The Enemy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF V.S. NAIPAUL

Vidiadhar Surajprasad (V. S.) Naipaul was born in the rural town of Chaguanas in Trinidad in 1932. He was descended from Hindus who had migrated from India to Trinidad under the British colonial system of indentured labor. His father, Seepersad Naipaul, was a journalist from humble origins who married into a far wealthier family (providing the inspiration for Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*). At the age of 16, Naipaul was awarded a scholarship that allowed him to travel to England to study English literature at the University of Oxford. During his studies at Oxford, he started to write for the BBC's program *Caribbean Voices*. In 1955, he married an Englishwoman, Patricia Ann Hale. This marriage lasted until 1994, although it was deeply troubled because of Naipaul's abuse and infidelity. Naipaul's first novels, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), as well as his short story collection *Miguel Street* (1959), are focused on life in colonial Trinidad. His first major critically acclaimed work was *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), which focused on the main character's struggle for personal identity and independence, symbolized by his desire to own his own house. The short story collection *In a Free State* (1971), which won the prestigious Booker Prize, is set across multiple countries; *Guerillas* (1975) focuses on a failed uprising on a Caribbean island; and *A Bend in the River* (1979) is a pessimistic depiction of a newly-independent African nation. Naipaul also wrote several other short story collections and novels, as well as many nonfiction books, especially travel books. In 1995, Naipaul's wife Patricia died of cancer, and Naipaul soon broke off his affair with the Anglo-Argentine woman Margaret Murray Gooding, with whom he had been involved since 1972. He then married Nadira Khannum Alvi, a Pakistani journalist; their marriage lasted until his death in 2018.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Enemy" takes place in Trinidad (now Trinidad and Tobago), which has a long history of European colonization, starting with Christopher Columbus's arrival on the island in 1498. During the 16th century, the Spanish colonized Trinidad, and a large portion of its indigenous population was enslaved and sent to work in other Spanish colonies. After the Spanish crown began to encourage European settlement in 1783, Trinidad started to become a major site of the Caribbean plantation economy. This resulted in the establishment of cotton and sugar plantations, an influx of enslaved laborers, and an increase in trade. In 1797, the British seized Trinidad from Spain, and it became an official colony of the British Empire in 1802. Trinidad became an economically significant sugar colony, fueled by slave labor. From 1834–1838, however, slavery was abolished entirely in the British Empire, and the owners of plantations turned to indentured workers from South Asia for cheap, easily exploitable labor. The colonial system of indentured labor would last until 1917. This history accounts for the large minority of Indo-Trinidadians (like the narrator and his family in "The Enemy") in Trinidad and Tobago. Naipaul's early fiction, like "The Enemy," is largely concerned with the lives of Indo-Trinidadians—that is, the descendants of South Asian indentured workers—and sometimes also focus on racial tensions between the two major ethnic groups in Trinidad. Naipaul's later fiction is largely concerned with the fates of newly independent post-colonial states. In these novels and stories, Naipaul is ambivalent decolonization; while he doesn't praise colonialism outright, he offers a deeply pessimistic view of independence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Enemy" was first published as part of Naipaul's 1967 short story collection *A Flag on the Island*. Many of the short stories in this collection, like "The Enemy," are set in Trinidad, although some are also set in London or in unnamed Caribbean countries. "The Enemy" was not originally intended to be read alongside the other stories of *A Flag on the Island*, but rather as part of the earlier short story cycle *Miguel Street*, which was published in 1959. The stories in this collection are closely interlinked, each of them focusing on a different character living on the fictional Miguel Street in Port-of-Spain (Trinidad's capital city). All of the stories in *Miguel Street*. The stories of *Miguel Street*, including "The Enemy" are semi-autobiographical, drawing on Naipaul's own childhood experiences in Trinidad. For this reason, they share many similarities with Naipaul's other semi-autobiographical works, such as *A House for Mr. Biswas*. For example, the episode in which the narrator of "The Enemy" nearly drowns is based on in a drowning that Naipaul witnessed when he was 12 years old. Other Caribbean writers of Naipaul's generation, such as Derek Walcott (most famous for his epic poem *Omeros*) and Samuel Selvon (whose most famous novel was *The Lonely Londoners*) wrote about similar themes as Naipaul, albeit in quite different ways. Samuel Selvon in particular shared many similarities with Naipaul, as he was born to Indian parents in Trinidad, lived in Port-of-Spain, and then lived in London from the 1950s to the 1970s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Enemy

- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1967
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonialism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A plantation and nearby house in Cunupia, Trinidad; then, Port-of-Spain (the capital of Trinidad)
- **Climax:** After an impulsive decision, the narrator is knocked unconscious and breaks his hand. When he wakes up, he learns that his mother has been worried about him and realizes that she truly loves him.
- **Antagonist:** The Narrator's Mother
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

An Unknown Writer. *Miguel Street*, which included "The Enemy," was the first manuscript that Naipaul tried to publish. However, the publisher was concerned that a short story collection by an unknown Trinidadian writer wouldn't sell well, and they encouraged Naipaul to write and publish a novel first. So, he wrote and published two novels, *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, before publishing *Miguel Street* in 1959.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Enemy" is a coming-of-age story about a young Trinidadian boy (who's the story's narrator) and his relationship with his father and mother. His mother hates his father and considers the narrator his father's child, and the narrator thinks of her as his enemy. His father is a driver on a sugar plantation who mistreats the laborers. One day, his father decides to move the family out of the barracks and into a nearby wooden **house**. His mother doesn't want to move, fearing that living in the house will not be safe. Soon after they move in, a man shows up at the house and threatens to wait for the narrator's father, presumably to attack him.

After this incident, the family lives in terror, keeping weapons nearby. They start to hear threatening voices whispering outside their house at night. After getting a dog that they keep outside, they wake up one morning to find him dead, cut to pieces on their front steps. The narrator's mother, unable to keep living in this constant fear, tells her family that she is going to leave and tries to bring the narrator along with her. But his father has promised him a box of crayons if he stays with him, so the narrator decides to stay, causing a rift between him and his mother.

Soon, the narrator's father becomes ill and spends most of his time in bed, and the narrator spends a great deal of time talking with him. His father teaches him about God, shows him tricks to demonstrate the force of gravity, and shows him how to mix two colors together to create a different color. One night, during a severe thunderstorm, his father becomes terrified because he believes the threatening voices will be able to do anything to them in the darkness and noise of the storm. His father dies that night from the fear.

The narrator, who's embarrassed that his father died of fright, goes back to living with his mother, and they move to Port-of-Spain. Here, he sees other father-son relationships, most of which are abusive, and feels grateful that his own father is dead. The relationship between the narrator and his mother, meanwhile, becomes more antagonistic. His mother increasingly criticizes him and beats him. The narrator, in turn, becomes disobedient towards his mother, often engaging in fierce struggles of will with her over seemingly trivial matters. The narrator considers his mother "the enemy," looking forward to escaping from her as soon as he grows up.

