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**Study Guide**

for

**A House for  
Mr Biswas**

by V. S. Naipaul



 **Glencoe  
McGraw-Hill**

New York, New York   Columbus, Ohio   Woodland Hills, California   Peoria, Illinois

# Meet V. S. Naipaul



*I'll tell you the way I try to write. If you look at anything very honestly, without prejudices—prejudices either of hope or a political point of view—many things are contained in what you observe.*

—from an interview with V. S. Naipaul

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, a small town on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, in August 1932. He was the grandson of Hindu immigrants from East India. During Naipaul's first six years, his family lived in his maternal grandparents' imposing home, which was known as Lion House and which formed the model for the Tulsi home in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Much like the children of Mr. Biswas, the Naipaul children moved with their parents several times before finally settling in Port of Spain, the ethnically and racially mixed capital of Trinidad and Tobago. A good student who had been drilled at home in vocabulary and comprehension by his journalist father, Naipaul won a scholarship to Trinidad's finest high school and later a government scholarship to study abroad. Like Anand in *A House for Mr Biswas*, V. S. Naipaul went to Oxford University in England. He earned a degree in English literature in 1954 and remained in England to pursue a writing career. He supported himself by working as a freelance writer and editor for the British Broadcasting Corporation radio program *Caribbean Voices*, which was broadcast to the West Indies. During this time, he wrote short

stories set in Trinidad. The stories would be published some years later as *Miguel Street*. In 1958 his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, a comic story of a Trinidadian con man, was accepted for publication. In 1961 *A House for Mr Biswas* became Naipaul's fourth published work and brought him international attention.

Reviewers in the United States and England admired Naipaul's writing, both for its sense of humor and for its portrayal of people who felt separated from the culture in which they lived. After the success of *A House for Mr Biswas*, the prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, who was also a historian, asked the novelist to consider writing a nonfiction work about the Caribbean. Naipaul felt uncertain about his ability to write nonfiction but decided to accept a scholarship to travel the islands. This assignment was the beginning of his expanded career as a journalist, and he became known as a writer who looked beneath the surface of a culture to examine its social and cultural underpinnings.

Naipaul's book about the Caribbean, *The Middle Passage* (1963), angered many Trinidadians because it criticized social conditions in the newly independent colony. Soon Naipaul received a grant to write about India, his ancestors' homeland. Before his journey to India, Naipaul had hoped that he would experience there a sense of belonging that he did not feel in Trinidad or England. But India's poor living conditions and failure to make Western-style progress disappointed Naipaul.

Naipaul is generally considered a British writer. His output is about evenly divided between fiction and travel journalism. His unwillingness to excuse what he considers evil, stupid, or foolish on the part of the governments and the peoples of developing countries sometimes offends those concerned as well as outside observers. Naipaul has won Britain's top literary awards—including the Booker Prize, given annually to the best full-length novel written in English by a citizen of the Commonwealth countries. In 1990 Queen Elizabeth knighted Naipaul for his achievements in literature.

# Introducing the Novel

*When he talked to me about writing I decided to be a writer. I thought he knew—we knew—that was established. I was aware that he thought I was somebody, even when I was small. That kind of love is a great thing, a great thing. It gives one an idea of oneself.*

—V. S. Naipaul, describing his relationship with his father

Naipaul's father encouraged his son to use the elder man's life story if Naipaul was ever at a loss for a theme, and that is what Naipaul did in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Naipaul has expressed a special affection for the novel. In the foreword that he wrote to the 1983 edition, he states:

*Of all my books, this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child.*

Naipaul's father, Seepersad, is the prototype for Mr. Biswas. Both the real man and the fictional Biswas were born in a village; lived with wealthy relatives; worked as a sign painter; married into a conservative, well-to-do Hindu family; held a series of jobs; and wandered from home to home. Like Mohun Biswas, Seepersad Naipaul found work on a newspaper after moving to Port of Spain.

The events in the life of Mr. Biswas's son Anand reflect those of the novel's author. Anand, like the young Naipaul, is pushed hard to excel at school and to share his father's involvement with writing. It is not difficult to imagine the character's growing up to become a world-famous novelist.

Critics have praised the novelist's descriptions of nature; his colorful, eccentric characters; and his vivid portrayal of life in the unique social and cultural milieu of Trinidad. Readers have enjoyed the humor in the raucous scenes of life with the Tulsi family, in Mr. Biswas's career as a tabloid-newspaper journalist, and in the language of the characters.

