The Postmaster

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Rabindranath Tagore, born in Calcutta, British India, in 1861, was a renowned Bengali writer and a stalwart of the Bengal renaissance, a period in which Bengal art and culture flourished during the reign of the British Indian Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Born into a wealthy, educated family active in the Bengal literary scene, Tagore is best known for his 1910 collection of poems entitled *Gitanjali* (meaning "Song offering"), for which he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. Tagore was educated both in India and England—in Calcutta, East Sussex, and at University College London—and was seen by many in the literary modernist movement as an artist capable of bridging the gap between British and Bengal literary traditions. Yet Tagore (often called "the Bard," or the Shakespeare, of Bengal) was also openly critical of the British Raj, or British colonial rule in India. Though he developed relationships with the British writers H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and W. B. Yeats (who helped to publish *Gitanjali* and wrote an introduction to the text), Tagore firmly opposed British imperialism, and he declined the British government's offer of Knighthood in 1919 after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which British troops in India fired on peaceful protesters. Tagore is celebrated today for his insightful lyrical poetry, as well as for his prolific work in other genres: essays, short stories, plays, lectures, drawings, and paintings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tagore wrote "The Postmaster" during the rule of the British Crown in India, known as the Raj (1858–1947). Britain's system of imperialism did not extend to the entire subcontinent, portions of which continued to self-govern, but the government's influence in Indian life created chaos, segregation, and violent rebellion. White Britons—colonial administrators—lived alongside their marginalized subjects, and famine, high taxation, and massive debts crippled the Indian economy. "The Postmaster" involves an Indian man who works for the British government as a postmaster, and it is strongly implied that the poverty-stricken Bengal town in which he is stationed has been affected by imperialist policy. Years after Tagore wrote the "The Postmaster," the Raj began to unravel. Beginning in the 1940s, nationalist resistance spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi and severe economic challenges contributed to the gradual defeat of British rule.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tagore completed fifty-nine stories during the 1890s, when he wrote "The Postmaster." Many of these were published in popular Bengal periodicals and also involved issues of class and power, including "Little Master's Return" (1891), about a lower-class Bengali who cares for his wealthy master's child. Additionally, Tagore's 1912 play *The Post Office* also features a postmaster—albeit a fantasized one, envisioned by a dying child and symbolizing empire. In addition to Tagore, Troilokynath Mukhopadhya, Rabindranath Thakur, Akshoy Kumar Sen, Nagendra Nath, Sachin Majumdar, and the literary magazine *Bharati* (edited by Tagore's older sister) contributed to the development of the Bengal short story in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the end of the nineteenth century, Swarna Kumari Devi, a woman writer, published the short story "Birenda Singhs Ratnholar" (Birenda Singh finds wealth), considered a pioneering work in this period of Bengal literature.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Postmaster
- **When Written:** 1891
- **Where Written:** East Bengal
- **When Published:** 1891
- **Literary Period:** Literary realism/modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Ulapur, Bengal, British India
- **Climax:** The postmaster decides to leave Ulapur and Ratan because of his illness.
- **Antagonist:** There is no clear antagonist in the story, though Ulapur might be considered an antagonizing force to the narrator, who experiences illness and discomfort during his time there
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Movie adaptation. "Postmaster," a 2016 Bengali movie, is based on "The Postmaster," with a few significant changes. In this adaptation, Ratan and the postmaster marry secretly, defying the wishes of the postmaster's conservative father.

Writing from real life. Tagore wrote "The Postmaster" while working as a landlord in Sajadpur, Bengal, where he managed his family's estates. In Sajadpur, Tagore was acquainted with a local postmaster in the area, though it is not entirely clear whether the real postmaster's experiences influenced Tagore's story. Tagore also lived above a post office, which took up the first floor of his family home.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Postmaster" is set in the "humble village" of Ulapur, Bengal, during the nineteenth century and the rule of the British Raj. The British owner of an indigo dye factory in Ulapur has convinced the imperial government to open a post office in the village, and a man from Calcutta is contracted to become the postmaster. He moves to Ulapur and works in a hut that serves as a rudimentary post office, but he finds that he is unable to fit in with the other men in the town, who are less educated than him and have little time to socialize because of their work at the factory. The postmaster, though, has not much work to complete, and he spends his time attempting to write **poems** about his natural surroundings.

Despite his small salary, the postmaster asks an orphaned village girl named Ratan to complete housework for him, for which she receives some of his food. Ratan is twelve or thirteen, impoverished, and unlikely to get married, likely because she lacks a dowry. Nonetheless, the postmaster's loneliness leads him to strike up a conversation with Ratan, even though her class status is distinct from his. The two recount stories from their childhood, and they become close, talking late into the night. Ratan begins to think of the postmaster's family as her own, but the postmaster continues to long for a "close companion" to abet his loneliness—seeing Ratan as a mere stand-in for the romantic partner he desires.

The postmaster decides to teach Ratan to read, and she learns quickly from him, eager to become literate. However, the continual presence of heavy **rainwaters** in Ulapur causes the postmaster to become ill, and though Ratan nurses him back to health, "soothing his illness and loneliness with feminine tenderness," he decides that he has to leave his post in the village. After he is denied a transfer to another village, he quits his job altogether. The postmaster explains to Ratan that he is departing Ulapur, devastating her.