One day, a neighbor named Hat is tearing down his old latrine to replace with a new lavatory, and the narrator impulsively rushes out in front of a falling wall and is knocked unconscious. When he wakes up, his hand broken, he hears that his mother has been worried about him and sees the tears in her eyes. For the first time, he realizes that his mother truly loves him. He wishes that he were a Hindu god with two hundred arms, just so all of them could be broken and he could see his mother's tears again.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator is an unnamed young Indo-Trinidadian boy who struggles to assert himself in his relationship with his mother. The narrator is initially closer to his father than his mother, and when his parents split up, he chooses to stay with his father, causing a rift between him and his mother. In fact, he sees his mother as the story's titular "enemy." The narrator emotionally connects with this father while they live together, but when his father dies and he moves back with his mother, he starts to think of himself as a "boy who had no father." He even becomes "grateful" for his father's death because it has, as he sees it, saved him from a potentially dominating relationship. However, the narrator has a troubled relationship with his mother, who beats and insults him, although the narrator also acknowledges that she shows him occasional "glimpses of kindness." At school, the narrator shows some talent for writing, as when he receives a high grade on an essay about his experience of nearly drowning. Meanwhile, he yearns to grow up and escape from his mother and often acts out against her authority. However, at the end of the story, the narrator finally recognizes his mother's love for him when he sees how worried she is after he injures himself. "The Enemy" is a kind of coming-of-age story for the narrator as he struggles to form his own identity in opposition to both his father and his mother. Yet he plays a largely passive role in the story,

seemingly caught between the stronger wills of his two parents. Toward the end of the story, however, the narrator starts to take on a more active role, first through his attempts to assert his will against his mother's, and then in his final epiphany of his mother's love for him.

The Narrator's Mother – "The Enemy" is fundamentally about the relationship between the narrator and his mother. According to the narrator, his mother has always hated his father, and she disapproves of her only son because she sees him as her husband's child, not her own. The mother resists the family's move to the wooden **house** because she knows how dangerous it will be, and although she shows some bravery in facing down a man who comes to threaten the family, she ultimately cannot put up with her husband's apparent indifference towards her and her son's safety. Once her husband becomes more abusive, screaming and throwing things at her, she decides to return to her mother's house. She tries to convince her son to go with her, but he insists on staying with his father, causing a rift between the mother and son. When her son starts living with her again following her husband's death, she starts out trying to rid him of his father's influence over him, but she soon gives up on this, resorting to simply beating her son from time to time. She compares her own son unfavorably to other boys in the neighborhood and berates him for his incompetence, although she also occasionally shows him kindness. Her underlying love for her son comes to the surface at the end of the story, when she cries from worry over her son's injury. Because the reader only ever experiences the mother from her son's point of view, it is difficult to fully understand the mother's feelings and motivations. However, it is clear that she feels wronged by her husband, who has acted abusively towards her, as well as hurt that her only child seems to prefer her husband to her. This may be the cause of her subsequent erratic behavior toward her son, vacillating between strictness, abuse, indifference, kindness, and love. Her son, too young to really understand his mother's feelings, sees her, until the very end of the story, as simply his "enemy," without ever suspecting that it may be himself, rather than his mother, who is truly "misunderstand[ing]" the other person.

The Narrator's Father – The narrator's father is a complicated figure in "The Enemy": he's at once authoritative and abusive yet also tender toward his son and fearful of the very people he oversees. The narrator's father is a driver on a sugar plantation who mistreats the laborers, as if they were enslaved, and he also treats his wife (the narrator's mother) harshly. He insists on moving from the barracks of the plantation to a nearby **house**, where mysterious voices outside (implied to belong to the vengeful laborers he's wronged) threaten the family at night. The narrator's father ignores his wife's pleas to leave the house, apparently caring neither for her nor his son's safety. He eventually becomes so abusive toward his wife, shouting and throwing things at her, that she leaves him. At first, the narrator's father copes with the terror of living in the house by aid of an eclectic spirituality, mixing together Hinduism, Christianity, and his own imagination. As he falls ill, he becomes closer to his son, teaching him about God, gravity, and the mixing of colors. He ultimately succumbs to his fears one night during a massive thunderstorm. Imagining that the laborers he has wronged will be able to do anything to him and his son under the cover of darkness and the noise of the storm, insisting that he can hear their voices even when his son can hear nothing, he dies from what his son assumes to be fear. Whereas the narrator's father begins as an authority figure over his workers and family members, at the end of his life he is portrayed as a weak and pathetic figure, dying of fright at the imagined voices of the people he has wronged. The narrator initially identifies and allies himself with his father and the authority he represents while rejecting his mother. But later, after his father's death, he recognizes his relationship with his father as one of potential domination and is grateful for his death.

Hat – Hat is the narrator and his mother's neighbor in Port-of-Spain. At one point he saves the narrator from drowning, an experience that the narrator writes about in an essay for school. The pivotal ending scene of the story, when the narrator is injured and falls unconscious, occurs at Hat's house, when he is tearing down his old latrine. Hat is a minor character is this story and does not actually appear directly in any of the scenes, but he is a more significant character in many of V. S. Naipaul's other interconnected stories, serving as a mentor figure for the narrator.

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.

FAMILIAL LOVE AND CONFLICT

Fundamentally, "The Enemy" is about the narrator's relationship with his mother. This relationship is characterized by conflict, even hatred, yet also by an underlying love. At the start of the story, the narrator explains that his mother hates his father, and she also resents the narrator for choosing his father over her when his parents separate. She calls him "your father child [...] not mine." The narrator bonds with his father during the short time they live together without the narrator's mother, but after his father's death, the narrator soon "forgets" his father and thinks of himself as a "boy who had no father." He even becomes grateful that his father has died when he and his mother move from the

countryside to Port-of-Spain (Trinidad's capital city), and he discovers that the "normal relationship between father and son" is "nothing more than the relationship between the beater and the beaten." With this, the narrator expresses his painful recognition that family relationships can be characterized by conflict and antagonism just as much as by love.

And indeed, the narrator's relationship with his mother soon becomes a constant struggle between "the beater" (his mother) and "the beaten" (the narrator). The narrator sees his mother as an "enemy" who misunderstands and disapproves of him. She beats him and criticizes him, and in turn the narrator develops a disobedient streak and looks forward to "escaping" from her when he grows up. But at the end of the story, when the narrator gets hurt in an accident, his mother rushes to the scene, crying. For the first time, the narrator discovers that his mother can be "worried and anxious" about him—in other words, he discovers that his mother, the woman he has considered his "enemy," truly loves him. Through this ending, the story suggests that even the most fraught familial relationships often conceal an underlying love, even if neither person realizes that this love exists until loss, or the fear of loss, causes it to come out into the open.

