**A Horse and Two Goats by R.K.Narayan**

First published in the Madras, India, newspaper *The Hindu* in 1960, “A Horse and Two Goats” did not achieve a wide international audience until 1970 when it became the title story of R. K. Narayan’s seventh collection of short stories, A *Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories*. It reached an even wider audience in 1985 when it was included in *Under the Banyan Tree,* Narayan’s tenth and best-selling collection. By this time Narayan was well established as one of the most prominent Indian authors writing in English in the twentieth century. The story presents a comic dialogue between Muni, a poor Tamil-speaking villager, and a wealthy English-speaking businessman from [New York](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york). They are engaged in a conversation in which neither can understand the other’s language. With gentle humor, Narayan explores the conflicts between rich and poor, and between Indian and Western culture.

Narayan is best known for his fourteen novels, many of which take place in the fictional town of Malgudi. Many of the stories in his thirteen [short story](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/short-story) collections also take place in Malgudi, but “A Horse and Two Goats” does not. This accounts for the fact that the story has attracted very little critical commentary; however, all of the attention it has drawn has been positive. The story is seen as a fine example of Narayan’s dexterity in creating engaging characters and humorous dialogue, but it is not considered one of his greatest works.

**Author Biography**

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Ayyar Naranayanaswami was born in Madras, a large industrial coastal city in India, on October 10, 1906. His family was Brahmin, the highest caste of Hindu society. When he was still young, the rest of his family moved to Mysore, a smaller city in the heart of the country. Narayan stayed in Madras with his grandmother, who read him classic Indian tales and myths from an early age and encouraged his imagination. He was not a serious student; he believed that the educational system was too regimented and that it discouraged students from thinking creatively, so he decided not to work hard and ended up failing several subjects and his college entrance exams.

After graduation, Narayan went to work in a government office in Mysore, but he was no more suited for mundane office work than for formal education. He tried teaching for a while, but did not last long as a teacher, either. What he wanted to be was a writer. At first, most of his stories were rejected. For three or four years he lived at home and earned less than five dollars a year, worrying and embarrassing his family.

In 1933 he married a woman named Rajam, who encouraged him in his writing. To help support his wife and daughter, he tried journalism, starting out as a correspondent for the *Madras Justice* and working his way up to junior editor. Rajam lived only five years as his wife, dying of typhoid in 1939. By that time Narayan had published three novels, and had begun, under the shortened name R. K. Narayan, to attract international attention. Finally, he was able to quit his newspaper job and become a full-time fiction writer. His fourth novel, *The English Teacher* (1945), features a character patterned after Rajam and describes Narayan’s own struggles to deal with her death. All of his fiction, most of which takes place in the fictional town of Malgudi and all of which is in English, gives a realistic portrayal of middle-class life in India, with its caste system and long-standing traditions, and many of his stories are based on real events.

Narayan is one of the most widely read of the Indian authors writing in English. He has published more than thirty novels and collections of short stories and essays, and was still producing new work well into his eighties. He has been honored for his work in India, in [Great Britain](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/great-britain), and in the [United States](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states), where he has been made an honorary member of the [American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters](https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/social-organizations/private-organizations/american-academy-and-institute). His own humble views of his life and success are presented in his memoir, *My Days* (1984).

**Plot Summary**

Set in Kritam, “probably the tiniest” of India’s 700,000 villages, “A Horse and Two Goats” opens with a clear picture of the poverty in which the protagonist Muni lives. Of the thirty houses in the village, only one, the Big House, is made of brick. The others, including Muni’s, are made of “bamboo thatch, straw, mud, and other unspecified materials.” There is no running water and no electricity, and Muni’s wife cooks their typical breakfast of “a handful of millet flour” over a fire in a mud pot. On this day, Muni has shaken down six drumsticks (a local name for a type of horse radish) from the drumstick tree growing in front of his house, and he asks his wife to prepare them for him in a sauce. She agrees, provided he can get the other ingredients, none of which they have in the house: rice, dhall (lentils), spices, oil and a potato.

Muni and his wife have not always been so poor. Once, when he considered himself prosperous, he had a flock of forty sheep and goats which he would lead out to graze every day. But life has not been kind to him or to his flocks: years of drought, a great famine, and an epidemic that ran through Muni’s flock have taken their toll. And as a member of the lowest of India’s castes, Muni was never permitted to go to school or to learn a trade. Now he is reduced to two goats, too scrawny to sell or to eat. He and his wife have no children to help them in their old age, so their only income is from the odd jobs his wife occasionally takes on at the Big House. Muni has exhausted his credit at every shop in town, and today, when he asks a local shopman to give him the items his wife requires to cook the drumsticks, he is sent away humiliated.