While in his more recent books Naipaul has taken a mostly dark and unhelpful view of the future of former British colonies like Trinidad, in this earlier novel, he moderated his pessimism

with comedy. Perhaps it is this comic sense more than anything else that has made *A House for Mr Biswas* a classic of world literature. Mr. Biswas's journey through life is hard, painful, and incomplete, but the reader cannot help but smile along the way.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The novel takes place over a period of almost fifty years—the lifetime of Mohun Biswas—during the first half of the twentieth century. The setting is the Caribbean island of Trinidad, which is part of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Trinidad's history has given the island the most ethnically diverse population in the Caribbean. The first European to arrive on the island was Christopher Columbus, during his third voyage, in 1498. At that time, people speaking the Arawakan and Carib languages already lived there. About two hundred years later, Spanish people began settling in the region, bringing with them enslaved people from Africa. Spain encouraged Roman Catholic people from other countries to move to the island, and the French settlers who came in large numbers greatly influenced its culture. Britain seized control of Trinidad from Spain in 1797, and under its rule the population became even more multicultural. Laborers arrived from India, and many immigrants from other areas, including China, Lebanon, and Africa, settled in the region.

Trinidad's diversity has affected its culture. English is the official language, but four creole languages (mixtures of English, Spanish, French, and African tongues) are also spoken, as are some East Indian languages. The island's distinctive steel-band and calypso music have their roots in African music, and its most popular sport—cricket—was introduced by the British.

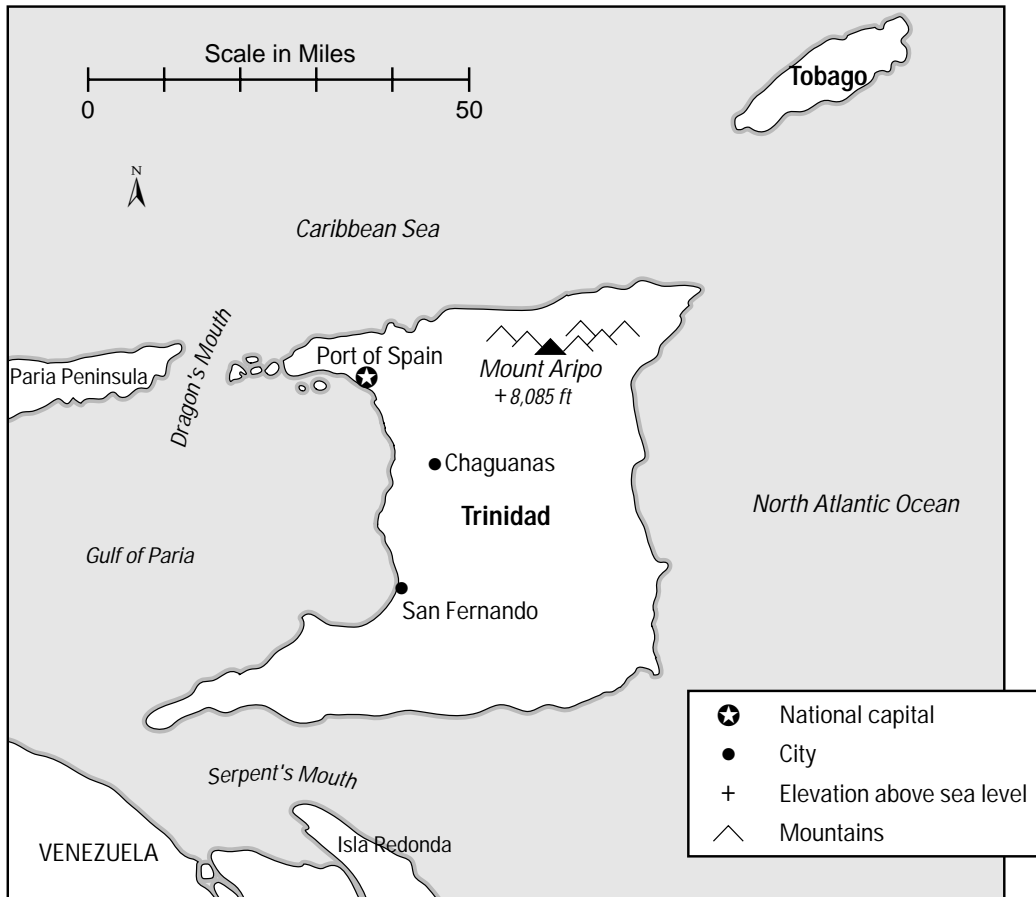
Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain in 1962. For many years previously, Trinidadians had been demanding, and moving toward, self-government. These years of transition serve as a backdrop for Mr. Biswas's story.

### Did You Know?

Mohun Biswas and most of the other characters in the novel are East Indian. Like V. S. Naipaul's family, they are descendants of people who emigrated from one British colony—India—to another during the 1800s. Around 1840, Indians began arriving in Trinidad as indentured workers. These were workers whose travel costs were paid by their employers in return for a set number of years of work,

usually on the island's sugarcane plantations. Indians also migrated to other countries that lived under British law and government. Today, the descendants of these indentured Indian workers can be found in former British colonies in Africa, East Asia, and South America. In these countries, as in Trinidad and Tobago, Indian culture, religions, and languages have remained alive.

### TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



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# Before You Read

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Prologue–Part One, Chapter 4

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

In chapter 1, an elderly father consoles his unhappy daughter with his favorite saying, “Fate. There is nothing we can do about it.” Do you agree? Or do you think that people can change the courses of their lives?

#### Journal Writing

In your journal, write about what fate means to you and how people might overcome their fates.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to discover how the concept of fate may be acting in the lives of several characters.

### BACKGROUND

#### Hinduism

With about 750 million believers, Hinduism is one of the world’s major religions. Hinduism developed in India around 500 B.C. and is the religion of the majority of Indians. Hindus also live in many other countries, including Nepal, Malaysia, Guyana, Suriname, and Sri Lanka. More than 1.2 million Hindus live in the United States.

Hinduism is different from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which developed from common roots in the Middle East and are *monotheistic* religions, that is, religions characterized by a belief in one god. Hinduism is a *polytheistic* religion, that is, a religion characterized by a belief in many gods. Each Hindu deity, however, represents one aspect of a single god, Brahma. The three Hindu deities most often worshipped today are the gods Vishnu and Shiva and the goddess Shakti.

Hindu worship practices are different from those of the monotheistic religions, which often revolve around public group activities. Hindus practice many private rituals, usually performed in the home for important events like marriages, births, and deaths. One common Hindu ritual performed in the novel is puja, a ceremonial dinner for a god. Rituals are usually performed by members of the traditional priestly class known as Brahmins. Hinduism’s holy scriptures include the Vedas, a collection of important rituals and commentaries, and a series of epic poems about gods and heroes called the *Bhagavadgita*.

One of the important beliefs of Hinduism is that all life is a series of births, deaths, and rebirths (called *samsara*) influenced by the moral purity of a person’s behavior and his or her attention to religious rituals (called *karma*). Karma is sometimes explained as the law of moral cause and effect. By following proper rituals, doing good deeds, and maintaining a purity of thought and action, a person can improve his or her karma and be reborn into a higher kind of life. Other key Hindu beliefs include *ahimsa* (the doctrine of refraining from harming any living being), *dharma* (conformity to one’s duty and nature), and *moksha* (the individual soul’s release from the bonds of transmigration). Many Hindus practice meditation and yoga—a system of exercises for attaining bodily or mental control and well-being. A Hindu teacher is called a *guru*.

Hindu society has traditionally been divided into groups called *castes*, based on heredity, which determine a person’s occupation and status. However, the influence of caste has been weakening, and discrimination based on caste is now frowned upon in democratic India.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**Creole** [krē’ōl] *n.* in the West Indies, a white person of European descent, especially Spanish or French

**decrepit** [di krep’it] *adj.* broken down

**deference** [def’ər əns] *n.* respect and esteem due to a superior or an elder

**morose** [mə rōs’] *adj.* gloomy

**prolix** [prō līks’] *adj.* wordy



# Active Reading

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Prologue–Part One, Chapter 4

Mr. Biswas is often in rebellion against the circumstances of his life, including his living conditions, his work life, and his relationships with his in-laws. As you read this section of the novel, use the chart on this page to note Mr. Biswas's acts of rebellion, both large and small, and the results of those acts.

Act of Rebellion	Result(s)
Despite the pundit's warning, Mr. Biswas plays in the stream while watching the calf.	First, the calf drowns; then his father drowns.

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# Responding

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Prologue–Part One, Chapter 4

### Personal Response

What words and phrases would you use to describe Mr. Biswas? What are your feelings about him? Explain.

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. What predictions does the midwife make about Mr. Biswas's future? On what evidence does she base these predictions? In what way can predictions like these have an effect on someone's life or behavior?

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2. How does Mr. Biswas's father die? What happens to the family as a result of the death? Do you think that fate played a role in these events? Explain your answer.

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3. Who beats Mr. Biswas at Hanuman House? What event caused the beating? What happens to Mr. Biswas and his family as a result of the beating?

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# Responding

## *A House for Mr Biswas Prologue–Part One, Chapter 4*

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. How does Mr. Biswas alienate his shop customers while living and working at The Chase? Do you think that the problems are his fault? Explain.

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5. In the prologue to the novel, V. S. Naipaul reveals the plot and the ending of the story. Why, in your opinion, might he have decided to do this? What does the story gain and lose by this decision?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Symbolism

Critics have noted that *A House for Mr Biswas* can be read both as the particular story of one individual and as a larger commentary on colonial and postcolonial society. One way in which Naipaul creates such multiple meanings is through the use of symbolism. Find and review the passage in the last quarter of Chapter 4 in which a small boy standing beside a hut watches the bus and the road as darkness falls around him. Reread this passage. Then write a paragraph explaining how this image can be seen as symbolic both of Mr. Biswas's life and of the uncertain future that awaits a colonized country.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

In the first section of the novel, several marriages take place, including that of Mr. Biswas and Shama. In your group, identify three or four of these marriages. Make a short list of words and phrases that describe each one. Then discuss how the circumstances of the couples' lives have affected their relationships. Take into consideration the couples' religious beliefs, their cultural backgrounds, and the economy of Trinidad.

