

## **Headmaster (Narayan's novel The English Teacher) Devoted**

**Character** The headmaster of a local school provides a sharp contrast with Krishna, the main character and English teacher of the title. He is a devoted teacher and a devoted Hindu, who prays and meditates for 15 minutes before each meal. He is devoted to the children he teaches and calls them the 'real Gods on earth.' Unconcerned with material gain, he is content to work in a non-fee paying school and live in a slum, a 'grim place where the gutter gurgled.' He is not, however, as loving toward adults, with whom he is often rude and abrupt, although this appears to be the result of shyness rather than meanness. His flaws are shown most sharply in his unloving attitude toward his wife and children. His wife comes from a rich family and gave up a lucrative career as a lawyer to marry him and live in such difficult conditions. He, however, only sees her as 'dominating and bossy' and tries to avoid her whenever he can. He is similarly unconcerned about his children, even admitting that he has no idea where they are, maybe 'playing in a gutter.' In the end, after coming close to death, he reaches a better understanding of himself, which enables him to treat his wife with love and other adults with more respect.

**Activities** The headmaster spends most of his time teaching, telling stories and meditating. He also devotes time every day to meditation, praying and worshipping gods and goddesses. This routine undergoes a severe change when, toward the end of the story, he leaves his family and becomes a wandering ascetic because an astrologer has told him the exact day he will die.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Traditional** The headmaster's traditional religiosity is demonstrated in an early scene when he washes his hands after eating. As Narayan describes it, he didn't use a cloth, 'leaving his face wet...hands dripping...to evaporate.' In other words, he is in complete harmony with nature and does not need the modern luxury of a towel.

**Transformation** The headmaster's transformation from a man who cares about children but not about adults is set in motion when an astrologer tells him that he will die on a particular day, not far in the future. The prediction turns out to be wrong, which stimulates him to rethink his life and have a kind of 're-birth'. This self-revelation releases himself from the demands of the school timetable, so that he can now embrace other people and love his wife and children.