There is no other food in the house, so Muni’s wife sends him away with the goats. “Fast till the evening,” she tells him. “It’ll do you good.” Muni takes the goats to their usual spot a few miles away: a grassy area near the highway, where he can sit in the shade of a life-sized statue of a horse and a warrior and watch trucks and buses go by. The statue is made of weather-beaten clay and has stood in the same spot for all of Muni’s seventy or more years.

As Muni watches the road and waits for the appropriate time to return home, a yellow station wagon comes down the road and pulls over. A red-faced American man dressed in khaki clothing gets out and is asking Muni where to find the nearest gas station when he notices the statue, which he finds “marvelous.” Muni’s first impulse is to run away, assuming from the khaki that this foreigner must be a policeman or a soldier. But Muni is too old to run any more, and he cannot leave the goats. The two begin to converse—if “conversation” can be used to describe what happens when two people speak to each other in separate languages, neither understanding the other. “Namaste! How do you do?” the American says in greeting, using his only Indian word. Muni responds with the only English he knows: “Yes, no.”

The American, a businessman from [New York](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york) City, lights a cigarette and offers one to Muni, who knows about cigarettes but has never had one before. He offers Muni his business card, but Muni fears it is a warrant of some kind. Muni launches into a long explanation of his innocence of whatever crime the man is investigating, and the American asks questions about the horse statue, which he would like to buy. He tells Muni about a bad day at work, when he was forced to work for four hours without elevators or electricity, and seems completely unaware that Muni lives this way every day. By now he is convinced that Muni is the owner of the statue, which he is determined to buy.

The two talk back and forth, each about his own life. Muni remembers his father and grandfather telling about the statue and the ancient story it depicts, and tries to explain to the American how old it is. “I get a kick out of every word you utter,” the American replies. Muni reminisces about his difficult and impoverished childhood working in the fields, and the American laughs heartily. Muni interprets the statue: “This is our guardian. . . . At the end of Kali Yuga, this world and all other worlds will be destroyed, and the Redeemer will come in the shape of a horse.” The American replies, “I assure you this will have the best home in the U.S.A. I’ll push away the bookcase. . . . The TV may have to be shifted. . . . I don’t see how that can interfere with the party—we’ll stand around him and have our drinks.” It is clear that even if the two could

understand each other’s words, they could not understand each other’s worlds.

Finally, the American pushes one hundred rupees into Muni’s hand—twenty times Muni’s debt with the shopkeeper. He considers that he has bought the horse, and Muni believes he has just sold his goats. Muni runs home to present the money to his wife, while the American flags down a truck, gets help breaking the horse off its pedestal, and drives away with his purchase. Muni’s wife does not believe her husband’s story about where the money came from, and her suspicions only increase when the goats find their way home. As the story ends, she is shrieking at him, and Muni appears to be not much better off than he was at the start.

**Characters**

**The American**

The man comes riding into the story in a yellow station wagon. A businessman who works in New

York and commutes from Connecticut, he is dressed in the khaki clothing worn by American tourists in the tropics. He typifies the “Ugly American”: he speaks only English, but is surprised and a little annoyed to find that Muni can speak only Tamil, and although he is in the tiniest village in India, he expects to find a gas station and English-speaking goatherds. Once he sees the statue of the horse, he must own it for his living room, with no thought for what the statue might mean or who might value it. Even when he can’t speak the language, he knows that money talks.

**Muni**

Muni, an old and desperately poor man, is the protagonist of the story. Once he was prosperous, with a large flock of sheep, but a series of misfortunes have left him with only two scrawny goats. He and his wife have almost no income and no children to help take care of them. Every day, Muni takes the goats out to graze on the scarce grass outside of town, while his wife pulls something together for an evening meal. As he watches the goats from the shade of a large statue, he remembers his younger days when the work was hard but there was enough to eat, when he could not attend school because he was not of the right caste, and when he imagined that he would one day have children. Like many poor and struggling people, he fears authority figures, and so he fears the American who steps out of a strange car wearing khaki clothes. While the man tries to talk with him about the statue, Muni babbles on about a recent murder and the end of the world. At the end he seems to have temporarily escaped his money troubles, but his bad luck continues when his wife suspects him of thievery and threatens to leave.

**The shopman**

The shopman is a moody man who has given Muni food on credit in the past, but who has been pushed past his limit. Muni owes him five rupees, and although they share a bit of humorous conversation, the shopman will not give him any more.