Desperate, Ratan asks the postmaster to take her home with him, and the postmaster replies with disbelief: "How could I do that!" The postmaster assures Ratan that his replacement will look after her as he has, but Ratan finds no comfort in his words, declaring that she doesn't want to stay in Ulapur without him. The postmaster then tries to give Ratan a sum of money—his left-over salary—but she refuses the payment, fleeing.

The postmaster travels by boat to Calcutta and recalls Ratan's "grief-stricken face," which speaks a "great inarticulate universal sorrow." He realizes that he cannot go back to her, and he ponders the "many separations" and "many deaths" that pervade life. Ratan, left behind in Ulapur, nurses a "faint hope" that the postmaster might return, but Tagore's narrator reflects that humans "cling with both arms to false hope," even in the most dire of situations—suggesting that Ratan's "hope" is utterly futile and ultimately cannot sustain her in the face of tragedy and loss.

CHARACTERS

The Postmaster – The postmaster (known only by his job title, never by his actual name) is a young Indian man from Calcutta employed as a postmaster in Ulapur, a rural Bengal village. The postmaster comes to Ulapur after the British owner of an indigo dye factory in Ulapur asks the government to install a post office there. This is an institution that will modernize Ulapur, providing the isolated village with a means of contact with the outside world. Because the postmaster is from Calcutta, a large city, he feels out of place in rural Ulapur, and he is a "bad mixer": he does not know how to interact with the other men in Ulapur (indigo factory workers who are poorly educated, unlike the postmaster, and too busy with their own work to spend time with him). The postmaster has "little work to do" and earns a "meager" salary. In his free time, he tries to write **poetry**, though he feels somewhat disillusioned with the themes of his own poems. He writes about the transcendent beauty of nature in Ulapur, yet he would prefer to be in urban Calcutta, with its impressive "paved roads" and "high rises." Out of boredom and loneliness, the postmaster develops a relationship with Ratan, an orphan who helps him with housework, and he begins to share stories about his life with her. He also begins to teach her how to read. However, the unending monsoons in Ulapur depress the postmaster and cause him to become ill. He quits his job and leaves Ratan behind in Ulapur, offering her a significant sum of money out of guilt—which she refuses. At the end of the narrative, the postmaster, leaving Ulapur by boat, reflects "philosophically" on his situation, comforting himself by thinking that there would be "no point" in returning to Ratan, since life is fleeting, always filled with death and separation. Though the postmaster does show kindness to Ratan, his own loneliness and sense of alienation and purposelessness lead him to take advantage of the orphan girl's own loneliness and isolation. Ultimately, the postmaster's urban, educated background renders him incapable of understanding life—and other people—in Ulapur, making his return to Calcutta inevitable.

Ratan – Ratan is a "twelve or thirteen" year old "orphaned village girl" who helps the postmaster with housework in return for a portion of his meals. Tagore's anonymous narrator notes that it is "unlikely" that she will get married, suggesting that her future is bleak: she is lower-class, lacks a family, and cannot marry out of her poverty or find employment outside of menial household work. At first reluctant to interact with the postmaster, Ratan gradually begins to enjoy her conversations with her "master," in which she recounts her own family background and begins to form "affectionate imaginary pictures" of the postmaster's own family life. Ratan also learns

quickly from the postmaster's lessons in reading and the alphabet. Eventually, Ratan comes to think of the postmaster as a father or husband, and she becomes dependent on his generosity and his conversations with her. She nurses him back to health after his sickness, "staying awake at his bedside all night long." Finally, after the postmaster has recovered and decides to leave Ulapur, Ratan asks him to take her "home" with him—essentially, to adopt or marry her. The postmaster's incredulous rejection of this proposal horrifies and embarrasses Ratan. After his departure, she wanders "near the post office, weeping copiously." Destitute, lonely, and still uneducated, Ratan cannot leave the confines of Ulapur, though she wishes desperately to. She has neither the freedom nor the philosophy of the postmaster, who can comfort himself in his grief with the knowledge that death and separation are an inescapable part of life. Ratan, though, has no such knowledge, and thus, no such comfort.

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.

GENDER, CLASS, AND INEQUALITY

Rabindranath Tagore's "The Postmaster" explores the fraught relationship between a postmaster stationed in the fictional Bengal village of Ulapur, and a servant girl, Ratan, who assists him with household work. Ratan is an orphan and of a lower class than the postmaster, who—though not wealthy—holds significant power over Ratan and benefits from liberty she lacks. The postmaster could provide Ratan with the education and financial support she needs to flee her lower-class life, but he deliberately does not. By having the postmaster leave Ratan at the story's conclusion, Tagore affirms what has been implicit from the beginning: in colonial India, educated men have freedom and mobility, while poor, uneducated women do not. Both gender and class oppress Ratan, dooming her to continued poverty and marginalization.

The impassable divide between the postmaster and Ratan is immediately apparent in the story. Though not technically the postmaster's servant, Ratan is expected to work for him, completing menial tasks (lighting his fire and his pipe, cooking, cleaning) while receiving no compensation apart from a portion of the meals she cooks. As a lower-class woman, Ratan is subservient, expected to provide domestic labor even for men she is not married or related to: the postmaster becomes Ratan's "master." The postmaster regards Ratan as a "simple little girl," suggesting that although the two share meals and discuss memories of their families together, they are intrinsically separated by both gender and class. One of the postmaster's first thoughts after meeting Ratan is that she likely will not ever marry. This underscores the precariousness of her situation: as a poor orphan, she has no one to care for her now, and if she can't find a husband, she will have no one to care for her in the future. The possibility of a lower-class woman finding opportunities on her own is inconceivable in this world—which, again, highlights the vast difference in their statuses and suggests that the postmaster is Ratan's potential savior.