##### Math Connection

With a partner, identify the lines in the prologue and the first four chapters of the book that give clues about Mr. Biswas's age. Using these clues, work together to decide approximately how old Mr. Biswas was when he moved to the back trace, when he got married, when he lived at The Chase, and when he left The Chase. Compare your answers and the clues you used to find them with those of other student teams.



*Save your work for your portfolio.*

# Before You Read

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Part One, Chapter 5–Part Two, Chapter 2

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

Henry David Thoreau, the author of *Walden*, wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Do you agree with him?

#### Sharing Ideas

Discuss this quotation from *Walden* with a partner. What kinds of things can people do to prevent lives of quiet desperation?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how the life of Mr. Biswas becomes more and more desperate.

### BACKGROUND

#### Trinidad

V. S. Naipaul’s birthplace and the setting for *A House for Mr Biswas* is an island nation seven miles off the northeast coast of Venezuela. Trinidad is a little smaller than the state of Delaware. Since 1962 it has been independent and, with a nearby smaller island, part of the republic of Trinidad and Tobago. About 40 percent of today’s approximately 1.2 million Trinidadians are of African descent; another 40 percent are of Indian descent; and the rest, sometimes referred to as Creoles, are mixtures from different ethnic backgrounds.

Trinidad and Tobago is relatively wealthy, compared with many of its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors. Its economy is dominated by the oil and natural gas industry, which has replaced sugarcane as the major source of wealth. The country contains huge oil refineries. Trinidad is known for its calypso and steel-drum music; its spirited carnival celebrations, similar to Mardi Gras; and its champion cricket players. The island’s lush tropical beauty has made it a popular tourist destination.

#### Did You Know?

Trinidadians, like many Caribbean peoples, speak a variety of languages, often creating their own special blends of English, Spanish, French, African, Asian, and native languages. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, the characters speak Hindi, the official language of India, as well as Trinidadian English, which is characterized by a simplified grammar and the omission of words or word endings. You can tell when characters are speaking Hindi because the dialogue is translated as grammatically correct English. Sometimes Naipaul tells the reader which language is being used.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