**The wife**

Muni’s wife has spent some sixty years with him (neither of them is sure about their ages), through prosperity and poverty. Although she is gruff with him now, she is willing to indulge his request for a special meal. She works as hard as he does, or harder, getting up at dawn to fix his morning meal, and taking odd jobs at the Big House when their stores are low. But poverty has worn her down: her first reaction when she sees the hundred rupees is to accuse Muni of stealing.

**Themes**

**Culture Clash**

The most important theme in “A Horse and Two Goats,” and in fact the central theme of Narayan’s work, is the clash of cultures, specifically the clash of Indian and Western cultures. Using humor instead of anger, Narayan demonstrates just how far apart the two worlds are: the two cultures exist in the same time and space, but literally and metaphorically speak different languages. The two main characters in this story couldn’t be more different: Muni is poor, rural, uneducated, Hindu, brown; the American is wealthy, urban, educated, probably Judeo-Christian, white. As a good Hindu, Muni calmly accepts the hand that fate has dealt him, while the American is willing and able to take drastic and sudden action to change his life (for example, flying off to India, or throwing away his return plane ticket to transport a horse statue home on a ship). Each man is quite ignorant of the other’s way of life.

Unlike many stories about culture clash, the inability to communicate in this story leads only to confusion, not to any real harm. In fact, although each feels vaguely dissatisfied with the conversation, the men do not realize that they are not communicating. Each speaks at length about his own life and local calamities, with no awareness that the other hears nothing. At the end of their encounter each man has what he wants or needs, and neither man has lost anything of value. As an Indian who writes only in English, Narayan himself has experienced the ways in which Indian and Western cultures conflict. While this conflict may be painful at times, here he finds it merely amusing.

**Wealth and Poverty**

Although they have little in common, the most important way in which Muni and the American differ is in their respective level of wealth. Narayan takes great pains in the opening of the story to show how desperately poor Muni is, and to emphasize that even in his time of “prosperity” his [standard of living](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/economics-business-and-labor/economics-terms-and-concepts/standard-living) was still greatly below that of most Americans. The American takes for granted his relative wealth and seems unaware of the difference between Muni and himself. He casually offers cigarettes to a man who has never seen one, complains about four hours without [air conditioning](https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/technology/technology-terms-and-concepts/air-conditioning) to a man who has never had electricity, brags about enjoying manual labor as a Sunday hobby to a man who grew up working in the fields from morning until night, and without a thought gives Muni enough money to open a business. He is not trying to show off; he simply accepts his wealth as his right. His very casualness emphasizes the gap between them. Narayan in no way condemns the man for being wealthy, or for not stepping in to aid the poor Muni, but he wants the two men and their relative wealth to be clear, so the reader can evaluate the relationship between wealth and worth.

**Knowledge and Ignorance**

In a small way, “A Horse and Two Goats” explores the different ways that a person can be educated. Muni, who grew up a member of a lower caste at a time when only the Brahmin, the highest caste, could attend school, has had no formal education. He has not traveled beyond his village, and he likes to watch trucks and buses go by on the highway a few miles away so that he can have “a sense of belonging to a larger world.” He does not even know his own age. He does, however, have an impressive amount of knowledge of the two major texts of his literary heritage, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* which he has learned by acting in plays and by listening to speakers at the temple. He knows the stories, and he is able to mine them for truth and wisdom when he needs them.

The American, on the other hand, has had the full benefits of an American education. He has a roomful of books that he values as objects (“you know I love books and am a member of five [book clubs](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/journalism-and-publishing/libraries-books-and-printing/book-clubs), and the choice and bonus volumes mount up to a pile in our living room”), but there is no evidence that he understands or values what is inside them. On one level, he is familiar with the larger world around him in a way that Muni never will be. However, even on this trip to India “to look at other civilizations,” he does not seem to be looking at India for what it is, but only for a reflection of—and ornaments for—his own life. The uneducated Muni tries to tell him the significance of the horse statue, but the American sees it only as a living room decoration. Of course, the language barrier prevents him from receiving Muni’s interpretation, but it never even crosses his mind to ask. In this story, there are at least two ways to be ignorant.

