to drop off his supplies and then arrives at the **cricket** field by evening. Though he tries his best to get there quickly, Swami is often disappointed to find that the practice is concluding by the time he arrives and Rajam is annoyed at him for arriving late.

Swami is unhappy to find that, like the Mission School, the rules at Board School run contrary to what he believes are his best interests, in this case arriving on time for cricket practice. This time, however, the restrictions force Swami to become a better student and help him develop his individual academic skills even as it keeps him away from his team. Again, Narayan points to the kernels of positivity that still exist within oppressive systems.

One day, Swami's grandmother calls to him during the brief time that he is at home between school and **cricket** practice. He feels sorry for how often she is ignored and goes to see what she wants. She asks him to go and get her a lemon to soothe her stomach pain and offers to let him keep three paise for himself, but when she gives him a time limit, he gets annoyed and runs out to practice.

This encounter shows Swami's inner conflict between following his self-interested impulses as he is used to doing or instead supporting someone else whose needs are counter to his own.

Later that evening, Swami arrives home feeling guilty for abandoning his grandmother earlier. He goes to see her, worrying that she might die because of his neglect, but she tells him that his mother gave her a lemon and she is feeling better. Swami is joyful and relieved to find her doing well, and in his excitement he tells her about being nicknamed Tate. However, he is dismayed to find that she does not know who Tate is and, furthermore, she does not know what **cricket** is. He lectures her on the basics of cricket and explains how well Rajam leads his team. Swami's father enters, carrying Swami's baby brother, and remarks that soon it will be the baby teaching everyone about the world.

Swami's genuine concern for his grandmother's health marks a new facet of their relationship, in which he begins to see himself as her caretaker rather than the other way around. Even when she upsets him by failing to understand his new identity as Tate, he remains patient and loving, for once setting aside his own wishes in favor of caring for her. It is similarly significant that Swami's father remarks on the baby's growing role in the family, pointing to the fact that Swami is no longer the center of his family's attention and will soon have to make way for the growing needs—and intelligence—of his younger brother.

Rajam warns Swami that he cannot keep being late to cricket practice. Swami tells Rajam that the Board School schedule keeps him from arriving on time, so Rajam suggests asking the Board School Headmaster to let him leave early until after their match. Swami tells Rajam that he is afraid of the headmaster, so Rajam announces that he will speak to the headmaster himself at Swami's school the next day. Swami begs Rajam not to go to the school, but Rajam insists on doing so.

At this point, it becomes clear that rather than simply bringing Rajam and Swami together, the cricket team is beginning to burden their friendship. As their political disagreements did before, the team—symbolically standing in for British oppression—creates an excuse for conflict that Rajam attempts to solve through straightforward dominance.

To avoid seeing Rajam at his school, Swami pretends to be sick the next morning. His father thinks that he is well enough to go to school, but his Granny and mother support him and convince his father to let him stay home, even though he does not have a fever. Halfway through the day, Swami becomes anxious and tells his mother that he feels better and wants to go to school, thinking that Mani will already have gone. On the way there, he runs into Rajam and Mani, who tell him that they went to his school but left when they found he wasn't there. Mani is carrying a club, which makes Swami afraid of what his friends might try to do to the Board School Headmaster.

Again, Swami relies on the support of his family, this time his mother and grandmother, to get what he wants. However, in this case he is not able to fully accept their protection, eventually leaving for school even though he has permission to stay home. While Swami is frightened of both the headmaster and his friends' behavior, he feels compelled to return to school nonetheless.

Rajam leads Swami back to school and tells Mani to wait outside while they speak to the Board School Headmaster. Rajam and Swami enter the headmaster's office and find him sleeping. They wait for ten minutes and then make noise to wake him up. The headmaster asks what they're doing there and Rajam explains that Swami, the best bowler on the team, needs to leave school early to get to **cricket** practice on time. The headmaster listens and then orders them to leave the office without granting Swami permission to leave school early. Mani gets tired of waiting outside and enters the office with his club, but the headmaster is not intimidated. Rajam tells the headmaster that Rajam's father is the Police Superintendent, but even that fails to convince the headmaster. Rajam leads his friends out of the office in disgust.