Indeed, however menial the work, it momentarily appears as if Ratan's proximity to the postmaster will provide her with opportunities to better her life. Ratan becomes not only a servant, but also plays the role of wife and mother to the postmaster, who falls ill and craves "the presence of loving womanhood" and "tender nursing" in his sickness. Ratan "steps into the post of mother" as she nurses the postmaster back to health. Her own education is postponed, and she is obliged to provide for the postmaster, who has become her lifeline to the possibility of life beyond Bengal. Without the postmaster, Ratan has neither companionship, nor a steady source of meals, nor a teacher who might help her to improve her own dire situation and find employment outside of the domestic sphere. She begins to feel affection for her master, even thinking of his family as her own—reflecting her clear desire to assimilate herself into his world.

Ultimately, however, Ratan's emotional and physical labor for the postmaster is futile, since according to the class and gender rules that society dictates (which the postmaster chooses to follow), he cannot marry her or continue to provide education and support for her. The postmaster does attempt to reward Ratan for her work by teaching her to read, but even this can be read as an expression of his own loneliness rather than an altruistic act. In Bengal, he has "nothing to do," and in the "deep, silent mid-day interval of his work," he longs for human connection, which he finds by teaching Ratan the alphabet. This is a project that helps the postmaster to feel as if he is making a difference in a young girl's life, but it does not require him to commit himself to her in any meaningful way.

This lack of commitment is clearest when the postmaster responds to Ratan's proposal that he take her to his home—and, by implication, become her husband—with laughing ridicule ("What an idea!"), suggesting that their class statuses are too distinct to be reconciled in marriage. The postmaster's declaration that he is going away destroys Ratan, who regards his rejection not only as an act of supreme cruelty, but also as a resounding reminder that she cannot leave the confines of her village. "I don't want to stay on here," Ratan says to the postmaster, weeping: though the postmaster easily and freely decides to leave the town where he has been stationed, departing by boat, Ratan cannot leave the village without him,

since she is constrained by her limited education and financial means. Additionally, codes of honor prohibit her from taking the postmaster's gift of money ("the whole of his month's salary"). As a lower-class woman, Ratan must present herself as humble, grateful, and inferior—a posture that entails refusing gifts. Thus, she is forced to sacrifice a financial opportunity that may have helped her to leave her village and build a better life. This subtly reinforces how societal norms maintain class hierarchy. Further, Tagore notes that "Ratan had no philosophy." That is, she has no body of knowledge on which to draw to ease her suffering, while the postmaster, owing to his education in urban, upper-class Calcutta, has philosophy and spirituality to "console himself with" as he leaves Ulapur on "the swollen flood-**waters**" of the river. By the story's end, Ratan is left illiterate, filled with grief, and utterly disenfranchised, sustained only by the "false hope" that the postmaster might return and bear her away from her oppressive rural life.

Though "The Postmaster" initially seems to be a simple, parable-like story imbued with lyricism and reflection on the natural world, the crux of the narrative lies in the irresoluble differences between its main characters. Because of their gender and class statuses, Ratan and the postmaster are destined for entirely different lives. Ratan is subservient to patriarchy and ultimately marginalized, deprived of education and financial support, while the postmaster's educated background and financial means allow him to move freely out of Bengal and seek a better life in Calcutta. Tagore suggests that, though educated men and lower-class women may find common ground—as Ratan and the postmaster do when they share memories and stories about their families—they do not have the same opportunities in life.

MELANCHOLY AND THE SUBLIME NATURAL WORLD

Tagore's story derives much of its emotional depth from lush, elaborate depictions of the natural world, which becomes a source of both melancholy and artistic inspiration for the postmaster (who, like Tagore himself, writes **poetry**). The rural Bengal landscape, often soaked with **rain**, seems to symbolize the postmaster's own sense of confinement in the village. Yet the landscape is equally instilled with intense emotion and a sense of the sublime. While the postmaster seems moved by the natural world, nature also drives him out: the floods that persist in Ulapur prompt his illness, which ultimately spurs him to leave the village. Tagore seems to be suggesting that the powerful natural world is capable of influencing those who come into contact with it—for better or for worse.

At first, the postmaster finds Ulapur radiant. In his poetry, he reflects on "the leaves trembling in the trees" and "the clouds in the sky," attempting to express the "bliss" to be experienced by observing nature. Yet he also feels that he would "come alive again" if "a genie out of an Arab table" would "come and cut down all the leafy trees overnight," make "a road," and block "out the sky with rows of tall buildings"—that is, if a "genie" were to replace Ulapur's natural scenery with the fittings of urban life. In other words, to the postmaster, the natural world is only attractive to an extent. It is also jarringly unfamiliar, since he is used to Calcutta, a city populated by "tall buildings" and "roads." Thus, the postmaster's first impression of Ulapur is split; he is both captivated by its powerful beauty and profoundly disturbed by its rural nature.

Furthermore, the postmaster begins to realize that aspects of Ulapur's landscape are imbued with intense melancholy. On one lonely afternoon, he observes that "Earth's breath," "hot with fatigue," brushes against his skin, while a "persistent bird" cries out "monotonously," "making repeated and pathetic appeals at Nature's midday durbar." These pessimistic visions reflect the postmaster's own pessimistic outlook on humanity and love, made all the more extreme by his loneliness in the village. He observes these natural visions and begins to feel that the bird's "monotonous cry" is echoing his own longing for a "human object for the heart's most intimate affections"—a desire he feels he may never be able to fulfill, given his own isolation. The natural world is not only unfamiliar to the postmaster, but also representative of his solitude, misery, and confinement in Ulapur, where he is without family, friendship, or the material comforts of Calcutta.