**Topics for Further Study**

* Muni and his wife live a simple life, probably without running water or electricity in their home. How has life changed for poor villagers in India since 1960 when this story was written? Throughout the world, do more people live like Muni and his wife, or like you and the others in your class?
* Find the stories Muni mentions, from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. (Perhaps you can find Narayan’s own translations.) How would this uneducated man know stories from two-thousand-year-old poems? Why might Muni be remembering them at this point in his life? What stories do most people in the [United States](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states) know, whatever their level of education or sophistication?
* Investigate the role that [Great Britain](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/great-britain) has played in Indian politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially before 1947. Also, find out what you can about the origin of the word *khaki*. Does your new information help explain Muni’s warning to himself, “Beware of Khaki”?
* Most critics find Muni’s wife cold and unsympathetic. Do you agree? Compare the lives of the two wives in this story, and what can be guessed about their personalities. How important are their wives to these two men?
* Find the meanings for these terms from the story: *dhall, drumsticks, swarga, betel leaves, dhoti*. Then look closely at an American [short story](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/short-story) you have read recently. Which terms would a person from Muni’s village need to have explained?

**Style**

**Point of View and Narration**

“A Horse and Two Goats” is narrated in the third person by an omniscient narrator who reports clearly and objectively on the characters’ words, actions, and memories, but who does not comment or judge. The narrator describes Kritam’s erosion and Muni’s decline dispassionately, without regret; conversations between Muni and his wife, or Muni and the shopman, are told from Muni’s perspective, but with his calm acceptance of whatever fate brings him. This restraint is important to the understated humor of the dialogue between Muni and the American; Narayan trusts the reader to interpret the absurd conversation without his having to say through his narrator, “Notice that this response has nothing to do with the question asked,” or “See the irony in this remark.” When the two men leave the place where they met, each taking away something of value, neither has been accused by the narrator—nor by the reader—of foolishness or evil. By creating a narrator who tells the story without judging it, Narayan presents two believable characters with human flaws, but two characters for whom the reader can feel compassion and sympathy nonetheless. The conflict is between two likeable characters, or two worthy cultures, not between good and evil.

**Setting**

The story takes place in Kritam, “probably the tiniest” of India’s 700,000 villages. Its four streets are lined with about thirty mud and thatch huts and one Big House, made of brick and cement. Women cook in clay pots over clay stoves, and the huts have no running water or electricity. A few miles away, down a rough dirt track through dry fields of cactus and lantana bushes, is a highway leading to the mountains, where a large construction project is being completed. The meeting between Muni and the red-faced man was intended to take place between about 1945, when televisions became generally available to Americans, and 1960, when the story was published, but the date is not central to the story. Even today there are many villages in the world without modern technological conveniences, and many travelers who do not realize that not everyone lives as they do.

**Realism**

Narayan’s fiction is often noted for its realism, its simple and accurate presentation of common, everyday life as it is lived by identifiable characters. In “A Horse and Two Goats” Narayan pays careful attention to the small details of Muni’s life: where he lives, what he eats, how he coughs when he smokes his first cigarette. Although many of the small details, like the drumstick tree and the dhoti where Muni puts his hundred rupees, are particularly Indian, they are also basic enough to human experience that they are easily understood by an international audience. Narayan’s characters and stories are read not so much as regional literature but as universal.

**Humor**

Humor is an important element in “A Horse and Two Goats,” and understanding Narayan’s humor is important to understanding his world view. Humor, which is affectionate and sympathetic to humanity and human foibles, is often distinguished from wit, which looks more harshly on human fallibility. For Narayan, who looks at the world through the lens of his Hindu faith, weakness and strife are to be accepted and transcended, not railed against. When he creates the comic characters of Muni and the American (likely candidates for the roles of the “two goats” in the title), he laughs at them gently and kindly, not critically.

**Historical Context**

**Colonial India**

Indian culture is more than five thousand years old. Its great epics were composed before the year A.D. 200, and magnificent art and architecture were created in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. Beginning in the 10th century, Muslim raiders attacked and weakened the Buddhist kingdoms, and for the next several hundred years a series of Muslim kingdoms controlled what is now called the Indian subcontinent. By 1500, Europeans were also competing for control of Indian trade. In 1857, India became subject to British rule. Like [South Africa](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/south-african-political-geography/south-africa), Indians found themselves governed by a white minority from another country and culture, whose governance was guided by racism and religious intolerance. India remained a British colony until 1947, when a long campaign of peaceful [civil disobedience](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/social-reform/civil-disobedience) led by Mohandas Gandhi persuaded Britain to return control of the country to its own people. India was divided into two separate nations: India, a secular state populated mainly by Hindus, and Pakistan, a Muslim state. The late 1940s were marked with great violence and eventually war between Muslims and Hindus. Thus, the world from which Narayan was writing in the 1950s was both old, rich in tradition and legend, and new, struggling for identity.