It surprises Swami to see his imposing headmaster asleep and powerless, but he soon learns that the man's authority is nonetheless absolute. Even though he is old and weak, strong young Rajam and Mani are unable to defy him. In this situation, the wizened headmaster seems to stand in for the idea of the oppressing culture which, old and outdated though it may be, nevertheless wields power over the people of India.

CHAPTER 15

The M.C.C. has scheduled a **cricket** match against a team called Young Men's Union. The match is friendly in name, but in fact the M.C.C. sends a complicated list of demands and threats along with their invitation, including asking the other team to bring their own supplies and telling them that they will have to pay for anything damaged in the course of the match. The match is scheduled for a Sunday two weeks in the future.

The M.C.C.'s irrational insistence on threatening their opponents shows the senseless conflict inherent in their game, and the extent to which their desire to win may stem from a wish for dominance rather than excellence.

As the team's captain, Rajam throws himself into ensuring that his team beats the Y.M.U. Rajam believes that they are capable of doing so but he is very worried about Swami, who continues to arrive late to practice. With only a week to go until the **cricket** match, Swami realizes that he has to find a way to get extra practice and goes to tell his after-school drill master that he is not feeling well. The master asks what is wrong and Swami tells him that he is delirious and has been unable to sleep. Though he angrily accuses him of lying, the drill master lets Swami leave early and Rajam is very pleased to see Swami at practice on time.

While Swami wants to please Rajam, he is not willing to outwardly defy his school rules and so seeks permission from the very institution that oppresses him. Even though he is ridiculed and granted only a small reprieve, Swami is happy for even this reward, again showing the psychological necessity of gaining small victories within oppressive systems.

The next morning, Swami sneaks out of his house and goes to visit a physician named Dr. Kesavan before school. He explains that he needs to get a certificate that will allow him to leave school early to practice for the **cricket** match. The doctor appears concerned, but laughs at Swami when Swami says that he has delirium and that it is "some kind of stomachache." The doctor examines Swami and says that because he is well, he cannot get a certificate. However, the doctor offers to talk to the Board School Headmaster for him and ask that Swami be allowed to leave school in time for practice.

By sneaking out to see the doctor without his parents' knowledge, Swami takes another step toward trying to solve his own problems independent of his family. However, Swami's belief that Dr. Kesavan can convince the headmaster to let him leave early shows that Swami still ascribes significant power to the group of older male authority figures that surround him.

Swami leaves school early and attends practice on time for the next several days, making Rajam and the rest of the team very happy. On Friday, however the Board School Headmaster comes to Swami's class and confronts him in front of the class about missing drill practice all week. Swami protests that Dr. Kesavan had said he would "die if [he] attended drill" and that the doctor should have talked to the headmaster. The headmaster dismisses Swami's defense and Swami realizes that the doctor betrayed him. The headmaster prepares to cane Swami, but without thinking Swami grabs the cane, throws it out the window, and runs away from school.

Swami's punishment at the hands of the Board School Headmaster mirrors the earlier scene of humiliation at the hands of the Mission School Headmaster, which indicates that, to some extent, all schools are the same in their harsh oppression of students like Swami. This time, Swami rebels even more forcefully, physically robbing the headmaster of his strength by taking his cane. With this action, Swami moves still farther on his journey to self-actualization, haphazard though it may be.

Swami sits under a tree to think through his situation. He realizes that there are no more schools in Malgudi, and that his behavior might mean that even schools in other cities wouldn't accept him. He thinks that he might have to get a job, and although he would enjoy having money, he knows that his father won't let him live at home without going to school. Swami decides that he cannot face his father, and chooses to leave the city on his own.

In this moment, Swami's father is not only powerless to help Swami, but he transforms into something of threat to Swami's well-being. Facing this new reality, Swami chooses uncertainty rather than this new version of his formerly protective father.

Swami continues onward to his old school, the Mission School. He feels full of nostalgia and misses everything about it, from his friends to his teachers to the Mission School Headmaster, whom he now finds dignified. He feels as if he is an outcast and has no choice but to leave Malgudi. He wishes to talk to Rajam and Mani before going, so Swami goes behind the school and waits for a young boy to come outside to blow his nose. He calls the boy over and offers him an almond peppermint in exchange for going and getting Rajam from his class. The boy agrees and returns with Rajam. Swami gives the boy a three-paise coin rather than the promised peppermint, which disappoints the boy, but he goes back to his class nonetheless.

