CHAPTER - II

VISION OF R.K. NARAYAN
Dante calls his very serious work on the human soul's evolution *The Divine Comedy*. It is a work that presents states of horror with the utmost elaboration, and oftentimes with a frightening reality. It does speak of the beatific vision but what haunts the mind is the horrors of hell. Even if the reader does not take the narrow theological base of the work, he cannot fail to be struck by the psychological reality of the allegory. Sojourning through Inferno and Purgatorio with anguished concern, Dante passes to the solemn celebration of the peace that passes all understanding. It is with this progress through all depravity and consequent suffering that ultimately Dante comes to his vision of Divine place. This devout consummation could not be termed tragic and therefore, perhaps, Dante calls his work *Divina Commedia*. Thus the term 'comedy' denotes a philosophical exploration of the spiritual vicissitudes of man.

Comedy often gets the connotation of the comic, the somewhat unreal, the somewhat farcical. In the seventh edition of *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams says:

> In the most common literary application, a comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfiture engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern. We are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters (p 38).

Yet some of the great comedies do not eschew the consideration of suffering. Comedy is not in this context a sufficiently large term.
The general idea that comedy is not philosophic is not well informed. Comedy, paradoxically can be serious, dealing with sadness and human realities. R.K. Narayan too is a writer of a peculiar sadness in his comedy. In one of his essays Narayan speaks of the hardships that he is put to by his reputation as a humorous writer. People expect every word of his to be full of humour. Narayan's works show that such comedy is not his intention at all. Narayan does not go into exquisite poetry and sentiment. Nevertheless his works contain abundant evidence of his awareness of the sadness of loneliness, and of many other shades of sadness. All this means that Narayan has a worldview and that is much more comprehensive than it is ordinarily credited with.

Many critics have established that Shakespeare's comedy has the note of sadness quite often. It is that which gives his writing comprehensiveness, whereas Greek tragedy gains its intensity through its acuteness. Shakespeare's tragedy often strays into other elements and gains a dispersed tragic effect. His comedy contains in this way an essential element of sadness. For instance in Twelfth Night, Feste the clown, is haunted by a sense of the passing of time and his inspired clowning has its origin in a fear of want which is what prompts him to look for money wherever he goes and whomever he meets. There is an exquisite sadness underneath the melody of Cesario's poetry.

A reading of the novels and short stories of Narayan, reveals that his world view has certain characteristics. This is inevitable. A person looks at life from some characteristic angle. Out of the endless procession of events and experiences in life, he notices a select few. When he happens to be an artist who expresses himself in writing, he naturally presents his perceptions. Thus in all his writings, and despite all his efforts at
objectivity, he expresses his own ideas of life. In this way Narayan also expresses a view of life.

As a person grows in age his views change through experience and exposure. Such change can naturally mean change or modification of point of view or convictions. It is not even necessary that a person's ideas can change only if he lives a long life. Lionel Trilling interprets Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" as a poem that proclaims a change in the way in which he sees the world. Trilling says that in his changed way Wordsworth accommodates the tragic vision also, which, till then, he could not do. When such a fundamental change occurs in the vision of Wordsworth he is probably in his thirties (123-151). If a writer's career is long, it is almost inevitable that his views and convictions change or expand.

Narayan's views have not changed fundamentally. But his attitudes to experiences and artistic presentation of experiences have undergone changes. For instance Narayan never takes a righteous and condemnatory attitude to the deeds and qualities of his characters. When there is disapproval it is expressed with an unmistakable sense of tolerance. But in his expression of certain aspects of life Narayan was rather neutral and unemphatic in his early days. For instance, the relationship between the sexes was something minimally touched upon. But in novels like The Painter of Signs (1976), his treatment of this subject becomes quite uninhibited. Only, he seems to consider love and sex important enough experiences but not dominating experiences.