**Independent India**

Immediately after achieving independence, India’s government, under Prime Minister Pandit [Jawaharlal Nehru](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/south-asian-history-biographies/jawaharlal-nehru), began planning and taking action to bring peace and prosperity to all Indian citizens. The task was daunting: although there was a will to provide education for all, there were not enough teachers; the need to grow more food and distribute it was apparent, but the technology and skills were not available. Although there was a change in the air, there was no real change in the day-to-day lives of poor people like Muni and his wife for many years. “A Horse and Two Goats” takes place less than a decade after independence, little enough time that Muni has realized no tangible benefits from living in a sovereign nation, and that he still shrinks from a white man wearing khaki, who he assumes must be a British authority figure.

For Narayan, independence made it possible for him to move more freely on the world stage, but he continued in his lifelong tendency to avoid politics in his personal life and in his writing. It should be noted that choosing to write and publish in English, his second language, was an artistic, not a political, decision. He was raised a Brahmin, a member of the highest Hindu caste, and he had enjoyed a good education and a life of relative ease. He had learned English in school, and as he developed his writing skills he found that the [English language](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/language-and-linguistics/english)—as Indians speak it—was ideal for expressing his ideas and images clearly. But by writing in English, he was choosing to write for an

**Compare & Contrast**

* **1947:** One of the goals of the new Constitution in India is to provide free and compulsory education for Indian children. In 1951, approximately 80 percent of the adults in India, like Muni, are illiterate.

**1990s:** Approximately 52 percent of the adult population is considered literate (64 percent of the men and 39 percent of the women).
* **1951:** Approximately 80 percent of Indian adults live in poverty. The percentage is higher for children. Few of these people have access to clean water.

**1997:** Due to the spread of technology and a growing educated class engaged in international trade, only one-third of India’s population lives below the poverty line. Most villages have access to safe drinking water.
* **1950s:** One hundred rupees is enough money for Muni to think about building a small thatched roof and opening a small food stand. It is twenty times his debt to the shopman.

**1998:** One hundred rupees is equivalent to approximately $2.35 in American dollars.
* **1950s:** Agricultural yields are low, and insufficient to feed India’s 400 million people. Monsoons in 1951 and 1952 add to the country’s food deficits. By 1960, food grain production is increasing.

**1990s:** India grows enough food to feed its 935 million people, and also produces its own steel, computer software, and [nuclear energy](https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/physics/physics/nuclear-energy).

audience that lived mostly outside India, since most Indians, like Muni, did not speak or read English. As a journalist, and then as something of an international figure, Narayan had seen more of the world than Muni ever could. He understood the conflicts between Indian culture and Western culture as few people did, because he had created a life for himself that forced him to move through both worlds.

**Critical Overview**

Over a prolific career spanning more than fifty years, Narayan has published fourteen novels, thirteen collections of short stories, and eleven other volumes of essays, translations and memoirs. He is known primarily for his many novels and short stories set in the fictional, small Southern Indian town of Malgudi, and most critics and reviewers focus on these stories. Critics appreciate Narayan for the clarity of his vision for the town, for the way the town has grown and changed over the years as a “real” town would, and they compare his use of the town through many works to [William Faulkner](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/william-faulkner)’s creation of Yoknapatawpha County or [Thomas Hardy](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-19th-cent-biographies/thomas-hardy)’s Wessex novels, yet they find that his details about everyday Indian life and his warmth and sympathy toward his characters create stories that are universal. Reaction to Narayan’s work has always been quite positive, but his reputation among literary scholars seems to be fading as the twentieth century draws to a close. While general readers continue to value Narayan’s work for its simplicity of language, straightforward plotting and action, gentle humor and sweet disposition, recent commentators have found it perhaps a touch too unsophisticated and nonpolitical to warrant serious study.

“A Horse and Two Goats” is one of the few Narayan stories not set in Malgudi, and it has received very little critical attention of its own. It was one of many stories Narayan wrote quickly, at a rate of two per week, as a contributor to the Madras newspaper *The Hindu*. The story came to the attention of the international reading community when it appeared in the collection *A Horse and Two Goats and Other Stories* in 1970, and most criticism refers to this collection. Typical is *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation,* in which William Walsh relegates his discussion of the story to a chapter entitled “Other Work.” His analysis, like most writing about this story, consists primarily of a plot summary and the observation that “Narayan is himself fascinated by the gap which exists between supposed and real understanding, by the element of incomprehension in human relationships.” P. S. Ramana, in a short section of his *Message in Design: A Study of R. K. Narayan’s Fiction,* focuses on “how, by manipulating the narratorial position, focus, tone, attitude and commentary, the author is able to almost overlook the darker side of the experience to produce a highly humorous and ironic tale.” In an article in *Perspectives on R. K. Narayan,* H. C. Trivedi and N. C. Soni find the chief importance of the story is as “a subtle and real entertainment.”