Swami's sudden fond feelings toward the Mission School indicate that, as much as it caused him pain while he was there, the school acts as a kind of home in Swami's life. This change in Swami's feelings offers a new perspective on the school as site of colonialism; just as Swami ends up feeling comfortable in the familiarity of a place that oppressed him, so too must the Indian people learn to call their colonized nation home.

Swami then explains his situation to Rajam, who criticizes him for always getting in trouble. Rajam tells Swami that he has seen their **cricket** opponents practicing and that Swami must not miss the match. On the spot, Swami decides not to tell Rajam that he is running away but instead plans to leave for two days without telling anyone and return for the match. Then, he will leave Malgudi for good after the match. Rajam goes back to class, reminding Swami to come early to practice.

Rajam's critical reaction to Swami's behavior subtly highlights the political differences between the two: Rajam essentially supports following the rules, while Swami repeatedly finds himself acting out against his schools. But as before, the lure of succeeding at cricket and pleasing his friend outweighs Swami's immediate desire to rebel, and he changes his plans to fit the social structure that brings meaning to his life.

CHAPTER 16

Swami's father walks through town, ashamed of himself as he moves toward the Sarayu river. He is planning to look for Swami's body in the water and feels ridiculous doing so, but he also feels unable to return home without finding news of his missing son. Swami's mother and grandmother are at home, "dazed and demented" with worry about Swami.

The sudden shift to Swami's father's perspective marks one of the only times that the narrative strays from a close focus on Swami himself. This section is particularly notable because it shows the humanity of Swami's father in a newly immediate way, letting the reader see the emotional, vulnerable side of his character that had previously been hidden.

Swami's father thinks back to earlier in the evening, when he had not yet been worried about Swami and had only gone looking for him to "please his wife and mother." He checked Swami's school, as well as Rajam's house, and was unable to find Mani's house. He returned home after an hour without news, which made Swami's mother and grandmother even more nervous. Eventually, their worry began to rub off on him and he became convinced that something had happened to Swami. Granny seemed to blame him for Swami's disappearance, but he thought back over his actions during the day and couldn't think of anything that would have driven Swami away. He went out again, leaving his wife crying at home.

Swami's father's confusion over the role that he himself might have played in Swami's disappearance points to a key moment in the changing relationship between Swami and his family. At this point, it's unclear even to Swami's father whether or not he is his son's protector. As Swami moves beyond the reach of his family's safety in the book's final section, his father's sense of his own identity becomes as fragile as Swami's.

Swami's father considers checking the hospital, but thinks that he is not brave enough to see Swami injured if he is indeed inside. Instead he goes toward the river, praying and wondering what he will do if he does find Swami's body in the water. However, he sees nothing but shadows on the water and proceeds to the railway station. He walks along the rails for about a mile and finds nothing, stopping once to see whether a wet patch is blood. When he finds that it is water, he thanks God.

The final phase of this chapter highlights Swami's father weakened state, as he finds his own bravery lacking. Furthermore, his sincere fear that he may find his son drowned or dead on the train tracks illuminates just how dangerous Swami's world has become; he is still a child in some ways, but he is now fully subject to all of life's dangers, as well.

CHAPTER 17

Swami walks alone on a road branching off the familiar trunk road of Malgudi. He walks for a mile and finds the road quiet, deserted, and unfamiliar. He wishes to be back on the trunk road, and realizes that he has been walking for hours. Swami misses home, imagining all of the food the cook makes and thinking of eating with his mother. As the sun begins to set, Swami rests and then decides to go home. He thinks that his troubles at school don't matter after all and he is surprised that he ever thought he needed to run away. Swami regrets not telling his father what happened and is especially sorry to miss **cricket** practice leading up to the match.

Even before realizing he is lost, Swami misses home intensely and regrets his decision to leave school, already finding his reasons for fleeing trivial. In this sense, the self that Swami was only a few hours before has already become a stranger to him, demonstrating the depth of the instability of his identity during this sequence. But as much as he wishes to be at home, he remains in unfamiliar geographic territory, again illustrating his half-independent, half-childish state.