Prompted by the passionate feelings of melancholy he experiences while observing nature, the postmaster turns to Ratan, who in many ways becomes the "human object" and "close companion" he desires as they share meals and conversation. The postmaster is able to express himself to Ratan, working through his loneliness by sharing stories of his childhood and providing her with a skill—reading—that is familiar to him from his upbringing in Calcutta. Despite the growing intimacy between Ratan and the postmaster, though, Ulapur's unending, torrential monsoons become too much for the postmaster to bear. Tagore's narrator notes that the postmaster feels "in need of comfort, ill and miserable as he was, in this isolated place, the rain pouring down," and although Ratan provides comfort, the postmaster ultimately decides that the "unhealthiness" of Ulapur—its extreme weather—constitutes grounds for a transfer. Even though the postmaster has experienced closeness with another human, the influence of the natural world overpowers this intimacy and creates further despair for him.

By the end of the story, all traces of the "bliss" the postmaster previously felt while observing nature (and transforming it into poetry) have disappeared, replaced by the "swollen," "fiercely" flowing river that bears the postmaster, aboard a boat, away from Ulapur. In the end, nature (in the form of the river) is cruel, relentless, and powerful. Though the postmaster wishes briefly to return to Ulapur and Ratan, he ultimately allows himself to

be transported away on the river's current. The natural world is too intense for the postmaster to resist, despite moments of unity, intimacy, and emotional expression with Ratan: nature is both beautiful and melancholic, and it rivals the human world in strength.

URBAN AND RURAL LIFE

By returning to the city of Calcutta at the end of the story, the postmaster rejects rural life and affirms the superiority of urbanity. His dissatisfaction with his surroundings and the people with whom he interacts demonstrates an implicit, irreconcilable division between city and country, or urban and remote village life. Written at a time when India, under Britain's colonial command, was moving tentatively toward modernization, "The Postmaster" seems to function as an appeal for social change. Tagore frames rural life as hopeless, degenerate, and isolated, and strongly implies that lower-class Indians like Ratan have been left to their own devices by upper-class, educated elites like the postmaster, who cannot bear to stay and work in country settings. Ultimately, Tagore seems to be suggesting that the gulf between urban and rural places deeply fragments Indian life, hindering attempts at unity and reconciliation for Indian people.

From the beginning of the story, the postmaster acts dismissively toward Ulapur's people, who are not "suitable company for an educated man" like himself. His "Calcutta background" makes him "a bad mixer," uncomfortable around the indigo factory workers whom he encounters in Ulapur, since he cannot relate to their humble, rural backgrounds. Though the postmaster himself must experience a more humble life in Ulapur, where he earns a "meager" salary and has to cook for himself (suggesting that he may have had servants in Calcutta), he nonetheless continues to feel distanced from the factory workers. Even Ratan, with whom he shares stories of his family life—stories he "would never have dreamt of divulging to the indigo employees"—is defined by her illiteracy and pitiable status to the postmaster. To him, she is an "illiterate young girl," utterly "destitute," and though she is as miserable and isolated in Ulapur as her "master," he regards her with condescension. Even before they become acquainted, he believes that her prospects of getting married look "faint," given her status as an orphan.

Thus, the postmaster views the inhabitants of rural Ulapur as inherently inadequate, and he continues to juxtapose his surroundings with those of urban Calcutta. The postmaster dreams of seeing the "leafy trees" in Ulapur razed and replaced with modern trappings, "tall buildings" and "roads," and he is reluctant to give up his Calcutta habits—such as bathing with "water brought in a bucket"—despite being embedded in an entirely different world. In Ulapur, he works in a hut in a jungle, as opposed to in a "tall building," and though his work in the post office should help to connect Ulapur to the outside world, he has "very little work to do," suggesting that as a small, country village, Ulapur is isolated and backwards, almost completely cut off from other, more modern parts of India.

Initially, it seems as if Ratan and the postmaster's intimate, developing relationship might help to bridge the gap between their rural and urban worlds. By learning about her family background and her life in Ulapur, the postmaster might be able to look beyond their differences and discover their fundamental similarities. Yet by cruelly rejecting Ratan at the end of the story—laughing at the "impossible" idea that they might marry or live together after he leaves Ulapur—the postmaster demonstrates the extent to which the distinction between the urban and rural is fixed. Even though the postmaster's application for a job transfer is rejected, meaning that he is without a job once he leaves Ulapur, his desperation to return to Calcutta (and urban, upper-class life) overpowers both his pragmatism and his generosity. He thinks briefly of returning to Ratan as he boards a boat to leave Ulapur, but ultimately regards their separation as one of the "many separations" one experiences in life—ignoring the notion that they might have been able to discover friendship and unity in Ulapur, despite its status as a rural, remote village. Ratan, who longed for connection with the postmaster, is left desolate and inconsolable; her life in Ulapur continues to be characterized by suffering, while the postmaster seeks relief from his suffering in Calcutta. Thus, Tagore creates a fractured image of India by suggesting that to upper-class, educated elites like the postmaster, urbanity is preferable to rural life, and that the divisions between these two disparate worlds cannot be overcome or reconciled.