When the story appeared again in 1985, in the collection *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories,* a new generation of readers discovered it. This collection has received no formal criticism, but was reviewed in major American newspapers and magazines. Many reviewers of this volume single out “A Horse and Two Goats” because it is one of the longest stories in the collection, and because it is a fine example of Narayan’s humor. In a review in *Washington Post Book World,* Frances Taliaferro calls the story “a classic of cross purposes.” Neville Shack, writing for [London] *Times Literary Supplement,* finds “a flourish of banality, exasperating but quite moving at the same time, infused with human drollery.” Although the market for short story collections has declined steadily, and critical attention to Narayan’s work has also declined, “A Horse and Two Goats” continues to appear in high school and college textbook anthologies, where students and teachers give it high marks for its insight into another culture in the form of a humorous tale.

**Criticism**

**Cynthia Bily**

*Bily has a master’s degree in*[*English literature*](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/literature-english/english-literature-20th-cent-present/english-literature)*and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines the role of women in “A Horse and Two Goats*.

When Muni the Indian peasant and the red-faced American meet and converse in “A Horse and Two Goats,” the differences between them are immediately apparent, and these differences inform the main idea of the story, the clash of cultures. One of the few things the two men have in common is kept in the background of the story, but resurfaces frequently—each has a devoted wife on the sidelines, making it possible for them to keep going.

To begin to understand Narayan’s sense of women, it would be useful to look briefly at how Indian and Hindu culture has perceived and shaped women’s lives. It is believed that the ancient Tamil societies may have been matriarchal, that is, ruled and guided by woman. The great Indian epics, composed approximately two thousand years ago, contain stories of several important female characters, including two that Muni mentions: the goddess Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, and Sita, wife of Rama. In their roles as nurturers and storytellers, woman have been revered because they have kept the culture alive.

In practical terms, however, the life of a woman in India as recently as one hundred or two hundred years ago was almost unimaginable today, even in comparison to the restrictions placed upon American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hindu law and tradition dictated that women were under the protection of their fathers, and then of their husbands. In fact, wives were the legal property of their husbands and had no right to own property, to be educated, to divorce, or to speak in public. Under the custom of *sati,* a woman whose husband died would throw herself onto his funeral pyre and be burned alive, thus showing her utter devotion to him.

In 1829, *sati* was declared illegal by the British colonialists, although it never completely disappeared. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Muni and his wife were wed, it was still common for a woman to be married off at a very young age, often to an adult man whom she had never met. In fact, although Muni has never kept track of his age, “He was told on their day of wedding that he was ten years old and she was eight. During the wedding ceremony they had had to recite their respective ages and names.” This is the tradition under which Muni had grown up. Women were honored on the one hand, and subordinate on the other—no more simple or straightforward than gender roles in any society.

Narayan is a bit younger than Muni, perhaps fifteen years, and his upbringing was different from Muni’s. Narayan was raised by his grandmother, who taught him the legends and stories from the traditional literature. Muni learned most of his lore from other men, including the story behind the statue: “I was an urchin this high when I heard my grandfather explain this horse and warrior, and my grandfather himself was this high when he heard his grandfather, whose grandfather. . . .” Narayan and his wife chose each other—over the objections of their families—and married when they were in their twenties. Sadly, her early death kept them from growing old together.

During his lifetime, Narayan saw many changes in the lives of Indian women. During the struggle for independence from Great Britain, women were active leaders and participants in the long years of [civil disobedience](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/social-reform/civil-disobedience). One of these women, [Indira Gandhi](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/south-asian-history-biographies/indira-gandhi), the daughter of the movement’s leader Mahatma Gandhi, remained politically active and decades later became [prime minister](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts/prime). With Indian independence in 1947, women became full citizens for the first time and acquired property rights and the right to vote. In 1955, about the time Narayan was writing “A Horse and Two Goats,” a new Hindu Marriage Act raised the minimum age for marriage to fifteen for females and eighteen for males and gave women the right to seek a divorce if their husbands took additional wives. The next year, women won the right to inherit property from their fathers on equal terms with their brothers.