Narayan makes no general statements about his philosophical ideas or convictions. Narayan's characters do not discuss or canvass philosophical ideas. He attempts no interpretation of Indian philosophical ideas to non-Indians. But that does not
mean that he has no ideas, that his stories are a collation of episodes. It is possible to read into some of his stories, philosophical ideas of modern systems of thought. But it is even possible to connect him with philosophical ideas that are found in modern systems of thought. One characteristic that is found repeatedly in R.K. Narayan’s works is a certain emphasis on the unexpectedness and unpredictability of life. Human nature responds to circumstances in many ways. But the way in which circumstances develop is the vision of an author inviting special attention. In the stories and novels of Narayan circumstances appear and develop with an extraordinary arbitrariness, sometimes even bordering on fantasy. What is expected seems to be deliberately thwarted and what is very unexpected is presented casually. But, paradoxically, the casualness gives them an assurance and emphasis that cannot be missed.

In literature that emphasizes circumstances, the way characters respond to the situations present an idea of the writer’s attitude to human destiny. It may sound odd if ideas like human destiny are discussed in relation to the work of R.K. Narayan. That is because it is assumed that comedy is only comic. R.K. Narayan is indeed capable of far greater effects than that. In many of his short stories and novels, things happen that cannot be rationally explained. In facing these circumstances Narayan’s characters do not appear as super-men. They are just ordinary people. Many of them are eccentric and cranky. So there is an appearance of light-heartedness or farcicality in Narayan’s works. He presents different types of this farcical element. One is the clever exploitation of the style of exaggeration which is marked in a narrator like the Talkative Man. But in all novels and short stories which are far more realistic it is this element of unexpectedness and unpredictability that dominates. There are stories in which the obvious farcical mode
is toned down but even in these the element of unexpectedness and unpredictability is strong.

In literature there are also themes which have a tradition of high seriousness. These have been repeatedly dealt with, with great intensity and they all move us deeply. One such theme is the theme of the poor and the humble whose the kingdom of God is. Kamala Das writes a beautiful story on this theme called "Padmavathy the Harlot." Anatole France tells in "The Juggler" the story of a humble fellow who dedicates all his art to the Virgin. In such stories, the message is very clear. These were humble people but they could win God's compassion because of their absolute devotion and self-surrender. From their lowly position they still enter the Kingdom of God. The stories contrast the humble beginning with the exalted end. Narayan takes a theme like this and emphasises the unpredictability of the man of the story.

"House Opposite" is R.K.Narayan’s story on a recluse. This recluse lives in a little room opposite to which is a house where a shameless woman lives. When he sees the way the woman lives he is filled with anger. He lives an ascetic life, mortifying his flesh. He seeks to quiet his thoughts and meditate on God:

Even in the deepest state of meditation, he could not help hearing the creaking of the door across the street when a client left after a night of debauchery. He vigorously suppressed all cravings of the palate, and punished his body in a dozen ways. If you asked him why, he would have been at a loss to explain. He was the antithesis of the athlete who flexed his muscles and watched his expanding chest before a mirror. Our hermit, on the contrary, kept a minute check of his emaciation and felt a peculiar
thrill out of such an achievement. He was only following without questioning his ancient guru's instructions, and hoped thus to attain spiritual liberation (UBT 10-11).

This is the way of self-denial, not the way of affirmation. Nature which is so suppressed is almost sure to avenge itself. Even Shakespeare deals with this theme. In Twelfth Night, Olivia swears that for seven years she would not allow the sun itself to have ample vision of her face. In Love's Labour's Lost, the Prince and his companions forswear the company of women for five years. Ironically, immediately thereafter they are overwhelmed by love. The poor hermit of Narayan is in an unenviable condition: the more he tries to keep the passions away, the more they disturb him. One day he happens to see her and his mind is full of her:

One afternoon, opening the window to sweep the dust on the sill, he noticed her standing on her doorstep, watching the street. His temples throbbed with rush of blood. He studied her person -- chiselled features, but sunk in fatty folds. She possessed, however, a seductive outline; her forearms were cushion-like and perhaps the feel of those encircling arms attracted men. His gaze, once it had begun to hover about her body, would not return to its anchor -- which should normally be the tip of one's nose, as enjoined by his guru and the Yoga Shastras (UBT 11).