SYMBOLS

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

WATER

Water—in the form of rain, river water, tears, and more—pervades Ulapur, the rural village depicted in Tagore's story. In the second paragraph of the story, Tagore reveals that the postmaster, a recent transplant, is "a fish out of water" in Ulapur and is greatly affected by both the rain-washed landscape of the village and the unending monsoons during the month of Sraban, when he arrives. Rain seems to represent both renewal and confinement for the postmaster. As a "fish out of water," he yearns to return to water and thus observes its presence in the natural world with awe and appreciation. Ulapur's "rain-washed leaves quivering" and the "layers of sun-whitened, broken-up clouds left over from the rain" inspire the postmaster, a would-be **poet**, who desires to

describe these natural phenomena in poetry and thus discover a renewed sense of spiritual harmony in the village, where he has previously felt lonely and isolated. At the same time, however, the "continuous" rain causes "ditches, pits, and channels" in the village to overflow, and it becomes impossible to travel around on foot. The postmaster becomes "ill and miserable … in this isolated place, the rain pouring down," unable to move freely through the town and overwhelmed by the destructive floods. Water ultimately becomes a source of emotional distress instead of inspiration for the postmaster, and it contributes to the sense of confinement and isolation he experiences in the village.

At the end of the story, however, water becomes a symbol of both confinement *and* renewal, resolving tension between these two conflicting emotions. When the postmaster sets sail from Ulapur, the "swollen flood-waters of the river … heave like the Earth's brimming tears," mirroring Ratan's own tears and emotional distress at the postmaster's departure. Yet by "heaving" the boat away, the flood-waters are transporting the postmaster toward new horizons and a happier, less confining life outside of Ulapur. Thus, in "The Postmaster," water is a natural object that represents persistent conflict between hope and renewal, misery and confinement.

POETRY

Poetry in "The Postmaster" symbolizes both the necessity and the difficulty of understanding and articulating human emotion. Like the postmaster, Rabindranath Tagore was a poet—albeit an accomplished one, whereas the postmaster struggles to write poems more than "occasionally." Written in lyrical, romantic prose, "The Postmaster" is itself imbued with a sense of poetic style and rhythm, and the postmaster's poetic musings on nature and loneliness—coupled with his own attempts at poems that express "a romantic sentiment of happiness"—contribute to the sense that in Tagore's view, lyricism and poetry are tools suited to encapsulating the intense emotions underpinning human relationships and identities. However, at the end of the story, it is "philosophy," poetry's opposite, that provides the postmaster with a degree of comfort and relief as he ponders his departure from Ulapur and the "melancholic face" of Ratan, the "ordinary village girl" he has left behind. Thus, poetry is shown to be both incredibly vital to emotional expression and ultimately ineffectual; poetry can only articulate emotion, not explain or justify it. The postmaster's philosophy, though, clarifies that "in life there are many separations, many deaths," providing order to episodes of grief and loss.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Selected Short Stories* published in 1991.

The Postmaster Quotes

The postmaster was a Calcutta boy—he was a fish out of water in a village like this. His office was in a dark thatched hut; there was a pond next to it, scummed over with weeds, and jungle all around. The indigo agents and employees had hardly any spare time, and were not suitable company for an educated man. Or rather, his Calcutta background made him a bad mixer—in an unfamiliar place he was either arrogant or ill-at-ease. So there was not much contact between him and the residents in the area.

Related Characters: The Postmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Tagore quickly establishes why the postmaster is isolated in Ulapur: his upper-class, educated background sets him apart from the laborers in the village. He is unable to interact easily with them, since he considers himself superior to the indigo agents, and his surroundings (a "dark thatched hut" in the jungle) are jarringly rural and unfamiliar. It is clear that the postmaster feels out of place in rural Ulapur and cannot overcome his feeling of estrangement from his environment by connecting with other individuals.

At the beginning of the story, the postmaster is a "fish out of water"; by the end of the story, he has returned to "water," by embarking on a boat journey back to Calcutta. Beyond relating certain class realities that will shape the characters' experiences through the story, Tagore further suggests a deep fragmentation between urban and rural life, strongly implying that individuals thrust into new settings cannot always put aside their background and previous experiences to assimilate into a different world.

Sometimes he tried to write poems. The bliss of spending one's life watching the leaves trembling in the trees or the clouds in the sky—that was what the poems expressed. God knew, however, that if a genie out of an Arab tale had come and cut down all the leafy trees overnight, made a road, and blocked out the sky with rows of tall buildings, this half-dead, well-bred young man would have come alive again.

Related Characters: The Postmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Because he has little work in Ulapur, the postmaster spends some of his free time writing poems. He attempts to convey the transcendent beauty of his natural surroundings through poetry, but he finds it difficult to appreciate these surroundings since he is thinking mainly of the urban life he left behind in Calcutta—a city with "tall buildings" and "roads," features that he longs for in the midst of his bucolic isolation. Here, Tagore again affirms a division between urban and rural life but also suggests the power of poetry as a force that can inspire "bliss" and tranquil reflection, even in the most hardened of city-dwellers (like the postmaster).

The postmaster would say abruptly, "So, Ratan, do you remember your mother?" She had lots to tell him: some things she remembered, others she did not. Her father loved her more than her mother did—she remembered him a little. He used to come home in the evening after working hard all day, and one or two evenings were clearly etched in her memory. As she talked, Ratan edged nearer to the postmaster, and would end up sitting on the ground at his feet.