What does this mean for “A Horse and Two Goats?” Muni and his wife were married in a traditional ceremony at a young age and have lived together nearly all their lives. His expectations for their roles in relation to each other, based on tradition, have not been met. He remembers that “he had thrashed her only a few times in their career.” The tone here is casual, without regret; thrashing is what husbands do when wives get out of line. But the [balance of power](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-1) did not hold, at least not in Muni’s eyes: “later she had the upper hand.” Critics have tended to accept Muni’s view of this, agreeing that Muni’s wife is controlling, even domineering. But is she?

In the opening, the narrator shows the town and a typical day. “His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment of the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday.” It is a spartan meal, the most nutrition for the least money, but there is no mention of her preparing anything for herself. Is the narrator simply not interested in her diet, or does she skip the morning meal to leave more for Muni? “She was old, but he was older and needed all the attention she could give him in order to be kept alive.”

Muni heads for the highway, where he grazes his two useless goats. They are thin, and the other villagers think he would be better off eating them than moving them back and forth each day. For the rest of the day, according to his usual schedule, he will sit in the shade of a statue, watch the goats and the passing cars, and daydream about his former

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prosperity. At this time in their marriage, he is not contributing much in the way of subsistence. His primary duty today is to “be careful not to argue and irritate” his wife, whom he seems to find unreasonable and difficult. His sixty-eight-year-old wife, on the other hand, “would somehow conjure up some food for him in the evening. . . . She was sure to go out and work—grind corn in the Big House, sweep or scrub somewhere, and earn enough to buy foodstuff and keep a dinner ready for him in the evening.” If “her temper was undependable in the morning but improved by evening time,” who could blame her?

The American’s wife is even more on the periphery of the main action than Muni’s wife; in fact the action could go along just as smoothy without her even being mentioned. But Narayan has a reason for introducing her. The American’s wife’s name is Ruth, the name of an [Old Testament](https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/bible/old-testament/old-testament) figure who stands in Judeo-Christian tradition as a model for wifely loyalty. The Biblical Ruth is loyal to her dead husband’s family; the Ruth in “A Horse and Two Goats” is loyal to her husband and stands by to prop him up when he is about to do something off-balance. Although he speaks of her with an impatient tone, surely she would be right to “disapprove” of a full-sized horse statue in the living room and right to hang on to her plane ticket instead of throwing it away to accompany the statue on a ship. She seems to be a good sport, to support her husband’s whims: “Next day she called the travel agent first thing and told him to fix it, and so here lam.”

Having a loyal, grounded wife gives each of the husbands the freedom to move out into the world. Muni goes to the highway each day so he can “watch the highway and see the lorries and buses pass through to the hills, and it gave him a sense of belonging to a larger world.” Later, he will describe the vehicles to his wife, whose duties do not permit her to move about so freely. Ruth has come to India with her husband, but he tells Muni that she is “staying back at Srinagar, and I am the one doing the rounds and joining her later.”

There are other wives in the story. Muni remembers that in his youth he was often chosen for the women’s roles in the plays the community performed. Sometimes he was the Goddess Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu. Lakshmi is one of the most popular goddesses in India, and countless people pray to her for wealth and good luck. She is a nurturer and a model for devoted wives. It is her obedience to Vishnu that gives her power. Muni also played the part of Sita, another incarnation of Lakshmi and the wife of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*. Sita is another exemplary wife, who remains loyal to Rama in spite of many trials.

A possible reason for Muni’s memories of these plays may lie in town gossip. To the delight of the men in town, the postman’s wife has run off to the city with another man. The postman “does not speak to anyone at all nowadays. Who would if a wife did what she did? Women must be watched; otherwise they will sell themselves and the home.” Men should keep an eye on their wives, because if they leave, the husbands lose their grounding.

In this speech, Muni comes as close as he ever will to stating the truth about wives: it may be annoying when they stay, but it is devastating when they leave. As Muni drives his goats out to the statue in the beginning of the story, he reflects on his age. “At seventy, one only waited to be summoned by God. When he was dead what would his wife do?” In fact, his wife would be lonely, but she is the one in the family with survival skills. The real question is what would Muni do without his wife if she were summoned by God? Where would a man be without a loyal wife?

**Source:** Cynthia Bily, “An Overview of ‘A Horse and Two Goats’,” in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

**Ralph J. Crane**

*In the following essay, Crane discusses “A Horse and Two Goats” in relation to common themes in Narayan’sfiction*.