FEAR

Fear is a powerful force in "The Enemy," transforming the characters' relationships with one another—sometimes driving them apart, sometimes drawing them together, sometimes even deciding matters of life and death. The first episode of fear occurs soon after the family moves from the barracks of the sugar plantation to a nearby **house**, when a man comes to the house and threatens them. After this, the family lives in constant terror, keeping weapons nearby. At night, they start hearing voices—most likely the voices of workers that the narrator's father has wronged, trying to lure them out and kill them. However, because the narrator never explains this explicitly, there is an almost supernatural element to the voices, as if they're the voices of ghosts coming to haunt the family. The threat of violence that the voices represent becomes terrifyingly clear when the family wakes up to find that their dog has been killed and cut to pieces on their steps. The constant fear of living in the house eventually drives the narrator's mother to leave, and soon his father's life is engulfed by this fear. One night, during a massive thunderstorm, his father becomes convinced that the voices have returned and will try to murder them that night. The narrator can't hear the voices and tries to assure his father that they will be able to protect themselves with weapons, but his father is so terrified that he eventually dies of fright. Through these various episodes that the family experiences, the story suggests that fear can control people, drive them insane, and even quite literally kill them—even when the threat itself is entirely imagined.

But the final episode of "The Enemy" demonstrates that fear can have a different kind of power, as well. When the narrator wakes up after injuring himself, he learns that his mother has been worried about him, and he sees tears in her eyes. This is a transformative moment in an otherwise troubled relationship. The narrator's mother perhaps needed to feel afraid for her son's safety and life to understand how much she truly loves him, and it is her visible fear for her son's life that leads him to realize that his mother cares. Whereas fear initially drove them apart, now it brings the mother and son together again quite unexpectedly, reminding them both of feelings they were not even fully aware they had.

SHAME AND DISHONOR

At many points in the story, the narrator is motivated by a desire to escape from shame and dishonor. As he grows older, he becomes more attuned to social approval and disapproval. He is aware, for instance, that there is something shameful about his father dying (apparently of fright) during a thunderstorm, reflecting that "it appeared that for the rest of my life I would have to bear the cross of a father who died from fright." Then, after his father's death, the narrator's relationship with his mother is marked by shame: in his view, she sees him as an unintelligent "freak," comparing him unfavorably to other boys in the neighborhood and beating him frequently. His mother's disapproval colors his view of himself, and so he develops a sense of shame about his own perceived incompetence—his inability to peel an orange or tie his own shoes, for instance. He becomes afraid of "dishonoring" himself by taking other people's orders, especially his mother's, so he begins to have "odd fits" where he acts out and disobeys adults. The narrator perhaps feels a need to assert his own independence in order to make up for the shame he feels because of his mother's humiliating treatment of him and the accompanying sense of his own inadequacy. The story thus suggests that while seeking independence from one's parents is a normal aspect of growing up, a child may become more rebellious and stubborn if their parents make them feel ashamed, since the child will then feel the need to distance themselves from shame and dishonor.

COLONIALISM, POWER, AND REVOLT

"The Enemy" is filled with instances of disobedience or revolt against authority figures, both within the narrator's family and within colonial Trinidadian society more broadly. The story takes place in the 1940s in Trinidad, when the country was still a British colony. Throughout the colonial period, Trinidad's economy was fueled by sugar plantations. Although both slavery and indentured servitude had ended by the period when "The Enemy" is set, even "free" labor on these plantations was characterized by low

wages and exploitation. The narrator's father, in terms of social position, theoretically has the most authority of any character in the story: he wields power both in his family and in the plantation system as a driver who physically forces laborers to work faster. And yet the narrator's father is ultimately a powerless and emasculated figure. For one, he's terrified and helpless when people (implied to be the laborers he's tasked with keeping in line) begin harassing the family outside their house at night. He's also unable to keep his wife (the narrator's mother) from leaving him, and eventually, he's literally frightened to death by imagined dangers during a thunderstorm. The father's weak authority perhaps indicates the fragile and illusory nature of his power in a society where he, too, is ultimately a colonized subject.

After the narrator's father's death, the narrator's mother becomes the major authority figure in his life. And as the narrator grows older, he begins to revolt against his mother just as she earlier revolted against her husband by leaving him. The narrator starts having "crazy fits" in which he can't bring himself to obey adults, especially his mother, feeling that he would "dishonor [himself] for life if I took anybody's orders." This urge to avoid "dishonoring" himself through obedience ultimately leads to fierce "struggle[s] between two wills," his own and his mother's, over seemingly trivial matters. But just as the laborers' revolt against his father was seemingly a consequence of his father's brutality toward them, and just as his mother's revolt against his father was a consequence of his father's violence and negligence toward her, so too is the narrator's seemingly inexplicable urge to disobey his mother a predictable response to how she beats and humiliates him. In this way, the story uses the power dynamics in the narrator's family and community to critique the broader context of Great Britain's colonial rule over Trinidad, suggesting that violence only breeds more violence, and that abuses of authority inevitably lead to revolts against that authority.

SYMBOLS

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

THE HOUSE

The wooden house that the narrator and his family move to at the start of "The Enemy" symbolizes the narrator's father's drive for independence and authority, as well as the ultimately doomed nature of that desire. The narrator's mother is afraid of moving to the house, because she knows it will provide less protection to them than the plantation barracks where they currently live, but the narrator's father insists that they move anyway. The move from the barracks to the house is both a literal and a symbolic separation between the narrator's father (the plantation driver) and the plantation laborers who presumably also live in the barracks. The house thus represents the father's willingness to sacrifice his family's safety for the increased independence, social status, and sense of authority that the house provides him.

The narrator's mother's fears are proven right: a man shows up to threaten the narrator's father, the family begins to hear threatening voices at night, and their dog is murdered on their doorstep. It's implied that these events are the plantation workers' attempts to terrorize the narrator's father, as revenge for the way he abuses them on the job. All of this (as well as the narrator's father's abuse) drives the narrator's mother to move out, because the house has become associated with fear and revenge. But the narrator's father chooses to keep living in the house—seemingly because he believes that the house, and the position of authority it represents, will keep him safe—and the narrator stays with him. This ruins the narrator's parents' marriage and creates a rift between the narrator and his mother. In this way, the house represents the narrator's father's continued unwillingness to admit defeat or relinquish control, even at the cost of his family.

But midway through the story, a violent thunderstorm hits. The wind blows open the windows in the house and lets heavy rain in, so thoroughly terrifying the narrator's father that he apparently dies of fright. The house's failure to protect the narrator's father from his own anxieties reflects the fear and helplessness beneath his tough exterior, suggesting that he was just as fragile as the house proved to be. What the father initially valued as a symbol of his own authority becomes, instead, a symbol of his demise.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 1* published in 2018.