Related Characters: The Postmaster (speaker), Ratan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Ratan and the postmaster begin to form a relationship on the basis of their late-night conversations, in which they express memories from their childhood. Notably, Ratan is the first to share her recollections, upon the postmaster's prompting; her memories allow the postmaster to understand her not merely as an outcast orphan but as an individual with a family life and vibrant memories. By sharing her stories, Ratan comes alive—brightened and excited by the prospect of interaction and conversation—and she and the postmaster experience moments of unity that transcend their disparate class statuses. This connection, in turn, makes the postmaster's ultimate abandoning of Ratan all the more tragic.

He felt in need of comfort, ill and miserable as he was, in this isolated place, the rain pouring down. He remembered the touch on his forehead of soft hands, conch-shell bangles. He wished his mother or sister were sitting here next to him, soothing his illness and loneliness with feminine tenderness. And his longings did not stay unfulfilled. The young girl Ratan was a young girl no longer. From that moment on she took on the role of a mother.

Related Characters: Ratan , The Postmaster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

The postmaster is severely affected by the weather in Ulapur—namely, its intense monsoons—and becomes ill. His illness makes him homesick for his female relatives, who often soothed him during illnesses, and their "feminine tenderness." Ratan steps into the role of a female relative for the postmaster here, providing for him in his pain and demonstrating the "tenderness" he craves. Yet the postmaster does not acknowledge her as a potential wife nor a member of his family (though she desires to be a part of his), understanding that they are from two different worlds, and from two different rungs of society.

When the postmaster had had his meal, she suddenly asked, "Dadababu, will you take me home with you?" "How could I do that!" said the postmaster, laughing. He saw no need to explain to the girl why the idea was impossible. All night long, whether dreaming or awake, Ratan felt the postmaster's laugh ringing in her ears. "How could I do that!"

Related Characters: Ratan , The Postmaster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

To the postmaster, the reason he cannot bring Ratan home

with him is obvious: she is his servant, only important to him for the services she provides. Though he has shown Ratan kindness and helped her begin to improve her life, ultimately he feels that he has no obligation to her. This is despite the closeness that Ratan herself feels toward him. The postmaster's laughing retort, which occurs at the climax of the narrative, is a cruel rejection of Ratan and a definitive confirmation of their impassable class statuses. Ratan's bravery in asking a man of higher class status to provide for her is ultimately futile.

❝ The postmaster felt a huge anguish: the image of a simple young village-girl's grief-stricken face seemed to speak a great inarticulate universal sorrow. He felt a sharp desire to go back: should he not fetch that orphaned girl, whom the world had abandoned? ... Detached by the current of the river, he reflected that in life there are many separations, many deaths. What point was there in going back? Who belonged to whom in this world?"

Related Characters: The Postmaster (speaker), Ratan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

The postmaster has philosophy to comfort him as he departs Ulapur, borne away on fierce flood waters that symbolize the profound power of the natural world. He cannot return to Ratan, since he believes that all relationships in life are fleeting. In deciding to remain on his journey, the postmaster overlooks the consequences of his actions: he has left behind a young woman poised on the brink of a better life, ultimately preventing her from grasping new opportunities by cutting off her education and denying her the support he once provided. Ratan's face speaks "universal sorrow," yet the postmaster seems to believe this sorrow is temporary, never realizing that he could have solved her sorrow—and helped her to discover a richer world beyond poverty—by continuing his relationship with her.

❝ But Ratan had no such philosophy to console her. All she could do was wander near the post office, weeping copiously. Maybe a faint hope lingered in her mind that Dadababu might return; and this was enough to tie her to the spot, prevent her from going far. O poor, unthinking human heart! Error will not go away, logic and reason are slow to penetrate.

Related Characters: Ratan (speaker), The Postmaster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Though the postmaster leaves Ulapur comforted by his belief that no relationships in life can last, Ratan cannot find comfort in her misery, since she cannot leave her native village: she has neither the education nor the financial means to do so. Ratan is sustained by "faint hope" that the postmaster might return and help her to find opportunities outside of Ulapur, but as Tagore's narrator affirms, this is merely "error"—her hope is false and futile, though it will continue to sustain her as she lingers near the post office, attending the postmaster's return. Yet Ratan's life has not been left up to chance entirely: her hope is justified, since the postmaster has the ability—and the privileges—to help improve her life, and indeed has demonstrated this ability in the past by offering lessons and financial support. Ratan's fate is anonymity and marginalization, while the postmaster is free to return home to a comfortable life in urban Calcutta. By the end of the story, their lives and worlds appear irrevocably divided.

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 POSTMASTER

The postmaster, a young man from Calcutta, earns his first job working at a post office in the small rural village of Ulapur. Near the post office is an indigo factory, owned by a British manager who helped to establish the new post office. The postmaster feels out of place in Ulapur, and he works in a hut next to a pond that is covered in weeds and surrounded by jungle. He is more educated than the indigo factory workers, who are the only other men he can socialize with, but they are too busy to spend much time with him, and because of his upbringing, he is arrogant and uncomfortable around them.

The postmaster is not used to rural life in Ulapur, which sharply contrasts his upbringing in urban Calcutta. Not only is he confronted with people of an entirely different class status—uneducated low-level workers—but he must work in a rustic weed-covered hut. From the outset, the postmaster's class status and urban background complicate his settlement in Ulapur, immediately suggesting a deep division between urban and rural life, as well as between lower and upper-class individuals.