Failing to retrieve his mind from her, he finds his mind filled with hatred and decides to leave the place. Her inequity fills him with disgust. But the suppressed instincts are taking their revenge and his very disgust is the expression of his thwarted desires and his frustrated spiritual aspirations. He even reminds himself of the story of the self-righteous
man who went to hell whereas the harlot whom he hated went to heaven. The harlot
sinned only with her body, but her detractor was corrupt mentally and could meditate on
nothing except her activities. When he is about to leave with his meagre possessions the
woman comes to him humbly with a tray of fruits and flowers. She says she has come to
seek the blessing of the saint because it is a day of remembrance for her mother:

All the lines he had rehearsed for a confrontation deserted him at this
moment; looking at her flabby figure, the dark rings under her eyes, he felt
pity. As she bent down to prostrate, he noticed that her hair was in-
differently dyed and that the parting in the middle widened into a bald
patch over which a string of jasmine dangled loosely. He touched her tray
with the tip of his finger as a token of acceptance, and went down the
street without a word

(UBT 13).

It is difficult to understand what overwhelms this angry seeker and brings him to
a sudden surge of compassion. He sees before him a creature whose beauty, her only
capital, is fading away. Soon she would be ugly and old and may be sick too. The pathos
of the poor woman’s condition changes him. But whatever the feeling, it does not lead
him to change his mind. He leaves her vicinity, perhaps giving her his blessings as he
goes.

In such stories normally the contrast is between appearance and reality. Narayan
does emphasize the negative attitude of the man and emphasizes the futility of such a
course of action. Opposed to him is the woman who stands for human weaknesses and
utter lack of goodness. Possibly, both the ways are equally wrong. Yet suddenly he
leaves not with words of anger and condemnation but with a gesture of acceptance and
pity. What the gesture means is clear. The angry old man seems to have been exposed to an experience like the three experiences Prince Siddhartha was exposed to.

There are stories in which Narayan narrates a comic episode and it is always interesting to see how he brings about its end. He is not unduly worried about the strict possibility of actions and events. The events he narrates in this story show the wild possibilities of human nature. They recall to mind a story often told in religious discourses of our country, of a man who on his way to the temple, sees a friend of his going to meet his girl friend. When he stands before God, his mind is full of the joy his friend should be tasting in the company of his girl. But the voluptuary's mind is full at the same time with the thoughts of the joy his friend should be experiencing at the temple. So the voluptuary goes to heaven finally and the pious person to hell.

Narayan’s story seems to be a deliberate variation on this theme. Narayan looks at the situation with a realist-psychologist's concern and finds this spiritualist facing struggles within himself. Others do not see the struggles of such men. They interpret the appearances according to their own light. The morally weak woman yearns within herself for a higher life when she is immersed in a life she considers sinful. To her the tortured spiritual aspirant is the symbol of all the great things she wants to be. To him however she is a threat to his fragile and enforced purity. So the poor man runs away from her. But at the moment of running away he gets a sort of half spiritual compensation -- he sees the woman of pleasure aging visibly and he understands again the mutability of human life. When he leaves, therefore, there is a wry though not spontaneous renunciation or resignation. But whether Narayan endorses this intellectual resignation is not clear. This ambiguity is part of Narayan's craft. There is a touch of sour-grapism in the attitude of
the man. It is interesting that Narayan does not present any exalted spiritualist in his stories. He thinks mostly of the average of every kind, and the average always involves weakness.\(^1\)

There are many characters in R.K. Narayan who know nothing about what they may or may not do. Narayan creates these characters with the conviction that not many know their own mind. "Four Rupees" is a story of such a character. It starts with that declaration about its protagonist: "Ranga was never certain what he was going to do next" (\textit{UBT} 157). One day he goes out to the market place, depending on some odd job coming his way— as it ironically happens. He is not ambitious and a few annas a time quite satisfy him. But today he has a very odd job indeed coming his way. The servant of a rich family, a complete stranger, tells him that a brass pot in his master’s family has fallen into the well. He asks Ranga if he could get into the well and fish out the pot. Ranga does not know swimming and he has never before got into a well. Nevertheless he asks the servant what he would be paid for the job. When the servant asks him how much he would want, Ranga tells him that he could say that only when he has seen the well, but it couldn’t be less than two rupees:

"Yes, Follow me," the other said, and Ranga was astounded. He never thought that his offer would be accepted. He had never gone down a well before. He tried to excuse himself now. But the other would not let him go. He almost gripped him by the wrist and dragged him along. He

\(^1\) cf. The character of Raju in \textit{The Guide}. The very title is ironic— as the presentation of the career of the protagonist and the end of the novel is the peak of the ironic effect.
went protesting. "I don’t know anything about wells," he cried. "Oh, don’t say that, see the well first," said the servant, and clung to him. He added, "They have made life a hell for me for four days now. They will dismiss me if I don’t do anything about it today."

"But I know nothing about wells."

"Hush! None of it with me," admonished the old servant, and smiled significantly. "If you want an anna or two more, ask for it, don’t try these tricks."

"But, but," Ranga faltered, but the other offered him a beedi to smoke and silenced him. Ranga followed him resigned to his fate. He is taken to the well and the family hangs on his lips. He tells them that he couldn’t risk his life for anything less than four rupees. The family agrees, snuffing out his last hope that they might send him away unwilling to pay so much. Four rupees—he has never seen so much in a lump. He could idle for three days and silence his wife and mother-in-law. But yet to get into a deep well... he tries to wriggle out of it. They give him food to eat and after half-an-hour take him back to the well. Unable to escape he ties a rope to the crossbar of the well and lets the other end of the rope into the well. He slides down along the rope and halfway down pleads with them to let him go up. They don’t let him escape. He is frightened but they think that he is only dodging:

"If I don’t come up again, please tell my wife..." They burst into a laugh on hearing this. He felt so helpless that he said to himself: There is no way out. Let me die. He briskly went down. It became darker and
more eerie at every step. His ears grew dull and he felt heaviness at his chest. His eyes dimmed and he was only partly conscious when he reached the last foothold. His brain kept drumming, Four rupees, four rupees. I am dying, he kept saying to himself. Or am I dead? Ice-cold water lapped his feet. He bent down precariously and took a handful of water and drank it. He then dived into the water muttering, “Four rupees, four rupees.” His fingers combed the sandy bed and finally clutched a piece of rope. He dragged it up, and attached to it was the brass pot (UBT 159 - 160).

When he comes up they give him four annas more than he has asked for and he pleads for eight annas more. They grow impatient and tell him to learn contentment. When Ranga goes home, his wife and mother-in-law are, as usual, at the door. On seeing him his wife snarls that it is seven o’clock. When is she to buy the things and cook the food? He seems to think she is born to slave. It would be a fine lesson if he is made to do without a meal that night... He flourishes his four rupees and four annas. “Four rupees! Are you sure you didn’t steal it?” She asks him. He explains, showing the bruises on his elbows and knees. They just laugh and reply, “Never knew you to go near a well; more likely you have been in a scrape and pulled the money out of somebody’s pocket...” When his people see the fortune he has made at the very risk of his life they ask him if he has stolen the money. When he tells them his reluctant and enforced heroics, they say that it is more likely that he has picked somebody’s pocket.

A question may arise whether a sensible person would lend himself to such an exercise and risk his life. But the human mind is unpredictable. The person who bribes
the official for a driving license knows that it is likely to prove fatal to him. It seems to be a buried instinct for suicide. Whatever it is or is not, it is there in the human mind.

