

Before You Read

An Astrologer's Day

World Literature
India



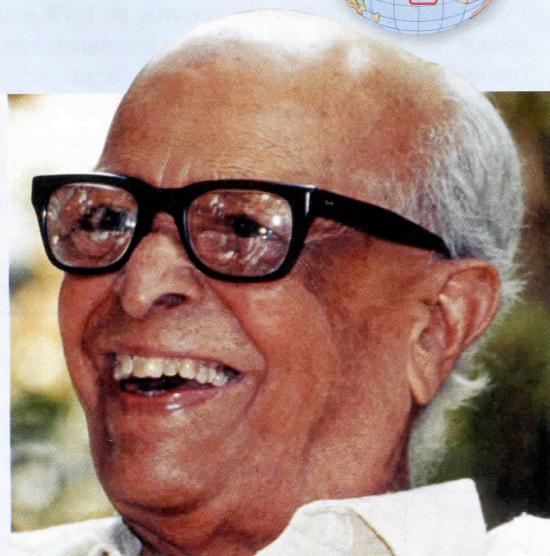
Meet R. K. Narayan

(1906–2001)

As a young boy, R. K. Narayan (nä rä' yan) had absolutely no use for school. "Going to school seemed to be a never-ending nuisance each day," he once wrote. Narayan much preferred spending time with his pet monkey, who liked to hang by its tail from the roof, and his pet peacock, who acted as the family watchdog. Despite his aversion to school, Narayan's family placed a high value on education. But Narayan never changed his opinion that school was too serious. Today, Narayan's stories are regularly assigned to students in schools around the world. Considering his unenthusiastic view of formal education, Narayan might have enjoyed this irony.

"I want a story to be entertaining, enjoyable, and illuminating in some way."

—R. K. Narayan



Graham Greene. Narayan went on to publish numerous other works.

A Literary Voice of India Narayan is probably best known as the creator of Malgudi, a fictional South Indian village that has been called a "zany, eccentric and, at the same time, true to life world." It is the setting for almost all of Narayan's novels and short stories, including "An Astrologer's Day." Of his invented village, Narayan remarked, "Malgudi was an earth-shaking discovery for me, because I had no mind for facts and things like that, which would be necessary in writing about . . . any real place." Narayan's stories about Malgudi are often comic considerations of individuals trying to find peace in a turbulent world.

Critic Judith Freeman writes that Narayan "takes a Western reader into the very heart of an Indian village. . . . The foreignness of the setting, rituals and traditions may seem to us exotic, but the underlying humanity of Narayan's dramas can't fail to strike a familiar chord."



Literature Online

Author Search For more about R. K. Narayan, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL59794u1.

Literature and Reading Preview

Connect to the Short Story

In your opinion, how much of one's future is decided by the choices one makes, by fate, or by coincidence? Freewrite for a few minutes about an event, a coincidence, or a choice you made that changed the course of your life.

Build Background

Astrology is a form of fortune-telling. It originated in ancient Babylonia and has been practiced in many cultures, including those of ancient Rome, Greece, India, and China. Some astrologers claim the ability to foretell an individual's future by drawing and studying a chart called a *horoscope*. A horoscope shows the configuration of the planets and stars at the moment of an individual's birth.

Set Purposes for Reading

Big Idea Matters of Life and Death

As you read "An Astrologer's Day," ask yourself, What is revealed when a man asks about his future?

Literary Element Mood

The **mood** is the overall emotional quality of a literary work. The writer's choice of language, subject matter, setting, diction, and tone all contribute to conveying a mood that helps draw the reader into the experience of the characters.

As you read, ask yourself, How does Narayan create a pervasive mood that helps me relate to a time and a culture different from my own?

Reading Strategy Analyze Cultural Context

When you **analyze cultural context**, you pay attention to details that reveal the setting, dress, speech, mannerisms, and behaviors characteristic of a particular culture at a particular time in history. As you read, ask yourself, What details does Narayan use to show the customs of 1940s India?

Tip: Take Notes As you read, take notes about cultural details that relate to the setting, characters, and main events in the plot.

Learning Objectives

For pages 54–62

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing mood.

Reading: Analyzing cultural context.

Vocabulary

enhance (en hāns') *v.* to make greater, as in beauty or value; p. 56
Wearing too much makeup may detract from your beauty, not enhance it.