The postmaster has little work to do in Ulapur, and he sometimes spends his free time writing **poems**, which express the joy to be found in observing nature. However, he is "half-dead" in Ulapur, despite its natural beauty, and he believes he could "come alive" again if a genie out of an Arab legend would cut down all of the trees in Ulapur, construct a street, and erect tall buildings.

Although Ulapur's natural landscape is exquisite, primed for description in poetry, the postmaster still longs for modernized urban life. Even though the postmaster finds the natural world in rural Bengal beautiful, he cannot help but prefer urban surroundings—the setting most familiar to him.

Because his salary is low, the postmaster has to cook his own meals, though he hires an orphaned village girl, Ratan, to do housework for him, compensating her with a share of his food. In the postmaster's view, Ratan is not likely to get married. At night, when intoxicated singers from a nearby village gather to sing, disrupting the evening silence, the postmaster goes inside his hut, lights a lamp, and calls for Ratan. Ratan calls back, "What is it, Dadababu, what do you want?"

Ratan is of a lower-class status than the postmaster, and as a woman who is unlikely to be married, she is limited to performing menial labor for the men who employ her. According to the rules society dictates along the lines of class and gender, Ratan can only receive opportunities in life from wealthier men, though these are severely restricted and she is not compensated fairly for her labor.

Ratan insists that she must light the kitchen fire, but the postmaster tells her to get his hookah ready. He then asks if she remembers her mother. Ratan remembers some things about her childhood, but other things she doesn't. She remembers that her father loved her more than her mother, and that her father worked all day long. As Ratan tells the postmaster about her childhood, she approaches him, and ends up sitting on the ground by his feet. She also recalls her younger brother, and how the two of them would pretend to catch fish with sticks from trees: this is a memory she can recall in more detail than other memories.

Ratan and the postmaster begin to develop a relationship, suggesting that they might be able to overcome their distinct class statuses and find unity through sharing their experiences. Ratan begins to feel comfortable enough with the postmaster to physically approach him—while previously she would stand at a distance from him or linger outside of his hut—and to share childhood memories with the postmaster, despite her subservience to him.

These conversations about Ratan's family go on late into the night, and eventually the postmaster and Ratan are too tired to prepare elaborate meals. They have leftovers and chapati for supper instead.

The postmaster actively engages with Ratan's stories, and the two begin to forget the practical reason that brought them together—making meals—in favor of a developing relationship. That they prepare meals together hints at a sense of egalitarianism between them.

Sometimes, the postmaster tells Ratan about his own family: his younger brother, mother, and older sister. He misses them greatly, and he tells Ratan stories about them that he feels he could not tell the indigo factory employees. Ratan begins to refer to the postmaster's family as if they were her own family, creating vivid images of them in her head.

The postmaster seems to be overcoming some of his initial aversion to the lower-class people in Ulapur by opening up to Ratan. He still considers her differently from the indigo factory employees, whom he seems to regard as less emotionally aware—perhaps because they are men. Though Ratan and the postmaster's relationship is not explicitly romantic, he seems to be drawn to her as he would to a potential romantic partner. Ratan begins to think of his family as her own, suggesting that she wants to become part of the postmaster's world. The postmaster allows himself to become emotionally intimate with her, with the implication that the two might overcome the vast difference in their class positions.

One afternoon during monsoon season, when the breeze is warm, the sun is shining on the wet grass and leaves, and bird sounds are audible, the postmaster sits outside and watches the leaves and the clouds left over from **rain**. He longs for a romantic companion, and he begins to think that the sound of the birds and the rustling leaves are echoing his longing. Not many people would believe that a postmaster on a small salary could have such intense feelings on an ordinary, lazy afternoon.

Though the postmaster seemed to be developing a close relationship with Ratan, it is clear that he does not think of her as a romantic companion, since he still longs for someone—likely of his own class status—to share his life with. Moreover, the postmaster's melancholic reflections demonstrate that though he prefers urbanity to nature, the natural world is capable of influencing his mood and prompting intense emotions.


The postmaster calls out for Ratan, who is eating unripe guavas under a guava tree. She gets up immediately, and the postmaster tells her that he is going to teach her to read. He starts with vowels and moves on quickly to consonants and conjuncts.

Despite the postmaster's desire for a different companion, he returns to Ratan and decides to educate her, drawing her further into his world.

During the month of Sraban, the **rain** is endless, creating overflow in ditches and channels in the village. It becomes impossible to travel around Ulapur on foot instead of boat. Ratan waits for the postmaster by his door, but when he does not call for her, she enters his room with her books. The postmaster is lying on his bed, and she starts to leave, but he calls her back.

The constant monsoon rains in Ulapur depress the postmaster, who becomes physically ill as a result of the weather. Once again, the natural world exercises clear control over the postmaster's emotions and well-being.

The postmaster says that he is ill, and Ratan feels his forehead. He needs comfort in the midst of his isolation and misery, and he recalls the gentle touch of his mother and sister's hands during previous illnesses. Ratan plays the role of mother to the postmaster during this sickness, providing him with pills, standing vigil by his bedside, preparing him meals, and asking him constantly if he feels any better.

Ratan acts as a mother to the postmaster, nursing him back to health and concerning herself with his wellness. Their relationship appears to deepen during these moments of physical and emotional interaction, yet Ratan is still subservient to the postmaster.