Swami walks toward home, thinking of the excuses he will give his parents. After some time, he feels that he should have reached the trunk road but still seems to be far away on an unfamiliar road. Night falls and Swami becomes nervous, realizing that he might still be far from home. He begins to walk faster and is unnerved by the "uncanny ghostly quality" of birds fluttering in the quiet trees. As Swami continues, he wishes to run but is afraid of making noise. He feels that his senses become more keen, hearing small noises that he cannot identify or understand. Eventually, Swami even hears his name whispered through the night and thinks that he sees a monster crouching in the shadows, though it turns out to be a group of trees.

Swami continues to think of excuses to tell his parents even as he finds himself far from their influence, demonstrating the difficulty of separating from his family's sphere. This section also marks the beginning of Swami's temporary dissolution of identity, as he feels the barriers between himself and the rest of the world grow thinner and perceives his own name coming from outside himself. Swami has frequently redefined his identity throughout the story, but at this point, he begins to reach a state of barely having an identity at all.

Swami looks forward to reaching the trunk road soon and feels "a momentary ecstasy" when he comes into a clearing that looks like the trunk road and he is able to see the stars overhead. He decides to go forward without resting but quickly realizes that the road he is on lacks some of the signs of the trunk road and is probably a different location. Beginning to walk anyway, he soon finds himself lost in tall grass and has to turn back the way he came.

This moment of false hope adds emphasis to the idea that Swami may not ultimately have control over his circumstances or sense of self. Though he goes forward confidently, he remains lost nonetheless, showing the extent to which his life is circumscribed by outside forces even at this moment of unprecedented autonomy.

Pausing, Swami is forced to accept that he is far from home late at night, and that he does not know how to get back. He becomes "faint with fear" and is barely able to continue walking, and he feels the dark world around him closing in with "a sense of inhumanity." Swami falls to the ground and cries aloud, praying for someone to rescue him. With his imagination running wild, Swami thinks he sees a succession of deadly creatures—elephants, tigers, cobras, even demons—attacking him. Soon, he falls into a fantasy that he is playing **cricket** in the coming match, playing well and watching his team win, with the odd addition that the Board School Headmaster is playing for the opposing team. He collapses with exhaustion, imagining that he is still on the cricket field.

As the barrier between Swami's inner life and the threats of the outside world breaks down at last, he loses all sense of himself as a coherent individual. In this moment of complete disorientation, Swami falls back on a fantasy that illustrates the essential scaffolding of his life. Associated with both the supportive power of Swami's friends and the oppressive power of British rule, cricket's appearance at this crucial moment symbolizes the paradoxical but nevertheless powerful forces that shape Swami's existence.

Ranga, a man who drives a cart, is out on an early morning journey when his bull stops unexpectedly. Ranga is surprised to find Swami sleeping in the road in front of his cart and at first thinks he is dead, but soon realizes that Swami is a living boy from the town. Unable to imagine how Swami got there, Ranga decides to take Swami to the office of the nearby District Forest Officer, who will know what to do with him.

Ranga is one of the few named characters who could be said to be an Indian peasant, the group that Swami pledges to protect at the protest on the Sarayu. Ranga's role here is crucial to Swami's rescue, but later the more powerful Mr. Nair is the one who receives all the credit. Swami never seems to be aware of Ranga's existence, and even Ranga views himself as too simple to be of help. Ranga's unsung but pivotal role hints at the status of peasants throughout India under British rule.

Swami regains consciousness and does not understand where he is. At first he thinks he is at home, but then begins to remember his recent ordeal and looks around him in confusion, unable to see clearly. He sees and hears a man talking to him and wonders why his father is there with him. The man says that his father will arrive soon, which makes Swami even more confused; he wonders whether the man is his father and, whether or not he is, what he is doing there.

When Swami awakens in an unfamiliar place, his sense of self remains diffuse, and he attempts to regain it by talking to the man he perceives to be his father. However, it quickly becomes clear that this source of comfort and stability is an empty one; Swami does not know whether the man is his father or what his purpose is. Regaining consciousness after his ordeal, Swami finds himself still without a clear identity and severed from his family connections in an unprecedented way.