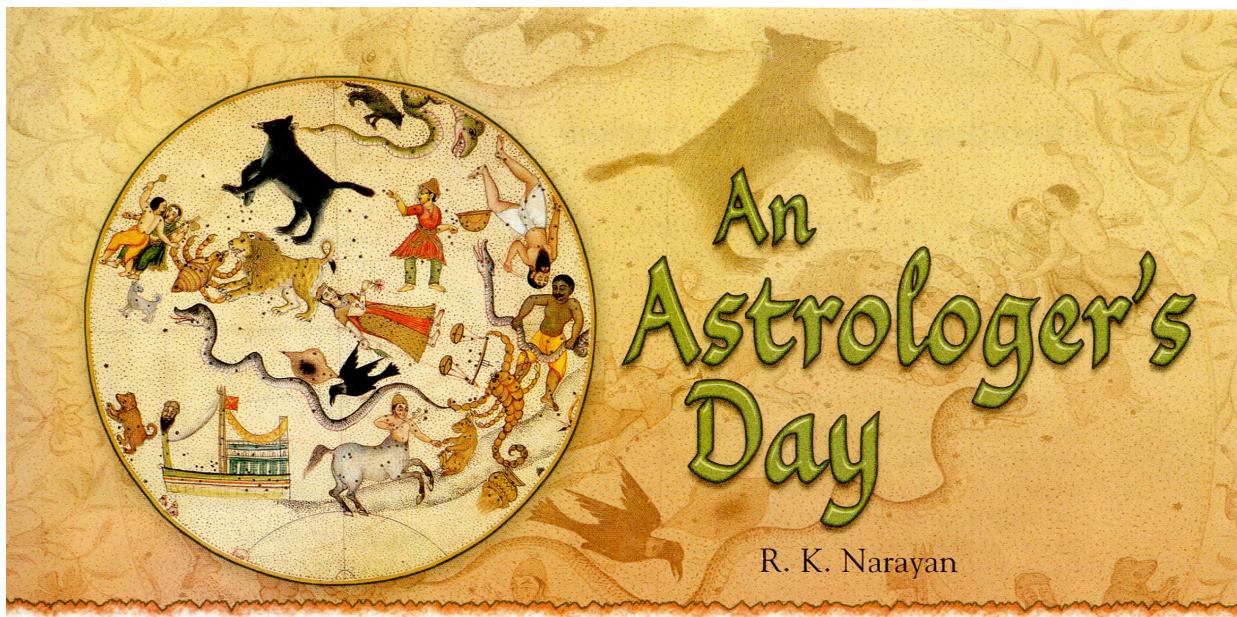
impetuous (im pech'ōō əs) *adj.* rushing headlong into things; rash; p. 57 *It was an impetuous decision, made without any thought.*

paraphernalia (par'ə fər näl'yə) *n.* things used in a particular activity; equipment; p. 58 *The traveling chef carried his own pots, pans, and other cooking paraphernalia.*

piqued (pēkt) *adj.* aroused in anger or resentment; offended; p. 58 *The director was piqued by the play's disastrous reviews.*

incantation (in'kan tā'shən) *n.* words spoken in casting a spell; p. 58 *In Shakespeare's Macbeth, witches utter an eerie incantation.*

Tip: Word Origins You can find a word's origin and history, or etymology, in a dictionary, usually near the beginning or end of an entry. If the origin does not appear there, look at the preceding word. If the two are closely related, your word most likely shares the same origin.



Indian Star Chart, ca. 1840. By permission of the British Library.

Punctually at midday he opened his bag and spread out his professional equipment, which consisted of a dozen cowrie¹ shells, a square piece of cloth with obscure mystic charts on it, a notebook and a bundle of palmyra writing. His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermillion,² and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably

enhanced by their position—placed as they were between the painted forehead and the dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks: even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting. To crown the effect he wound a saffron-colored³ turban around his head. This color scheme never failed. People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park. It was a remarkable place in many ways: a surging crowd was always moving up and down this narrow road morning till night. A variety of trades and occupations was represented all along its

1. A *cowrie* (kour'ē) is a small snail commonly found in warm, shallow waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans.
2. Here, *obscure* means "difficult to understand" and *mystic* means "having hidden or secret meanings." *Palmyra* (pal mi'rā) refers to paper made from the leaves of the palmyra tree. The man's forehead is full of splendor (*resplendent*) in that it is painted with dark ash and a red pigment called *vermilion*.

Encountering the Unexpected *What do customers misunderstand about the astrologer?*

3. *Saffron* is an orange-yellow color.

Analyze Cultural Context How does the astrologer's manner of dress suit his character?