The Enemy Quotes

❝ I had always considered this woman, my mother, as the enemy. She was sure to misunderstand anything I did, and the time came when I thought she not only misunderstood me, but quite definitely disapproved of me. I was an only child, but for her I was one too many.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

The first sentence of "The Enemy" clearly indicates that this will be a story about the relationship between the narrator and his mother—and, more broadly, about conflict between family members. The past perfect tense—"I *had* always"—suggests the possibility that something has happened to make the narrator no longer believe that his mother truly is his enemy. However, this remains nothing more than a hint, and the next few sentences lead into an explanation of how it is that the enmity between the narrator and his mother first developed.

The verb tense also establishes the narrator as an older man who is looking back on his childhood. Because the first-person narration situates the reader clearly in the narrator's mind, it also opens the possibility that the narrator may not be fully reliable—that perhaps the mother does not misunderstand or disapprove of the narrator quite so much as he might think. Indeed, the idea of "misunderstanding" raises the question of whether the narrator might be misunderstanding his mother as much as she apparently misunderstands him. In this way, the story hints that conflict between family members is common and perhaps even inevitable in one form or another, but that this conflict is often a result of mutual misunderstanding rather than simply one person tyrannizing another.

> She hated my father, and even after he died she continued to hate him.

She would say, "Go ahead and do what you doing. You is your father child, you hear, not mine."

Related Characters: The Narrator's Mother (speaker), The Narrator's Father, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator reveals that the conflict between himself and his mother is at least partially rooted in another familial conflict: the rift between his mother and his father. In another moment of retrospective narration, the narrator reveals that his father has already died, hinting that the story will primarily be about how the relationship between the narrator and his mother develops after his father's death. He suggests that her disapproval for him is perhaps rooted in the belief that he is his "father's child," not her own—perhaps because she believes that he is more similar to, or more loyal, to his father than to her. This offers the first hint that the source of conflict between the narrator and his mother may be related to her feelings of jealousy over the sense that her son has chosen her husband over her, and perhaps also a sense of resentment at the way that her husband has treated her that she projects onto her son.

> The real split between my mother and me happened not in Miguel Street, but in the country.

My mother had decided to leave. my father, and she wanted to take me to her mother.

I refused to go.

My father was ill, and in bed. Besides, he had promised that if I stayed with him I was to have a whole box of crayons.

I chose the crayons and my father.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother , The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator provides more insight into the source of the antagonism between himself and his mother: he has "chosen" his father over her. The narrator also indicates that something in the relationship between his mother and his father has driven his mother to leave, hinting at the abuse she has experienced. The detail about the "whole box of crayons" hints at the narrator's young age and immaturity at this point. These details again suggest that the narrator has gained perspective and wisdom over time, and that he perhaps didn't fully understand his family's dynamic when he was a young child. It seems likely that while the narrator regarded his mother as his "enemy" during his childhood, he now realizes that his mother actually *did* care for him, and that the abuse she suffered at his father's hands (and the narrator's preference for his father over his mother) is what caused the rift between them. On another note, fact that his father is "ill, and in bed" hints at the potential causes of his death, though it's not yet clear what this illness is.

The narrator also provides the first details of the geographic location, establishing that the first part of the story will take place in "the country" rather than the city. Miguel Street is

the recurring setting at the heart of Naipaul's short story collection of the same name—"The Enemy" was originally written as part of that collection, but left out of the final version and republished later on. The fact that the narrator refers to Miguel Street in this paragraph without further explanation, and without returning to this detail at any later point in the story, creates the sense of a wider fictional universe outside the confines of this particular story.

> We were living at the time in Cunupia, where my father was a driver on the sugar estates. He wasn't a slave-driver, but a driver of free people, but my father used to behave as though the people were slaves. He rode about the estates on a big clumsy brown horse, cracking his whip at the labourers and people said—I really don't believe this—that he used to kick the labourers.
>
> I don't believe it because my father had lived all his life in Cunupia and he knew that you really couldn't push the Cunupia people around. They are not tough people, but they think nothing of killing, and they are prepared to wait years for the chance to kill someone they don't like.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator provides more concrete details about the story's geographic location—Cunupia is a rural town in central Trinidad—as well as his father's social position. The details about how the narrator's father whips and (allegedly) kicks the laborers characterizes him as a potentially brutal person. Even though the father never shows this side of himself to the narrator, it does surface in his treatment of the narrator's mother later in the story.

At the same time, however, it could be argued that the father is not acting in this way from any inherent brutality of his own, but rather because of the nature of the social system he is operating in, and his particular role in it—in other words, the whole job of a "driver" is to force laborers to work as hard as possible, even if this means using physical force. This is a pressure imposed by the economic realities of sugar plantations, rather than necessarily a product of the father's own character. The fact that he treats the workers as "slaves" suggests that the plantation economy at the time the story is set (in the 1940s) isn't so different from how it operated during the time of indentured servitude (which ended in 1917) or, before that, during the time of chattel slavery (abolished in the 1830s).

Regardless of whether the blame lies with the father's personality or the social system more broadly, the narrator hints at the possibility that the laborers may one day seek revenge. He suggests that people in Cunupia "think nothing of killing" and will go to great lengths to get revenge on someone they hold a grudge against, even to the point of murder. This introduces a foreboding mood to the story, leaving the reader wondering whether, and when, the workers will try to seek revenge against his father. This detail also establishes the most plausible explanation of the strange occurrences that plague the family when they move—the threatening man who comes to their house, and the voices they hear at night—even though it is never explicitly stated that these are instances of laborers seeking revenge.

> Everybody agreed on one thing. My mother and I had to leave the country. Port-of-Spain was the safest place. There was too a lot of laughter against my father, and it appeared that for the rest of my life I would have to bear the cross of a father who died from fright. But in a month or so I had forgotten my father, and I had begun to look upon myself as the boy who had no father. It seemed natural.
>
> In fact, when we moved to Port-of-Spain and I saw what the normal relationship between father and son was—it was nothing more than the relationship between the beater and the beaten—when I saw this I was grateful.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Father, The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This narration occurs immediately after the narrator's father dies (apparently from fright) during a thunderstorm. The narrator and his mother are advised to leave Cunupia, presumably to escape from the people who were trying to seek revenge on his father. The narrator is surprisingly untroubled by his father's death, perhaps suggesting that their relationship was not actually very close or loving. His immediate concern is simply the fear of shame—having to "bear the cross" of having people laugh at how his father

died. But even this fear of shame soon wears off, and the narrator is actually relieved that his father is dead. He seems to accept, even to appreciate, his identity as "the boy who had no father"—perhaps because it is easier for him to assert himself as an individual with his father out of the way, just as he will soon try to assert himself against his mother.

The narrator is also grateful for his father's death because of his realization that the typical relationship between father and son is "nothing more than the relationship between the beater and the beaten"—in other words, that this family relationship is one that is necessarily characterized by domination and violence. The narrator's conclusion here, however, is perhaps unreliable—he never recounts the incidents that led him to this conclusion, nor does he explain why he believes it would have applied to his relationship with his father, had he lived. The sweeping generality and apparent unfoundedness of this conclusion may suggest that it is nothing more than a coping mechanism on the part of the narrator, a way of dealing with the loss of his father by convincing himself that it was for the best. On the other hand, it may be that the conclusion is well-founded because the narrator has seen how the father has abused his mother as well as the workers on the plantation, and it is natural to assume that one day this abuse would be directed toward him too. Whether the narrator's conclusion is well-founded or not, it does contribute to the story's overall depiction of family relationships as inherently contentious, a struggle between wills—a dynamic that will shape the narrator's subsequent relationship with his mother.