Finally, the postmaster feels recovered, though he is now thin and weak. He decides that he has to leave Ulapur, and he writes to the head office in Calcutta, asking for a transfer. Since the postmaster is recovered, Ratan leaves his bedroom and begins to wait for him by his door as usual, but the postmaster does not call to her. She looks into his house now and then and sees him sitting on his stool or lying on his bed, apparently preoccupied. He is waiting for a response to his letter; meanwhile, Ratan goes over her old lessons, worried that she might forget what she has learned.

Overwhelmed by the weather and by his own illness, the postmaster decides to leave Ulapur, foregoing his commitment to Ratan and the lessons he had been teaching her. It is clear that the postmaster has put his own desires and emotions before Ratan's, and that their relationship will not continue: he can no longer bear rural Ulapur and wishes to return to Calcutta, indicating that he has not overcome his initial distaste for the village.

One day, the postmaster calls to Ratan, and she rushes eagerly into his house. The postmaster informs her that he is leaving to go home, and that he won't be returning to Ulapur. Ratan asks no further questions, and the postmaster adds that his application for a transfer has been rejected. He is quitting his job in Ulapur and returning home for good. Neither Ratan nor the postmaster can speak. A lamp flickers, and **rain water** dribbles through a hole in the roof of the hut. Ratan goes out to the kitchen to prepare chapati without enthusiasm, seemingly distracted.

Ratan realizes that without the postmaster as a source of education and support, she will be alone and destitute in Ulapur. Yet she cannot express her sorrow to the postmaster, while he cannot express his own sense of guilt for leaving a poor, uneducated woman on her own; it is clear that the division between them has been reinstated.

While the postmaster eats the chapati she has prepared, Ratan asks him if he will take her home with him. The postmaster laughs and replies, "How could I do that!" He does not feel that it is necessary to explain to Ratan why such a proposal is impossible. That night, Ratan cannot forget the postmaster's laugh, which haunts her.

Ratan bravely asks the postmaster if their relationship could continue after his departure from Ulapur—ostensibly through marriage—but he denies her with laughing ridicule. To the postmaster, their class statuses are far too disparate to be reconciled in marriage.

The postmaster awakens at dawn the next day and sees that his bath-**water** (which he has brought in everyday from the river in a bucket) has been laid out already. He realizes that Ratan has carried the bath-water up from the river late the night before so that he would have it early in the morning, in case he had to leave Ulapur then. The postmaster finishes his bath and calls to Ratan, informing her that he will tell the man who replaces him as postmaster to look after her.

Ratan continues to prove helpful and obliging to the postmaster, yet her services are no longer of any value to him. He does not realize that his support has been invaluable to her, believing instead that the new postmaster will be an adequate replacement. Yet Ratan has come to rely on the postmaster, whose kindness represented access to improved opportunities in her life.

Though the postmaster's remark is meant to be kind and generous, Ratan cannot bear it, and she regards the comment as more severe than even the scoldings she has experienced from the postmaster before. She tells the postmaster that she doesn't want him to tell the new postmaster about her, and that she no longer wants to stay in Ulapur. The postmaster is surprised, since he has never seen Ratan in such a state before.

Ratan breaks down, unable to contain her emotions about the postmaster's departure any longer. The postmaster cannot comprehend Ratan's sorrow, impervious to the fact that he has retracted the lifeline he once offered her.

The postmaster prepares to leave as his replacement arrives. He calls for Ratan one last time and offers her the rest of the salary, except for a little money he needs for his journey home. Ratan falls to her knees before the postmaster and refuses his money. She then runs away.

Ratan cannot take the money the postmaster offers her, since as a lower-class woman, she must act grateful and inferior, and thus cannot accept gifts. She is also embarrassed by the postmaster's rejection and his subsequent pity toward her. It is not money she desires but human connection and education, both of which he has denied her by leaving Ulapur.

The postmaster sighs and picks up his luggage, preparing to leave by boat. A coolie (or a native laborer) carries his tin trunk. When he is on the boat, he begins to feel miserable. He cannot forget Ratan's grief-stricken face, and he suddenly wishes to return to her. However, the boat has departed, borne away on swollen flood-**waters**, and the postmaster has left Ulapur behind. He reflects on the notion that life involves many separations and many deaths, and that there would be little use in returning to Ulapur, since no one belongs to anyone in this world.

The postmaster is filled with grief upon departing Ulapur, and the floodwaters that surround him symbolize his sorrow and melancholy. Yet he realizes that he cannot return to Ratan, consoling himself with philosophy: he seems to believe that he never had an obligation to Ratan, since he reflects that no one belongs to anyone in this world. The postmaster cannot see that he has given Ratan a great gift—education and support—and that to leave is to sever the significant ties he formed with her.

Ratan cannot comfort herself with logic and philosophy in the way that the postmaster can. Instead, she lingers near the post office, weeping and nursing a faint hope that the postmaster might return there. False hope sustains humanity, even when what is hoped for is utterly unachievable. Eventually, hope will escape, but humans will fall back into its clutches, since reality is often too much to bear.

Ratan's limited education and lack of financial means she is stuck in Ulapur, while the postmaster leaves easily and freely. Tagore's reflections at the end of the story suggest that Ratan is a figure who represents the injustice and grief humanity frequently suffers; left behind in rural Ulapur, she is utterly marginalized.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Krolewski, Sara. "*The Postmaster.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 19 Dec 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Krolewski, Sara. "*The Postmaster.*" LitCharts LLC, December 19, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-postmaster.

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

MLA

Tagore, Rabindranath. The Postmaster. Penguin. 1991.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tagore, Rabindranath. The Postmaster. London: Penguin. 1991.