The man turns out to be Mr. Nair, the District Forest Officer. He recalls helping to revive Swami and notes that Swami was not at first able to explain who he is, where he is from, or what happened to him. Now, he finds Swami outside, practicing **cricket** bowling with a tree and some rocks. Swami thanks Mr. Nair for helping him and says how eager he is to get back in time for his match. He asks what day it is and Mr. Nair tells him it is Sunday. Swami is horrified at this news because the match is on Sunday, but Nair quickly amends what he said and tells Swami that it is Saturday. He promises to get Swami home by evening if he can explain who he is.

As in Swami's fantasy, cricket is the first thing to ground him in reality as he regains his composure, again showing how crucial its dual meaning is in supporting Swami's sense of self. In this case, the issues of the cricket match allow Swami to return to himself enough to explain who he is and get Mr. Nair to help him return home.


CHAPTER 18

On Sunday afternoon, the **cricket** match between M.C.C. and Y.M.U. is underway. The M.C.C. is losing and Rajam is furious, in particular regretting that his team does not have a good bowler. Rajam's father interrupts the game to give him a letter about Swami, from which Rajam learns that Swami is safe. Rajam's father plans to leave and give the letter to Swami's father and asks Rajam if he would like to come. Rajam declines, saying that he doesn't care about Swami and wants to stay at the match. Rajam begins to tell Mani that Swami is safe, but then remembers that he has resolved not to care about Swami and stops talking before giving Mani the news.

Without Swami present, the reader gains advance knowledge of the fissure that is forming between Rajam and Swami as a result of the cricket match. While cricket helped Swami return home safely in the previous chapter, in this one it causes a painful break between him and his closest friend, again showing the complex effects of this symbol of British power. This chapter also marks the most significant transformation in Rajam's character, as he goes from being an encouraging leader to a cold former friend. An extension of the changes of social roles that Swami witnessed earlier in the book, this instance is perhaps the most extreme example of the fluidity of individual identity, as Rajam actively chooses to stop caring about Swami.


Back at home, Swami is content at the attention and concern that his family and other visitors feel for him. In addition to his delighted mother and grandmother, Swami is surrounded by friends of his family, all of whom are glad to see him home safely. In the midst of the celebration, Swami remembers Mr. Nair and feels guilty for not saying goodbye to him, after he rescued him and treated him well. He is also touched at the memory of how kind Rajam's father and his own father were, and he remembers with happiness how everyone laughed when he told the story of his conflict at school.

Swami's comfort at home represents a temporary stabilization of his sense of self, in which he is able to return briefly to the childish security he felt at the start of the book. However, his concern over forgetting to thank Mr. Nair hints at the difficulty of appreciating such safety in the moment and seems to foreshadow a future in which Swami's own father will also be a semi-forgotten figure of the past.

Mani arrives to visit Swami and the two friends go into the backyard to talk. Mani has heard the story of Swami's disappearance from Rajam and calls him a fool for running away from the Board School Headmaster, but he also expresses concern for Swami and asks where he was when he went missing. Swami tells Mani the whole story of his terrifying night, being picked up by Ranga, and then being rescued by Mr. Nair and forgetting to say goodbye. Mani recommends that Swami write him a letter of thanks and Swami agrees, saying how grateful he is that Mr. Nair returned him in time for the **cricket** match.

The start of this scene with Mani indicates Swami's continued naivete, as he assumes that his friendships will continue in the same comfortable pattern he is used to. This moment marks the last time that Swami is able to feel confident in his connection with Mani and Rajam, although the reader already knows that this connection has been strained by the results of the cricket match.

Mani explains, to Swami's dismay, that the **cricket** match has already happened earlier that day, Sunday. He tells the story of the team's defeat and the ways in which it was Swami's fault for being absent. Swami is devastated and changes his mind about writing to Mr. Nair, who told him that it was only Saturday. Mani also tells Swami that Rajam is furious with Swami and will never speak to him again. Swami begs Mani to help him reconcile with Rajam, but Mani says there is nothing he can do. Swami plans to see Rajam the following morning, and also informs Mani that he will be returning to the Board School the following week.

With the revelation that he has missed the cricket match, Swami is forced to accept that his plan has failed and that his close relationships will be altered as a result. Swami attempts to evade responsibility by blaming Mr. Nair, a surrogate father figure, but the consequences of Swami's actions remain unchanged. Furthermore, Swami admits that he must return to the Board School, indicating that as much as Swami has changed, he must still operate largely within the structures that have always constrained his life.