❝ My mother made a great thing at first about keeping me in my place and knocking out all the nonsense my father had taught me. I don't know why she didn't try harder, but the fact is that she soon lost interest in me, and she let me run about the street, only rushing down to beat me from time to time.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother , The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after the narrator moves back in with his mother following his father's death, she tries to undo her husband's influence on her son but soon gives up on doing so. This connects back to mother's earlier remark that the narrator is "your father child [...] not mine"—in other words, she feels that her son has chosen to follow in her husband's footsteps rather than hers, and therefore her hate for her husband spills over into her relationship with her son. But the fact that she gives up so quickly in her intended task of undoing her husband's influence shows the volatility of her relationship with her son—moving erratically from strictness to indifference to unpredictable abuse to fondness. This dynamic again suggests the complicated nature of family relationships that can veer between love and domination, as each member of the family struggles to assert themselves and their own influence over the others. Yet the narrator's mother's underlying love for him suggests that even volatile family relationships may be built on a foundation of love.

❝ But you mustn't get the impression that I was a saint all the time. I wasn't. I used to have odd fits where I just couldn't take an order from anybody, particularly my mother. I used to feel that I would dishonour myself for life if I took anybody's orders. And life is a funny thing, really. I sometimes got these fits just when my mother was anxious to be nice to me.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211-212

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator admits that as his mother becomes increasingly unpredictable and abusive toward him, and as he grows older, he becomes more and more reluctant to follow her orders—especially, and paradoxically, in the rare moments when she shows him kindness and affection. It may be that the narrator, in the process of growing up, wants to assert himself as his own individual with his own will, capable of defying his mother. It is through these acts of disobedience that he begins to develop his own individual identity.

The narrator's development in this way suggests that familial conflict, and in particular the act of resisting one's own parents, is an important part of growing up and forging one's own path as an individual. For the narrator, this desire for individuality is bound up with a desire to avoid shame and dishonor. There is nothing more shameful for him than submitting to another's will, and for that reason he resists his mother's will even when it is not entirely rational for him to do so.

Slowly the friendliness died away. It had become a struggle between two wills. I was prepared to drown rather than dishonour myself by obeying.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother , The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator is describing a seemingly trivial moment that erupts into bitter conflict between himself and his mother: he tells his mother of the high grade he's received on a school essay, but she doesn't believe him at first. Then, when she realizes he's telling the truth, she asks him to sit next to him on the hammock, and he refuses. There is seemingly no rational reason behind the narrator's refusal to sit next to his mother, besides his unwillingness to give in to easily to his mother's demands. The idea of a "struggle between two wills" characterizes the narrator and his mother's relationship in this latter half of the story, and it hints at what is at stake for both characters: his mother perhaps feels the need to assert her will over her son in order to assure herself that he is truly her son, and not just his father's son. The narrator, meanwhile, feels the need to assert his will against his mother in order to prove his own individuality—and perhaps his masculinity, as well.

The reference to drowning is an echo of the incident that started off the entire conflict: the narrator's school essay about his experience of being saved from drowning. But it also emphasizes the stakes of this battle of wills, in which, if either character gives in, they will "drown," giving up some degree of their individuality. The fact that the narrator is afraid of "dishonouring himself by obeying" shows that he is motivated mainly by a fear of dishonor—and for him, dishonor is linked to obedience, while honor is won through rebelling and asserting oneself as an individual.

At times like these I used to cry, without meaning it, "If my father was alive you wouldn't be behaving like this."

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother , The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator says this to his mother after their confrontation when she beats him for refusing to sit next to her on the hammock. The narrator's remark is ambiguous—he could be implying that if his father were still alive, his mother would be the one getting beaten, not him. Early in the story, when the narrator and his mother were still living with the narrator's father, the narrator's father abused her by shouting and throwing things at her, eventually driving the mother to leave. After the father's death, the mother perhaps abuses her own son as a way of taking out her frustration with her dead husband and the fact that her son has chosen her husband over her.

The narrator's remark might also suggest that, if his father were still alive, his mother would not feel such a need to undo the father's influence over her son and to assert her own influence over him, which is the fundamental cause of her abusiveness toward him. The narrator's remark may be intended simply to hurt the mother (which is implied by the phrase "without meaning it"), but it also establishes the continued role of the father in shaping the actions of both the narrator and his mother, even after his death.

So she remained the enemy. She was someone from whom I was going to escape as soon as I grew big enough. That was, in fact, the main lure of adulthood.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, the narrator views growing up as a process of asserting one's independence from family members. Becoming an adult is an appealing prospect primarily because he believes it means that he will no longer be dominated by others and will instead be able to become an individual in his own right. The narrator sees his mother as an "enemy" because she stands in the way of this process of growing up and becoming an individual, as she is still (as he sees it) trying to mold her son to fit her own will. This desire to become an independent individual, and the familial conflict that it may cause, may be an important part of growing up—yet, at the same time, independence alone is not enough to achieve full maturity and fulfillment. Recognizing one's *inter*dependence with others is just as

crucial—and this is the realization that the narrator will make at the end of the story.

> My mother came and I could see her eyes glassy and wet with tears.

Somebody, I cannot remember who, said, "Boy, you had your mother really worried."

I looked at her tears, and I felt I was going to cry too. I had discovered that she could be worried and anxious for me.

I wished I were a Hindu god at that moment, with two hundred arms, so that all two hundred could be broken, just to enjoy that moment, and to see again my mother's tears.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

This ending scene takes place after the narrator injures himself and falls unconscious, waking up to discover that he has broken his hand. For the narrator, this event results in an epiphany that transforms the way he views his mother. Throughout the story, he had seen her as an "enemy" who misunderstands him, disapproves of him, abuses him, and tries to dominate him. Now, he recognizes at last that she truly loves him. This love only really becomes apparent to the narrator in a situation where she is "worried" and "anxious" about him—in other words, his mother is unable to express her love to her son in ordinary situations and only shows it in situations where she is afraid that she may lose him.

Since the reader has only been shown the narrator's side of the story, and not the mother's, it is unclear whether this ending scene also serves as an epiphany for the mother. One interpretation could be that the mother only just now realizes how much she loves her son, in this moment where she is confronted by the possibility that he might be harmed or even killed. However, another interpretation is that the mother always understood how much she loved her son, and she simply struggled to express it to him. Regardless, it is a transformative moment for the narrator, as he realizes that what he truly wanted all along wasn't to escape from his mother, but rather to be loved by her.