**deprecatory** [dep’rə kə tōr’ē] *adj.* apologetic; disapproving

**duplicity** [dōō plis’ə tē] *n.* deceptiveness

**inscrutable** [in skrōō’tə bəl] *adj.* mysterious

**meticulously** [mi tik’yə ləs lē] *adv.* carefully

**sedition** [si dish’əs] *adj.* rebellious

**squalid** [skwol’id] *adj.* dirty; repulsive

**sully** [sul’ē] *v.* to stain

**tenuous** [ten’ū əs] *adj.* flimsy

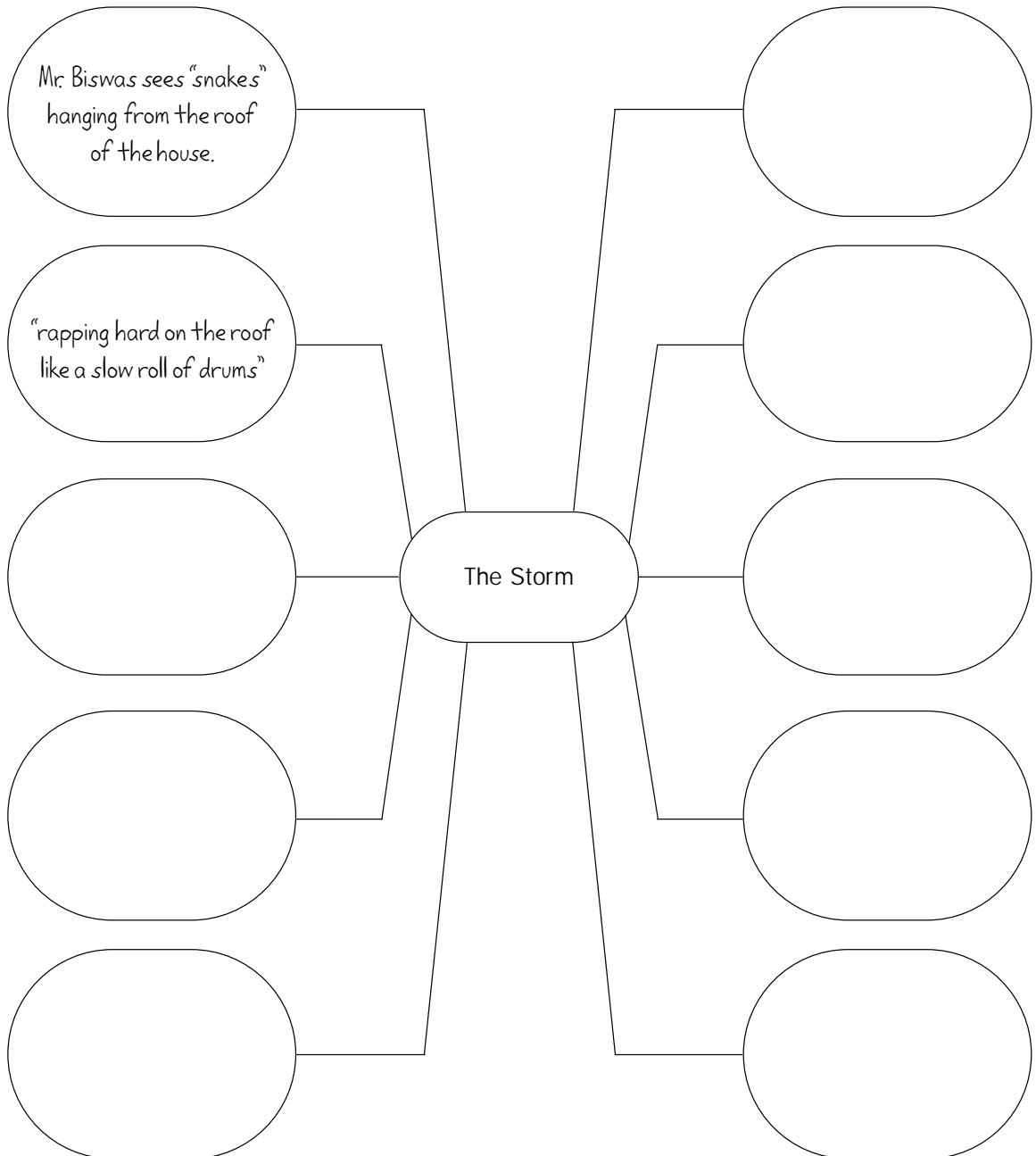
**torpid** [tōr’pid] *adj.* inactive

**ungainly** [un gān’lē] *adj.* awkward

# Active Reading

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Part One, Chapter 5–Part Two, Chapter 2

Novelists often use natural events to mirror and magnify their characters' inner states and struggles. One example of this occurs in Chapter 5, Part One, of *A House for Mr Biswas*. The severe storm reflects Mr. Biswas's inner turmoil and disordered psychological state. As you read this section, note in the word web below the events, the words, or the phrases that Naipaul uses to portray the storm vividly and to link it with Mr. Biswas's mental condition.



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# Responding

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Part One, Chapter 5–Part Two, Chapter 2

### Personal Response

V. S. Naipaul's style in *A House for Mr Biswas* is often described as "comic realism." What episodes, conversations, or descriptions from this section struck you as funny? Why?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. What special gift does Mr. Biswas give Savi? What happens to it? What does this gift tell you about Shama?

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2. What is the title of the short story that Mr. Biswas unsuccessfully tries to write? Why do you think he chose this subject?

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3. What changes does Mr. Biswas's newspaper job in Port of Spain bring about in his life and relationships?

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# Responding

## *A House for Mr Biswas*

### Part One, Chapter 5–Part Two, Chapter 2

#### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

##### Evaluate and Connect

4. Do you find Mr. Biswas a sympathetic character? Why or why not? What risks do authors take when they give their main characters negative qualities and make them difficult for readers to like? Why might the result be worth the risk?

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5. Mr. Biswas's feelings about Hanuman House and the Tulsis change according to his circumstances and his need for the family's support. Why do you think people's attitudes toward their families change in this way? In what ways can a family be both a source of support for a person's growth and a barrier to development of a person's self-identity?

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#### Literature and Writing

##### A Life of Quiet Desperation

In this section of the novel, Mr. Biswas's dissatisfaction with life reaches a crisis. Write an evaluation of his mental and emotional state, as shown by events in this section. Examine episodes such as his frequent quarrels with his family, his purchase of the doll house, his longing for his own home, his mental and emotional collapse before and during the storm at Green Vale, his short story, and his constant fear of being fired from his newspaper job. Conclude your evaluation with suggestions on how Mr. Biswas could regain his mental and emotional stability.

##### Extending Your Response

###### Literature Groups

Toward the end of this section of the novel, Mr. Biswas and his son Anand begin to understand each other better and grow closer. In your group, discuss what makes for a positive relationship between parents and their children. List the qualities of a positive relationship; then find examples in the novel that illustrate those qualities.