CHAPTER 19

Ten days later, Swami gets up early in order to get to the train station, from which Rajam is about to leave. Rajam's father is being transferred to a new city, which Swami learned the previous evening from Mani. Swami feels desolate knowing that Rajam will soon be gone, unable to imagine life without him. In particular, Swami is ashamed because he has not found the courage to go and see Rajam since missing the **cricket** match. When Swami heard the news from Mani, he asked Mani to come to his house early the next morning to go to the station with him, but Mani said he could not because he would be sleeping at Rajam's house. Knowing that he is missing their final night together fills Swami with despair and jealousy.

Although Swami has returned to the safety of his family's home, his new knowledge of the world's dangers and the true instability of individual identity has left him irrevocably changed. Despairing at the loss of Rajam, Swami no longer has a clear sense of himself and his place in the world.

After Mani leaves to go to Rajam's house, Swami looks through his possessions for something to give Rajam as a going away present. He considers giving Rajam back the green clockwork engine Rajam gave him the previous year, but worries that Rajam might take it as a sign that Swami no longer wishes to be friends. Eventually, Swami settles on giving Rajam a **book of fairy tales** given to him by his father years before. Swami recalls that he has never been able to read the whole thing because of all the "unknown, unpronounceable English words in it" and thinks that Rajam will be able to read it. He inscribes it to his "dearest friend."

By choosing a book for Rajam, Swami takes the first step toward rebuilding some sense of agency in his life and restoring his relationships. The fact that it is a book of fairy tales points to the potential healing power of imagination, but at the same time, Swami's memory of its mystifying English words shows that colonial influence still crops up even in sites of fantasy. The gift encapsulates both the hope that Swami can gain increasing agency and the reality that external context will always constrain him.


Swami arrives at the station in the dark early morning, holding the **book of fairy tales**. He sees Rajam and Mani get out of a car, along with Rajam's family. He sees how tidy and refined Rajam looks and loses his courage, hiding in the shadows rather than going to speak to him. Rajam remains surrounded by his family and a group of policemen, and Swami is unable to find a gap in which to speak to Rajam. The train arrives and Rajam's mother gets in as the policemen say goodbye to Rajam and Rajam's father. Swami finds Mani and asks if Rajam will speak to him, and Mani says that he will.

Even at the last, Swami discovers that the presence of Rajam's powerful family and their police guard comes between himself and his friend. Despite his newfound maturity and knowledge of the world, Swami is still subject to conventional power structures and needs to ask his stronger friend Mani for help.


Rajam gets onto the train and Swami asks for Mani's help giving him the **book**. Mani runs to the window and calls to Rajam that Swami is there to say goodbye, but Rajam replies only by saying goodbye to Mani. Mani points out Swami again, and Swami calls out to Rajam in despair. After looking at Swami for a moment, Rajam says something but his words are drowned out by the noise of the train. The train begins to move.

The uncertainty of this moment leaves Rajam's final role in Swami's life undetermined as he departs. At this point, the book's theme of fluid identity comes to a head, as Rajam appears to be neither good nor bad but rather a mystery.

Swami hands the book of **fairy tales** to Mani in panic, and Mani runs alongside the train to give it to Rajam. Rajam takes the book and waves goodbye as the train departs. Swami waves back, watching as the train vanishes from sight. Swami tells Mani that he is glad he got to say goodbye and Mani tells Swami that Rajam will write to him. Swami is surprised but Mani claims that he gave Rajam Swami's address. Swami accuses Mani of lying and asks him what the address is; Mani is unable to say. Still, he insists that he did give the address to Rajam. Swami looks at Mani and is ultimately unable to tell whether or not he is joking or sincere.

Swami succeeds in his effort at repairing the friendship by passing the book off to Rajam with Mani's help. However, neither he nor the reader knows if the attempt is successful, and Rajam and Swami's relationship to each other remains far from clear. At the end, even the previously simple Mani becomes impossible to interpret, and Swami has no choice but to acknowledge and accept the ambiguity of his words. This tolerance for uncertainty marks a new phase of maturity for Swami as he continues to contend with the new confusions and complexities of his changed life.


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