Vocabulary

enhance (en hāns') *v.* to make greater, as in beauty or value

way: medicine-sellers, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians and, above all, an auctioneer of cheap cloth, who created enough din all day to attract the whole town. Next to him in vociferousness⁴ came a vendor of fried groundnuts,⁵ who gave his ware a fancy name each day, calling it Bombay Ice-Cream one day, and on the next Delhi Almond, and on the third Raja's Delicacy, and so on and so forth, and people flocked to him. A considerable portion of this crowd dallied before the astrologer too. The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby. Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights. One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps and one or two, like the astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows. This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life; and he knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice and shrewd guesswork. All the same, it was as much an honest man's labor as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day.

He had left his village without any previous thought or plan. If he had continued

4. *Vociferousness* (vō sif'ər əs nəs) means "noisy outcry."

5. *Groundnuts* are peanuts.

Mood What does this description of lights add to the mood—the feeling—of the story?

there he would have carried on the work of his forefathers—namely, tilling the land, living, marrying and ripening in his cornfield and ancestral home. But that was not to be. He had to leave home without telling anyone, and he could not rest till he left it behind a couple of hundred miles. To a villager it is a great deal, as if an ocean flowed between.

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money and the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pice⁶ per question and never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advices. When he told the person before him, gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or he questioned: "Is there any woman in your family, maybe even a distant relative, who is not well disposed⁷ towards you?" Or he gave an analysis of character: "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an **impetuous** nature and a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior.

The nuts-vendor blew out his flare and rose to go home. This was a signal for the astrologer to bundle up too, since it left him in darkness except for a little shaft of

6. A pice is a coin of India of very small value.

7. In this paragraph, *disposed* is used twice with slightly different meanings. The first time, you might substitute *likely* or *inclined*. The second time, substitute *favorable* for the phrase "well disposed."

Vocabulary

impetuous (im pēch'ōō əs) adj. rushing headlong into things; rash

green light which strayed in from somewhere and touched the ground before him. He picked up his cowrie shells and **paraphernalia** and was putting them back into his bag when the green shaft of light was blotted out; he looked up and saw a man standing before him. He sensed a possible client and said: "You look so careworn. It will do you good to sit down for a while and chat with me." The other grumbled some vague reply. The astrologer pressed his invitation; whereupon the other thrust his palm under his nose, saying: "You call yourself an astrologer?" The astrologer felt challenged and said, tilting the other's palm towards the green shaft of light: "Yours is a nature . . ." "Oh, stop that," the other said. "Tell me something worthwhile. . . ."

Our friend felt **piqued**. "I charge only three pice per question, and what you get ought to be good enough for your money. . . ." At this the other withdrew his arm, took out an anna and flung it out to him, saying, "I have some questions to ask. If I prove you are bluffing, you must return that anna to me with interest."

"If you find my answers satisfactory, will you give me five rupees?"⁸

"No."

"Or will you give me eight annas?"

"All right, provided you give me twice as much if you are wrong," said the stranger. This pact was accepted after a little further argument. The astrologer sent up a prayer to heaven as the other lit

8. The *anna* is a former coin of India that was equal to four pice. The *rupee* is a coin of India (and other countries) equal to sixteen annas.

Vocabulary

paraphernalia (par'ə fər näl'yə) *n.* things used in a particular activity; equipment

piqued (pēkt) *adj.* aroused in anger or resentment; offended

a cheroot.⁹ The astrologer caught a glimpse of his face by the matchlight. There was a pause as cars hooted on the road, *jutka*¹⁰ drivers swore at their horses and the babble of the crowd agitated the semi-darkness of the park. The other sat down, sucking his cheroot, puffing out, sat there ruthlessly. The astrologer felt very uncomfortable. "Here, take your anna back. I am not used to such challenges. It is late for me today. . . ." He made preparations to bundle up. The other held his wrist and said, "You can't get out of it now. You dragged me in while I was passing." The astrologer shivered in his grip; and his voice shook and became faint. "Leave me today. I will speak to you tomorrow." The other thrust his palm in his face and said, "Challenge is challenge. Go on." The astrologer proceeded with his throat drying up. "There is a woman. . . ."

"Stop," said the other. "I don't want all that. Shall I succeed in my present search or not? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge¹¹ all your coins." The astrologer muttered a few **incantations** and replied, "All right. I will speak. But will you give me a rupee if what I say is convincing? Otherwise I will not open my mouth, and you may do what you like." After a good deal of haggling the other agreed. The astrologer said, "You were left for dead. Am I right?"