###### Performing

Radio call-in shows in which listeners describe personal problems and receive advice from professional counselors are popular. Create a script for such a show, using characters from *A House for Mr Biswas* as the callers. Examine the chapters you have read so far for incidents, situations, and problems that the characters could call in about. For example, Mr. Biswas might ask the radio host how to deal with his brother-in-law Govind, or Shama might ask how to encourage her husband to appreciate her efforts to keep a pleasant home. Script five or six calls, along with the host's responses, and perform your show for the class.



*Save your work for your portfolio.*

# Before You Read

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Part Two, Chapter 3–Epilogue

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Have you ever been pressured by adults to succeed in something that was also important to you?

#### Sharing Ideas

What role do you think parents or guardians should play in helping children succeed? Discuss with a partner how parents, guardians, and other adults can help young people achieve goals.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to see how a family reacts to Anand's bid for success.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Colonialism and *A House for Mr Biswas*

*Colonialism* refers to the control of one power over a dependent area or people. Beginning around 1500, first Spain and Portugal and then other European countries began to compete for colonies around the world. This competition led to many wars. Being under colonial rule profoundly affected many countries in what is now called the developing world—including Trinidad, V. S. Naipaul's home, and India, the home of his ancestors.

Many readers of *A House for Mr Biswas* have seen the novel as a symbolic representation of the colonial experience. According to this view, the Tulsis represent the mother country, Great Britain, which strictly controlled the colony's daily life and development. Mr. Biswas would represent the colonized people. He is economically and psychologically dependent on Mrs. Tulsi (whom he calls the old queen, perhaps recalling the height of British colonialism under Queen Victoria). He struggles for independence and freedom, but his progress is slow and difficult. Like many former colonists, Mr. Biswas has not had the opportunity to learn the skills needed to manage in an independent society. His attempt to run the store at The Chase is a disaster, and he is ill-suited to oversee the sugarcane workers. Even his self-identity has been jumbled and his traditional roots obscured; he does not know the location of the house he lived in as a boy. One book reviewer believed that the Tulsi family represented colonial slaveholders and pointed out similarities between the Tulsis' activities and those of the slaveholders of the 1800s.

While it may be seen as a representation of colonialism, the novel is many other things as well. *A House for Mr Biswas* can be read as an account of Naipaul's father's struggles to make a life for his family, as an autobiographical account of how Naipaul came to be an author and an outcast from his homeland, or as a personalized account of the experiences of thousands of Indian immigrants in Trinidad. The novel is enriched by the fact that it can be read on several different levels.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**caprices** [kə prēs' əz] *n.* whims

**cowed** [kəʊd] *adj.* intimidated

**debase** [di bās'] *v.* to lower in value

**homilies** [hɒm' ə lēz] *n.* short sermons on a moral theme; inspirational catch phrases

**lethargy** [lɛθ' ə r jē] *n.* sluggishness

**misanthrope** [mɪs' ə n θrɒp'] *n.* person who hates people

**quay** [kē, kā] *n.* dock

# Active Reading

## *A House for Mr Biswas Part Two, Chapter 3–Epilogue*

In this final section of the novel, Mr. Biswas is engaged in competition with Govind and the character he calls W. C. Tuttle. As you read, use the chart on this page to note what things the men compete over, what events result, and what the outcome of each event is.

Source of Competition	Events and Outcomes
Who has the most furniture?	The Biswases buy a glass cabinet, which further crowds them and gets them into debt.

# Responding

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Part Two, Chapter 3–Epilogue

### Personal Response

List several adjectives that could describe the end of the novel. Explain why you choose each.

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Who are the Deserving Destitutes? What is ironic about Mr. Biswas's writing stories about them?

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2. Who is Miss Logie? What are Mr. Biswas's feelings about his home and family when she comes to visit?

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3. From whom does Mr. Biswas finally acquire his house? What mistakes does he make in deciding to buy the house?

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# Responding

## *A House for Mr Biswas* Part Two, Chapter 3–Epilogue

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. In the **Focus Activity**, you discussed the role that adults should play in helping their children succeed. Evaluate Mr. Biswas's involvement with Anand's education and examination. Support your evaluation with evidence from the novel.

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5. Toward the end of his life, Mr. Biswas begins to live through his children. Find passages in the novel which indicate that he does so. What might be some reasons for his doing so?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Letter to Anand

One of the themes of the novel is personal responsibility: to what extent are people responsible for what happens to them? Imagine that Mr. Biswas's son Anand has asked you whether his father's bad experiences were his own fault. Write a letter to Anand, answering his question and justifying your answer with evidence from Mr. Biswas's life.

### Extending Your Response

#### Literature Groups

Throughout history philosophers have debated about what makes for a happy life. What do you think? Discuss in your group what things are necessary for happiness. You might want to consider material aspects (food, water, shelter, warmth, money), emotional aspects (love of family and friends, satisfying work, commitment), and spiritual aspects (involvement in something greater than oneself, appreciation of art and beauty, a sense of self-worth). Work together to make a list of things that you consider necessary for happiness. According to your list, did Mr. Biswas have a happy life? Why or why not?