For the narrator, this expression of love is infinitely more precious than even his own comfort or safety—hence his desire to have "two hundred arms," simply so that they could break, and he could prolong this moment of his mother's love and concern for him. This ending image suggests that the narrator cannot yet imagine a truly loving, fulfilling relationship with his mother, where love simply exists unconditionally from moment to moment—instead, he can only envision his mother giving him her love in exceptional moments of danger. The fact that the story ends precisely at this moment leaves it ambiguous as to whether this epiphany has any kind of impact on the lives of the narrator and his mother—whether their relationship improves, or whether the mother simply goes back to her old, abusive ways once the danger has passed. But, at the very least, it seems like it will be impossible for the narrator to go on thinking of his mother as simply his "enemy."

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.

THE ENEMY

The narrator always considered his mother his enemy. He believes that she misunderstands and disapproves of him. His mother always hated his father, even after he died, and she considered him his father's child. The split between the narrator and his mother begins when his mother wants to leave his father, and she wants to bring the narrator with her to live with her mother. But the narrator's father, who's bedridden with an illness, promises him a "whole box of crayons" if he chooses to stay with him. So, the narrator decides to stay rather than leave with his mother.

The narrator's voice and tense in the opening sentences indicate that he is narrating the story retrospectively, looking back on his childhood family relationships from a later date. The narrator's claim that he "had always considered" his mother his enemy suggests that something may have happened to change his opinion of his mother, and that he no longer thinks of her in this way. By stating that his mother "misunderstood" him, the narrator is also implying that the misunderstanding may go both ways—that he might, in fact, have misunderstood his mother just as much as she misunderstood him.

The narrator's father is a driver on a sugar plantation in Cunupia, on Trinidad. He is violent, treating the laborers like they're enslaved (even though they are free), and is rumored to kick the laborers. However, the narrator does not believe these rumors, because it is well-known that the people in Cunupia hold grudges and "think nothing of killing," and he believes his father knows better than to get on their bad side.

Throughout its history as a British colony, Trinidad played a key role in the global sugar trade, creating immense profits for Britain at the expense of exploited workers. After the British Empire abolished slavery in the 1830s, planters in Trinidad turned instead to a system of indentured South Asian labor. Although "The Enemy" is set during the 1940s, after the end of the indentured labor system, it still takes place in a world that has been shaped by colonial history of Trinidad. At this time, it was still a British colony, and plantation workers, even if they were technically free, continued to be harshly treated and exploited. Although the narrator's father is a colonial subject—likely the descendent of South Asian indentured workers, as Naipaul himself was—he nonetheless upholds the colonial hierarchy by harshly punishing the workers on the plantation and using physical force to force them to work faster. Therefore, although the narrator's father does not actually have much power in the colonial system, he nonetheless becomes the target of the workers' revenge—what could be seen as a kind of revolt against the plantation system. The narrator's remark about the tendency of people in Cunupia to hold grudges foreshadows the threats the family will endure as the story progresses.

The narrator's family starts out living in the barracks of the sugar plantation, but then his father insists on moving to a nearby wooden **house**. His mother is afraid and tells him to live in the house by himself, but the narrator's father wins out, and they move.

The narrator never quite explains why his mother is so reluctant to move into the house, but one possible interpretation is that she knows the plantation workers hate her husband, and that they want revenge. While they are living in the barracks, they are safe, because the plantation owners will presumably protect them. But if they live on their own in the house instead, they are more isolated and therefore more vulnerable. The father's insistence on moving to the house, despite his wife's fears, may suggest that the house symbolizes something important to him—perhaps his literal and figurative separation from the plantation workers as an authority figure.

After they move to the **house**, the "trouble really start[s]." One day, a man comes to the house and asks the narrator's mother when her husband is coming home. When she tells him she doesn't know, he responds threateningly that he can wait. The narrator's mother tells him that her sister is coming over soon, so he will not be able to do anything. The narrator, terrified, starts to cry, and when his mother shouts at him to shut up, he goes to another room and walks around saying "Rama! Rama! Sita Rama!" because his father has told him to say this whenever he is in danger.

The narrator never fully explains this man's intentions—perhaps because he is still a small child at the time and doesn't fully understand the implications of the scene. To the reader, it is clear that the man is threatening to hurt, even to kill, the father. One explanation of the man's actions could be that he is a plantation worker whom the narrator's father has mistreated. The narrator's response—to walk in a circle saying "Rama! Rama! Sita Rama!"—demonstrates the father's influence over his son and also shows the father's way of dealing with dangerous situations, which is to retreat to religious faith.

Soon, the narrator's aunt comes over and asks what is wrong, explaining that she felt like something was wrong and had to come and see. The narrator's mother, despite having put up a brave front throughout the scene, now starts to cry. The narrator explains that "all this was only to frighten us, and we were certainly frightened." From this point onward, his father always carries his gun with him, and his mother keeps a cutlass nearby.

It's implied that the man leaves after the narrator's aunt arrives, though the narrator doesn't explain why. One possible explanation is that the man only wants to harm the narrator's father, not his family members. The man's visit shows that the narrator's mother was right to be afraid of moving to the house, and from this point forward the family lives in constant terror.

At night, the narrator and his parents start to hear voices outside. The voices say things such as how they are lost and need lights, or how the narrator's father's sister has died suddenly, or how there has been a fire at the sugar mill. The family lies awake, waiting for the voices to quiet. But when they do fall silent, it is "even more terrible," because the voices are still out there, waiting for them to come outside. In the morning, they hear footsteps walking away from the **house**. Every night they lock themselves up to try to protect themselves from the voices.

Just as the motives of the man who threatens the narrator's mother are never fully explained, the voices that the family hears are left somewhat ambiguous. However, the most likely explanation is that they are the voices of people—workers on the plantation, or those workers' family members—who are trying to lure out the father so that they can harm or kill him. Perhaps one reason why the narrator never gives a definitive explanation is that he is only a small child at this point in the story, and so he does not fully understand the situation himself. The lack of a definite explanation about the voices creates an almost supernatural quality. Regardless, the voices are the clearest embodiment of the continual terror that haunts the family when they move to the house.

At one point, the family gets a dog, Tarzan, who sleeps outside. One morning, after a silent night, they find that he has been killed and cut into pieces on their steps. The narrator's mother starts to beg his father to let them move out of the **house**. But his father refuses, as if he "didn't really care what happened to him or to any of us." His father starts to hang up words of hope around the house, from the Bhagavad Gita or the Bible or his own imagination. He starts to lose his temper at his wife, screaming and throwing things at her. Eventually, she leaves to go live with her mother, while the narrator remains with his father.