“A Horse and Two Goats,” by R. K. Narayan appeared, in a somewhat different form, in *The New Yorker* in 1965. It was first published in its present form in the collection *A Horse and Two Goats A Horse and Two Goats* (1970), and was later included in *Under the Banyan Tree,* a selection of Narayan’s stories to 1984.

Narayan is admired as a writer whose novels and stories are remarkably consistent in quality. Yet one or two works do stand out—like the novel *The Guide* (1958) and the short story “A Horse and Two Goats.” To many, Narayan is best known as the creator of Malgudi, one of literature’s most enduring and endearing fictional worlds, so it is somewhat ironic that “A Horse and Two Goats” is one of only a handful of Narayan’s stories not to be set in the brilliantly-realised world of Malgudi. Nevertheless, it is a tale that perfectly displays his mastery of the short story form.

Muni, the central character of the story, is a typical Narayan hero who has achieved little, and who feels he has been dealt with unsympathetically by the world around him, and by fate. Unlike most of Narayan’s heroes, though, he is a lower-class village peasant, rather than the usual middle-class Malgudi-dweller, and he is very poor, as the appalling conditions of his life, always present behind the humour of the story, attest. Indeed, on one level this tale provides the non-Indian reader with a glimpse of the type of poverty and hardship that must be endured by the millions of Indians who, like Muni, have barely enough food to keep them alive:

*His wife lit the domestic fire at dawn, boiled water in a mud pot, threw into it a handful of millet flour, added salt, and gave him his first nourishment of the day. When he started out, she would put in his hand a packed lunch, once again the same millet cooked into a little ball, which he could swallow with a raw onion at midday.*

Narayan has, on occasions, been criticized for focussing on middle-class urban India in his stories, thereby excluding the poor of rural India who continue to make up the vast majority of the Indian population. But Narayan’s purpose as a storyteller has never been to educate the non-Indian reader about India. So although we can learn specific things about village life in India from this story, it isn’t about Indian problems or about Indian sensibilities as such. While what happens in “A Horse and Two Goats” is accurate to the particular of the Indian experience, it deliberately deals with themes that are quintessentially human, also. William Walsh has suggested it is a story about misunderstanding, a story about the gap between supposed and real understanding, a story about the element of incomprehension in human relationships.

“A Horse and Two Goats” is typical of Narayan’s pre-Modernist, village storyteller style of writing. In a deceptively simple, linear narrative Narayan unfolds the story of Muni, an old goatherd. In keeping with his usual narrative formula, Narayan carefully follows Muni as he goes about his daily, frequently humiliating existence—eating his meagre breakfast, visiting the local shopkeeper in a typically unsuccessful attempt tot get a few items of food on credit, and then taking his two scraggy goats to graze near the foot of the horse statute at the edge of the village. He spends the rest of his day crouching in the shade offered by the clay horse, or watching the traffic pass on the highway.

Once the nature of Muni’s world has been established, both the plot and the comedy of the story hinge on the disruption of that routine (as they do with the arrival of Vasu in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* or Tim in *The World ofNagaraj*). This is a formula Narayan uses frequently, and always with consummate skill. In “A Horse and Two Goats” the seemingly timeless routine is interrupted when a car stops and a “red-faced foreigner,” an American whose vehicle has run out of petrol, asks for directions to the nearest gas station.

This is where the comedy of misunderstanding takes over. After initially thinking he is being questioned about a crime by the khaki-clad foreigner, whom he assumes must be either a policeman or a soldier, Muni concludes that the man wants to buy his goats. Meanwhile the red-faced American, assuming the Tamil peasant owns the clay horse statute, which to the villagers, as Muni explains, “is our guardian, it means death to our adversaries,” sets about trying to buy it, so he can take it back to the United States to decorate his living room: “I’m going to keep him right in the middle of the room . . . we’ll stand around him and have our drinks.”

The humour and the irony of this tale lies in the total benign incomprehension that exists between

“The humour and the irony of this tale lies in the total benign incomprehension that exists between the two, not only in the way neither understands the other’s language, but also in the absolute contrast of their cultural and economic backgrounds, emphasised by the way each values the clay horse.”

the two, not only in the way neither understands the other’s language, but also in the absolute contrast of their cultural and economic backgrounds, emphasised by the way each values the clay horse. Much of this is conveyed through the wonderful double discourse that makes up a significant part of the story, with each of the characters happily developing his own hermetically-sealed interpretation of the other’s words and gestures. The story’s charm lies in the way Narayan refrains from passing judgement.

**Source:** Ralph J. Crane, “A Horse and Two Goats,” in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* Detroit: St. James Press, 1994.