#### Art Connection

In Chapter 13, Mr. Biswas has assembled all his possessions on the lorry for the final move to the house on Sikkim Street and is musing about "the gatherings of a lifetime, for so long scattered and even unnoticed." Imagine that you are in Mr. Biswas's place. Which of your possessions might be placed on the lorry? What memories would they call up for you? How might the possessions be considered symbols of certain periods in your life, of important events, or of meaningful people and experiences? Create a collage of some of the gatherings of your lifetime and what they mean to you.



*Save your work for your portfolio.*



# Dead Men's Path

Chinua Achebe

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Think of an experience from your own life involving a conflict between an old way and a new way of doing something. How was the situation resolved? Were there compromises, or did one person's or group's way of thinking win out completely over another's?

### Background

This short story is taken from *Girls at War*, a collection of stories by one of Africa's best-known writers, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria (1930–). The schoolmaster in this story is a typical Achebe character who finds that resolving conflicts involving different sets of values can be a complicated task. Achebe is the author of *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*, novels that focus on the conflict between traditional African culture and European values. Another novel, *A Man of the People*, deals with the difficulties that newly independent colonial nations face.

## Responding to the Reading

1. How would you describe Michael's attitude toward the opinions of others? What evidence from the story supports your answer?

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2. What proverb does the priest quote to Michael? What do you think the meaning of this proverb is? Do any of the characters in the story follow the proverb? Explain your answer.

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3. What are some things that Michael could have done to defuse the tension between the villagers and the school?

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4. **Making Connections** How successful are Michael Obi and Mr. Biswas in their rebellions against traditional values?

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## Learning for Life

At the end of this story, the supervisor writes a report that blames the "tribal-war situation" on Michael's "misguided zeal." Imagine that you are the supervisor writing the report. How might the rest of this report read? Find evidence in the story upon which to base the report.

# In the Middle of the Journey

V. S. Naipaul

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Think of a time when you were finally able to visit a place that you had long wanted to see. What were your feelings on finally attaining this goal? Were you disappointed, were you agreeably surprised, or was the place exactly what you expected?

### Background

V. S. Naipaul wrote this essay for the *Illustrated Weekly of India* during his first trip to the land of his ancestors. It was published in the October 28, 1962, issue. In a series of articles, which formed the basis for his first book about India, *An Area of Darkness* (1965), Naipaul chronicled his reactions to the civilization that had excited his imagination for so long.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What does Naipaul say about the status of the outsider? How has the visit to India helped him realize the importance of this outsider role in his own self-identity?

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2. Do you think Naipaul was disappointed in India? Support your answer with evidence from the article.

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3. The articles that Naipaul wrote on his trip to India, along with the book that followed, angered many Indians. What passages in the article might have been especially irritating to Indian readers? Why?

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4. **Making Connections** Find a passage in this article that reminds you of something in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Analyze these similarities and explain why the passage reminds you of one in the novel.

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## Art Connection

Choose a passage in the article and draw a cartoon of V. S. Naipaul in India. Analyze the text for details to include in your cartoon. Write a caption or a balloon monologue in which you express Naipaul's feelings about visiting the land of his ancestors.

# The Home, On the Seashore, and The Merchant

Rabindranath Tagore

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

If you wanted to capture a feeling of great joy, peace, or hope in a sixty-second film sequence, toward what would you turn your camera?

### Background

Rabindranath Tagore, born in Calcutta in 1861, published his first poems at the age of fifteen. Throughout the rest of his eighty years of life, he continued to write and publish not only poetry but also songs, plays, short stories, and novels. Beloved in his native India, Tagore was knighted in Britain and awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913. A major theme of his work is the profound meaning to be found in simplicity.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Identify one metaphor and one instance of personification in “The Home,” and tell how these devices add to the poem’s meaning.

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2. In “On the Seashore,” what does Tagore imply about children in the stanza beginning with “they know not how to swim . . .”? In your opinion, does he think children or adults are better off? Explain.

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3. In “The Merchant,” Tagore uses hyperbole, or exaggeration, for effect. Give examples of hyperbole from the poem. What effect do you think the speaker intends to create with hyperbole? How does the use of hyperbole relate to his feelings about his mother?

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4. **Making Connections** Compare “The Home” with the passage in *A House for Mr Biswas* in which Mr. Biswas reflects on the image of a lone child standing outside his isolated home (Part One, Chapter 4). What are the differences and similarities between the passage and the poem? In your answer, consider the authors’ tones as well as their subjects and descriptions.