The murder of the dog is a terrifying indication that the voices pose a real, and not just an imagined, threat to the family. Although it's possible that the murdered dog was simply intended to frighten the family, it seems more likely that it is a threat of what might be done to the family members themselves. The narrator's father's stubbornness in refusing to move out of the house, even in face of these threats and his wife's pleading, again suggests that the house holds some kind of symbolic value for him, perhaps as an embodiment of his authority and status. And, as a result, he "doesn't really care" what happens to him or his family—he only cares about projecting a powerful, self-assured image. Another interpretation is that he is afraid of showing any weakness or believes that he will be dishonoring himself by admitting he's afraid. Instead of taking practical steps to protect his family, he takes refuge in religion, mixing together Hinduism, Christianity, and his own imagination. His abuse of his wife echoes his mistreatment of the workers (which, perhaps, is the source of all their troubles in the house). The narrator's decision to stay with his father, rather than leaving with his mother, seems to be the major falling-out point between him and his mother—perhaps because she feels that her son has chosen her husband over her, despite his abusiveness and recklessness.

After the narrator's mother leaves, his father falls ill and spends much of his time in bed. The narrator stays by him and talks with him. During their conversations together, the father teaches the narrator three things: the first is that his "real father" is not him, but rather God. The second is that things fall because of the law of gravity—the narrator's father spins a bucket of water to demonstrate this. The third is that you can blend two colors together to form a different color, which he demonstrates by having the narrator close his eyes as his father mixes yellow- and blue-colored pencils to make green.

The narrator's father's weakness and illness seem to be a result of the constant fear that weighs down on him as he lives in the house. The father's "teachings" to his son may be motivated by the knowledge that he will die soon. These scenes are some of the few genuine moments of connection, perhaps even love, that any of the family members in the story share with one another. The first teaching, about God as the narrator's "true father," demonstrates the importance of religion to the father's worldview. But this is combined with an interest in science, as demonstrated by showing the law of gravity, as well as art, as demonstrated by the blending of the colored pencils. For the father, these areas of knowledge seem to all be connected, each of them revealing something wonderous about the world.

The narrator tries to make up tricks to show his father. But when he finally finds a trick he feels certain his father doesn't know (rubbing soap onto the palms of his hands until it disappears), his father dies that very night. There is a heavy thunderstorm, and the father and son try to protect themselves from "bad spirits." The narrator's father is terrified, convinced that "they" are here, and that "they" could do whatever they like to him and his son in the darkness and noise of the storm. He asks his son to repeat the mantra of "Rama! Rama! Sita Rama!"

The narrator's desire to show "tricks" to his father seems to come from a desire to reciprocate his father's teachings—to show his father something new and unexpected about the world, as his father has done for him. The thunderstorm that terrifies the narrator and his father seems to represent the unavoidability of their fears. Their attempts to protect themselves—the narrator's lighting of the oil lamp to keep away "bad spirits," and his father's command to repeat the mantra—seem paltry and insufficient in face of the storm's all-consuming force. The father imagines the voices in the noise of the storm and believes they will now come to kill himself and his son at last, whereas the narrator hears nothing. This suggests that the father is afraid of an entirely imagined threat.

The narrator tries to assure his father that they will be safe, that they have the gun and cutlass to protect themselves, but his father does not seem to hear him and keeps repeating, "It so dark." The thunder gets closer, and the wind blows open some windows, extinguishing the oil lamp and letting heavy rain into their **house**. The narrator feels "lost in the black world" and screams until the storm lets up, forgetting about the soap trick he has come up with.

The weapons that the narrator mentions are inadequate to soothe his father's fear, just like the lamps and the mantra. The father's obsession with the darkness of the thunderstorm suggests that the thunderstorm is a kind of elemental symbol of fear—in addition to posing a practical threat, darkness also represents the unknown, and human beings fear what they don't know or understand.

The narrator explains that his father died of fright. Everyone they know insists that he and his mother must leave the countryside, and that the safest place for them to go is Port-of-Spain. At first, everyone ridicules the narrator's father for having died of fright, and the narrator believes that he will have to deal with the shame of it for the rest of his life. But soon, he forgets about his father and starts to think of himself as "the boy who had no father." Once the narrator and his mother move to Port-of-Spain, he even becomes grateful for having lost his father, realizing that the "normal relationship between father and son" is "nothing more than the relationship between the beater and the beaten."

The narrator's remark that his father died from fright is ambiguous. One interpretation is that his father was already weakened from his illness, and perhaps would have been killed by this illness anyways, and that the stress caused by the thunderstorm was what finally caused his health to fail. Another possible interpretation is that the father's illness was, in fact, some kind of psychosomatic disorder caused by the constant terror of living in the house, surrounded by voices and threats. If this is the case, the description of his father as dying "from fright" seems accurate. Strangely, the narrator seems far more worried about the possible shame of having a father who "died from fright" than upset at the loss of his father. He is even grateful for his father's death, having become convinced that his relationship with his father would have necessarily transformed into one of violence and domination. This is arguably an accurate assessment of the father's character, but it may also be the narrator's way of coping with his father's death—avoiding grief by convincing himself it was all for the best. Whatever the case, the narrator's remark that the relationship between father and son is always one between "beater and beaten" suggests that family relationships are often marked by fierce conflict and struggles of the will.

At first, the narrator's mother tries to "knock out all the nonsense" that the narrator's father taught him, but she soon "[loses] interest" in her son, simply beating him from time to time. The narrator has difficulty learning how to tie his shoes, because he had never worn shoes when they lived in the country, and his mother beats him for it. He feels ashamed of his inability to learn to tie his shoes, but he manages to discover a trick that allows him to get by. He convinces his mother to always buy him a larger size than he needs and never unties the shoes after the shop attendant ties them for him, simply slipping his feet in and out.

The source of the animosity between the narrator and his mother seems to be his mother's belief that he is too influenced by his father, whom she hates. When she gives up on trying to rid her son of his father's influence, she becomes alternately indifferent and abusive toward him. As he grows older, the narrator struggles to assert his own independence and competence, as symbolized by his inability to tie his own shoes. Instead of simply showing him how to tie his laces, though, his mother shames him for it, which arguably confirms the narrator's belief that the relationship between a parent and child is essentially a relationship between "beater and beaten." Additionally, incidents like this perhaps influence the narrator's obsession with avoiding shame and dishonor.

The narrator's mother treats him as if he is a "freak," comparing him to all the other boys she knows who she believes are "better and more intelligent." Yet she still shows "glimpses of kindness" to her son, such as forgiving him when he drops and breaks a glass. He starts to worry about his mother's health, while she, according to him, "never worrie[s]" about his. She treats him with monthly doses of Epsom Salts and frequent visits to the government-run Health Office.

The narrator reveals his mother's contradictory attitude toward him—sometimes shaming him and making him feel inadequate, sometimes showing him kindness and leniency. When the narrator says that his mother never worries about his health, there is a hint that he might not be a completely reliable narrator when it comes to his mother's thoughts and attitude toward him. After all, she treats him with Epsom Salts and visits to the Health Office, which suggests that she does, in fact, care about his health.