9. A *cheroot* (shə rōōt') is a cigar cut square at both ends.

10. A *jutka* (jōōt' kə) is a two-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle.

11. Here, *disgorge* means "to give up or hand over."

Mood Why is the din in this scene so unsuited to the atmosphere one would associate with astrological consultation?

Vocabulary

incantation (in'kan tā'shən) *n.* words spoken in casting a spell



Untitled, 20th century. Image zoo.

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"Ah, tell me more."

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

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

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

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

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

"Guru Nayak—"

"You know my name!" the other said, taken aback.¹²

"As I know all other things. Guru Nayak, listen carefully to what I have to say. Your village is two days' journey due north of this town. Take the next train and be gone. I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home." He took out a pinch of sacred ash and held it out to him. "Rub it on your forehead and go home. Never travel southward again, and you will live to be a hundred."

"Why should I leave home again?" the other said reflectively.¹³ "I was only going away now and then to look for him and to choke out his life if I met him." He shook his head regretfully. "He has escaped my hands. I hope at least he died as he deserved." "Yes," said the astrologer. "He

was crushed under a lorry."¹⁴ The other looked gratified to hear it.

The place was deserted by the time the astrologer picked up his articles and put them into his bag. The green shaft was also gone, leaving the place in darkness and silence. The stranger had gone off into the night, after giving the astrologer a handful of coins.

It was nearly midnight when the astrologer reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door and demanded an explanation. He flung the coins at her and said, "Count them. One man gave all that."

"Twelve and a half annas," she said, counting. She was overjoyed. "I can buy some jaggery¹⁵ and coconut tomorrow. The child has been asking for sweets for so many days now. I will prepare some nice stuff for her."

"The swine has cheated me! He promised me a rupee," said the astrologer. She looked up at him. "You look worried. What is wrong?"

"Nothing."

After dinner, sitting on the *pyol*,¹⁶ he told her, "Do you know a great load is gone from me today? I thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all these years. That was the reason why I ran away from home, settled here and married you. He is alive."

She gasped, "You tried to kill!"

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

12. The expression *taken aback* means "suddenly surprised or startled."

13. Here, *reflectively* (ri flek' tiv lē) means "in a way that shows serious and careful consideration."

Encountering the Unexpected Did it surprise you when the astrologer called his client by the correct name? Explain.

14. Here, a *lorry* is a long, flat, horse-drawn wagon.

15. *Jaggery* is unrefined sugar made from palm tree sap.

16. A *pyol* (pī' ôl) is a low bench.

Mood How has the mood of the piece changed here?

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. (a)What was your reaction to the conversation between the astrologer and his wife? (b)Does this new knowledge reinforce or change your opinion of the astrologer? Explain.
2. (a)According to the narrator, how does the astrologer's appearance help him attract customers? (b)In your opinion, how does the astrologer help the customers and satisfy their needs?
3. (a)Describe the astrologer's current life. (b)How does this differ from the life he expected to live?
4. (a)What details does the astrologer give the stranger about his past? (b)Why does he advise the stranger to go home immediately?

Analyze and Evaluate

5. (a)Why is it important that this story takes place in the evening? (b)How would the story have been different if it had taken place earlier in the day?

6. (a)How would you characterize the astrologer's attitude toward the stranger after their encounter? (b)What attitude did the astrologer seem to have about the incident from his past?
7. How do you think the astrologer would respond to these questions: What makes you such a successful astrologer? Why do most people want to know the future?

Connect

8. **Big Idea** **Encountering the Unexpected** Suspense is the feeling of anticipation you may have as you read. In this story, what details contributed to your feelings of suspense and surprise? Explain.
9. **Connect to Today** How might the astrologer's fate have been different if he had committed his crime in today's technologically advanced world instead of in a rural Indian village many years ago?

Literary Element Mood

Mood helps the reader imagine the feeling of being in the scene and experience the events as the characters do. Writers use diction, descriptive language, and sensory details to help create mood.

1. Which descriptive and sensory details help you experience the marketplace in which the astrologer conducts his business?
2. (a)Describe the mood of the scene in which Guru Nayak visits the astrologer in one or two sentences. (b)Which details in this scene did you draw on to write your description?

Review: Flashback

A **flashback** is an interruption in the chronological order of a narrative to describe an event that happened earlier.

Partner Activity Meet with a classmate and imagine that you are the writer and director of a film version of "An Astrologer's Day." Collaborate on a film script for the scene in which the astrologer realizes that Guru Nayak is his former victim but still has to act as his astrologer. Include a flashback sequence in your scene in which the astrologer remembers the attempted murder. Write a description of and dialogue for the flashback sequence and integrate it into your film script.