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## Creative Writing

Each of these poems provides a snapshot of life. Choose one of the poems and use it as a springboard for a character sketch or a short story, developing the characters, the setting, or the situation that Tagore describes. In your own work, try to remain true to the theme and the tone of the poem.

# Why I Live at the P. O.

Eudora Welty

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

How do most people want to be treated by their families? What advice would you give families to ensure that every member is treated in this way?

### Background

Born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, novelist and story-writer Eudora Welty is known for her comic portrayals of life in her home state. In her work, she sometimes mixes folktales, mythology, and tall tales with realistic descriptions. Welty traveled Mississippi extensively for her job with the WPA in the mid-1930s and soon thereafter began publishing stories. “Why I Live at the P. O.” is among these early works, and it remains one of this prolific and highly respected writer’s best-loved stories.

## Responding to the Reading

1. How are Stella-Rondo and the narrator related? How is the narrator related to Papa-Daddy? Who appears to be the favorite of the family?

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2. With whom does Papa-Daddy get upset and why? In your opinion, is his anger justified?

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3. At what point does the narrator decide to move out? Why is it possible for her to move to the post office?

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4. **Making Connections** How does the family in the story compare with the Tulsi family? Give at least one specific example in your answer.

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## Drama Connection

The comic dialogue in this story provides a good opportunity for dramatization. With a small group, choose a humorous scene—the first supper scene, the scene in which the narrator wonders whether Shirley-T. can talk, or the scene in which the narrator gathers her things in preparation for a move. Assign parts, rehearse the scene, and perform it for the class.

# When Greek Meets Greek

Samuel Selvon

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Under what circumstances might a person have to pretend to be someone other than who he or she actually is?

### Background

Like V. S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon was a Trinidadian writer whose ancestors came from India. Although he moved to London and eventually settled in Canada, Selvon stayed close to his island roots and frequently used Trinidadian dialect in his stories, novels, and plays.

## Responding to the Reading

1. Why is Ram having a hard time finding a place to live?

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2. What does Ram do to convince the landlord to rent him a room? Why does he need to do this? What almost ruins his attempt?

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3. How is the end of the story ironic?

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4. **Making Connections** When the contact man suggests that Ram put on a turban and pretend to be from India, Ram says, "I am a born Trinidadian, a real Creole." In your opinion, how does Ram's attitude toward his race and nationality compare with Mr. Biswas's attitude?

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## Learning for Life

Imagine that the events in the story happened in the United States and that you are a lawyer hired by Ram. Use the library, the Internet, or another source to find information about federal and state fair-housing laws; then write Ram's landlord a letter explaining the illegality, and the possible consequences, of his actions.

## TEST: *A House for Mr Biswas*

### Recall and Interpret (40 points total; 5 points each)

Write the letter of the best answer.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The reason that Mr. Biswas's family is split up when he is a young child is  
 a. the death of his mother. c. the loss of the family store.  
 b. the death of his father. d. the predictions of the pundit.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Mr. Biswas is pressured into marrying Shama by  
 a. his mother. c. Shama's sisters.  
 b. Jairam. d. Seth and Mrs. Tulsi.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Mr. Biswas offends his customers at the shop in The Chase by  
 a. hiring a lawyer to collect bad debts. c. having the house blessed by Hari.  
 b. charging high prices. d. allowing Shama to beat the children.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Mr. Biswas's stay at Green Vale is ended by  
 a. a terrible storm. c. his nervous breakdown.  
 b. the birth of his fourth child. d. his fight with Seth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. In Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas lives  
 a. in a small room at the newspaper office. c. at Anand's school.  
 b. first with his sister, then with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad. d. at Hanuman House.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The Tulsis' effect on the estate at Shorthills is  
 a. beneficial. c. neutral.  
 b. disastrous. d. scientific.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Mr. Biswas loses his good job at the welfare office when  
 a. the department is eliminated. c. he insults a Deserving Destitute.  
 b. Miss Logie becomes disgusted by his family and home. d. he embarrasses himself by reading a poem to the literary group.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. After he loses his job at the newspaper, Mr. Biswas feels the only one who can comfort him is  
 a. Shama. c. Anand.  
 b. Owad. d. W. C. Tuttle.

### Evaluate and Connect (60 points total; 30 points each)

Answer two of the following essay questions on a separate sheet of paper.

- Houses are a very important symbol in the novel. The many different houses in which Mr. Biswas lives reflect different aspects of his character and personality. Examine the novel to find passages that show how the houses reveal aspects of Mr. Biswas's life. Analyze how Naipaul uses the symbol of the house to enrich his portrayal of Mr. Biswas's life.
- Evaluate how Naipaul uses the character of Mr. Biswas to develop the theme of the individual versus society.
- Discuss how the novel can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of colonialism. Cite evidence from the novel to support this reading. Explain similarities between the conditions of the characters and the conditions of colonial peoples.