The narrator admits that in his relationship with his mother, he isn't a "saint" all the time. He's sometimes overcome by an urge to not take orders from anyone, especially his mother, feeling that to do so would be to "dishonour [him] for life." This urge often seizes him in the very moments when his mother is nicest to him.

The narrator shows self-awareness as he recognizes that the dynamic between himself and his mother is more complicated than just that of persecutor and blameless victim. The narrator and his mother are trying to assert their independence from and dominance over the other, respectively. The narrator associates obedience—especially obedience to his mother—with shame and dishonor, and he therefore tries to rebel against her authority. The fact that he does so when his mother is acting most kindly toward him may also suggest that he is used to his mother treating him abusively and therefore does not know how to respond when she shows him love.

To illustrate this point, the narrator recounts the story of when a man named Hat rescued him from nearly drowning at a place called Docksite. The narrator turns this experience into an essay for school and receives high marks on it from his teacher, who tells him he is a "genius." When the narrator tells his mother the grade he received, she doesn't believe him at first and rebukes him for lying. When she realizes he isn't lying, though, she softens and asks him to sit next to her on the hammock. But he is seized by a "crazy fit," the desire to be disobedient toward his mother, and refuses to sit with her.

This anecdote—a young boy writing an essay about the experience of nearly drowning—is repeated almost exactly in the author, Naipaul's, A House for Mr. Biswas, *with the character of Anand. It is likely inspired by an actual drowning that Naipaul witnessed when he was young. The praise that the narrator receives for this essay provides a hint that he, like Naipaul himself, may one day find his calling in literary pursuits. The mother's tendency to belittle her own son is clearly expressed in her disbelief that he could receive such a high grade. When she realizes she is mistaken, she does not apologize for calling him a liar or praise him for the essay, but rather simply asks him to come sit with her. While the mother may intend to convey her love with this gesture, the narrator is likely hurt by the way she diminished his success and rebels against her for that reason.*

Soon, the trivial disagreement over whether to sit in the hammock or not turns into a "struggle between two wills," in which the narrator would rather "drown" than "dishonour [himself] by obeying." In the end, his mother asks for the narrator's belt and whips him with it. Even so, the narrator still refuses to sit in the hammock. He cries that if his father were still alive, his mother wouldn't act like this.

The narrator's description of this scene as a "struggle between two wills" represents his and his mother's entire relationship—she is trying to assert her authority over him, while he is trying to rid himself of it. The narrator is perhaps trying to prove himself to be independent by refusing to take orders from his mother. But the fact that the narrator is most eager to rebel against his mother when she is acting most kindly toward him may also indicate that he is unprepared or unwilling to recognize her love for him. He only knows how to see her as an "enemy," someone he must struggle against, rather than someone who might love him and whom he might love. His mother likewise seems incapable of expressing her love except by giving commands, and when she is rejected, she reverts to violent abuse.

The narrator continues to think of his mother as his enemy as he grows older, looking forward to adulthood when he will be able to escape from her. He describes the progress that sweeps through Port-of-Spain, fueled by American finance and changes in British colonial policies. The main symbol of this progress for the narrator is the replacement of the old, filthy latrines with new lavatories.

The narrator continues to long for independence from his mother—failing, or refusing, to see how she is not simply his "enemy" but also someone who cares about him. The detail about the latrines is important because it gives context that Trinidad is a colony in flux. In the 1940s, when the story is set, Trinidad was still a British colony, but the British Empire was also weakening as a result of anti-colonial movements. This may be why the British start to take a less obviously exploitative approach toward their colonies, using talk of "progress" to try to forestall challenges to their empire. However, the detail about American finance could indicate that it is, in fact, in the interest of more powerful, capitalist countries to improve the quality of life in Trinidad.

One of the first people to have a new lavatory built is Hat, and many people gather to help demolish his old latrine. The narrator is too small to help demolish it, but he goes to watch. The men try knocking down one of the walls in one big piece. As the wall starts to fall, the narrator goes "mad" for a moment and is seized by an urge to do a "Superman act" by rushing out and trying to keep the wall from falling. The last thing that he remembers is the crowd of onlookers yelling for him to look out.

The narrator's motivation for rushing out and trying to prevent the wall from falling is never fully explained—likely because he himself does not really understand it, as indicated in his remark that he went "mad" for a second. However, one explanation is that, at least subconsciously, he wants to show off his fearlessness as a way of gaining some kind of honor or respect in the onlookers' eyes. Although he is too small to help with the task of demolishing the latrine, he wants to find some other way to prove his bravery and manliness, as suggested by the phrase "Superman act." This may be the same motive that leads the narrator to rebel against his mother's orders, and it might stem from his shame at having a father who "died from fright."

When the narrator goes unconscious after being hit by the falling wall, he has a dream of traveling on a bus surrounded by squawking chickens and old women carrying baskets of fruits and vegetables. The old women start chattering, and he tries to shout at them but finds that he can't open his mouth. Then, he wakes up to water being poured on his face. The onlookers ask how he is feeling, and he insists that he's alright, but soon his whole body aches and he is afraid his hand is broken.

The narrator's dream, in which he is surrounded by chattering old woman but cannot open his own mouth to speak, suggests a sense of powerlessness. It may be a kind of allegory for his relationship with his mother, in which he is always struggling to assert himself but finds himself immobilized. The narrator's injuries, especially his broken hand, also express a sense of powerlessness—his attempt at a "Superman act" has left him more, rather than less, vulnerable.

Just then, the narrator's mother arrives, her eyes wet with tears. Someone tells him that his mother had been very worried. Looking at her tears, the narrator feels like he is going to cry. He realizes for the first time that his mother can be anxious and worried about him. In this moment, he wishes he were a Hindu god with two hundred arms, so that they could all be broken and he could once again enjoy the sight of his mother's tears for him.

This moment marks an epiphany in the narrator's understanding of his relationship with his mother. Throughout the story, he considered his mother an "enemy," unable or unwilling to see the love that she has for him. This is not simply the narrator's fault—it's also a product of his mother's inability to express her love to her son. It is only when she is afraid for her son's safety that the mother, even inadvertently, fully shows her love for her son. This suggests that even contentious family relationships are often underpinned by deep love. The role that fear plays in this ending, bringing the mother and son together at last, echoes the earlier role that fear played in tearing them apart—when the mother, unable to cope with the terror of living in the house, left her son, sparking the initial split between them. The final image—of the narrator wishing to be a Hindu god with broken arms, enjoying his mother's tears—marks a sudden shift in his earlier desire to be a "Superman," to be independent of his mother and rebel against her wishes. Instead, he wants to be loved by her, and it is this willingness to be vulnerable—not a desire to be wholly independent—that provides the most fertile ground for love.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Bennett, Emmaline. "*The Enemy.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2022. Web. 7 Jan 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bennett, Emmaline. "*The Enemy.*" LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2022. Retrieved January 7, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-enemy-naipaul.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Enemy* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Naipaul, V.S.. The Enemy. Cambridge University Press. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Naipaul, V.S.. The Enemy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018.