It may be questioned whether the story is comic. Certainly there is a strong element of the comic in the story. But when he goes down the well, frightened for his very life, and yet unable to help himself, it is comic no longer. It cannot be called tragic either. The tragic tone has been precluded by the very style from the very beginning. Everything happens casually. When he looks at the well, it looks like an evil thing, and when he desperately tries to wriggle out of his engagement, the comedy seems to be on the verge of collapse:

He felt like a condemned man. He stood for a long time gazing into the bottom of the well. He made one final attempt to extricate himself: “I can’t. I don’t know...” “Don’t say so,” they protested. Ranga felt puzzled why these people were so bent upon seeing him drowned. He had a momentary impulse to dash away and escape. He glanced at those around him. They stood in a ring as if forming a cordon. He felt that if he attempted an escape, they might pick him up bodily and drop him into the well. There seemed to be no hope of escape. He took off his ragged shirt, tucked up his dhoti (UBT 159).

Thus it is neither tragic, nor comic. A man might risk his life and do something wonderful. But others who know him do not easily recognize him for a hero. The question that arises here is whether Ranga is heroic. The character is typical. He is cowardly and foolhardy and stupid. Yet he does something that not many sensible people
dare do. This irrationality at the very core of life is something that Narayan emphasizes in his fiction.

People live engulfed in their own thoughts and therefore do not connect themselves with others easily. When poor Ranga is in an agony of fear at the prospect of going down the well, the others, possibly very worldly-wise, conclude that he is cleverly boosting his price. When the poor frustrated man asks that his wife be informed if he died in the attempt, they merely laugh. When he carries his fortune home those cruel people do not give him the credit for what he has done. Their attitude possibly has its justification in the light of his track record. From the angle of philosophy one might conclude that there is no truth in such “historical” and worldly-wise conclusions. But Narayan’s tone seems to try deliberately to put the reader off the scent of seriousness.

Another important theme may be considered here. Loneliness as a theme has a tradition. The Romantics had relished solitude as a means of communion with nature or with the soul. In the Renaissance mighty characters were seen as isolated characters. In the nineteenth century Arnold developed the theme of loneliness in many poems. For instance in intimate love poems like “Isolation: To Marguerite” and “Marguerite (continued)”, he elaborates on this idea. He compares the individual human souls to islands and calls the human condition “Enisled” and he is sure that a “god, a god, none less” willed this isolation. It is because of this conviction that this world has no peace, no love, no loyalty for Arnold that he pleads with his new-wed wife that at least the two of them should be true to each other. The theme is continued in no less haunting images in the works of the poets like T.S. Eliot. Prufrock’s isolation thwarted all his impulse for friendship and companionship with apprehensions that the ladies would turn away from
him and fix him like an insect commenting that his hair is wearing thin. When Arnold
speaks of human being "in the sea of life enisled," "... We mortal millions live alone" ("To Marguerite – continued", lines 1 & 4) and that a God ruled the severance of human
hearts and describes the human conditions as “Isolation without end / prolonged”
("Isolation: To Marguerite," lines 40 & 41), this loneliness is tragically presented. The
modernist Eliot presents it no less poignantly in poems like The Waste Land:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet (61 – 65).

Waiting for Godot and ever so many other modernist and post-modernist works
refer to this theme. A work like Waiting for Godot does use the comic mode
occasionally. Narayan deals with loneliness repeatedly but he does not highlight the
predicament.

"Gateman’s Gift" portrays loneliness of another type of character. Govind Singh, a former soldier who has seen service in the World War, gets the post of a gateman at
Engadia’s. For decades he is a very satisfied person who feels elated when he salutes his
British Manager morning and evening. When he retires, he gets a royal pension of
twelve rupees a month for life. He discovers that he is a good doll maker. He makes
lifelike dolls. He presents his office with some of his creations. Some of them present
the picture of the office and its workers in very minute detail. His Manager is happy with
these and to indicate his appreciation he sends his former employee a cheque by
registered post. The old man, being uneducated and inexperienced in registered articles, etc., is frightened. To his illiterate mind it seems that a registered article should carry only some bad news. This is typical of the class and the time. He is afraid to open it. He takes the envelope to many people and asks them to find out what the cover contains. They tell him that they should find out only by opening the letter. He does not want to do that. In terror the poor man loses his head and walks along the road breaking street lights:

A policeman put his hand on his shoulder. "Why did you do it?" Singh looked indignant. "I like to crack glass papaya fruit, that is all," was the reply. The constable said, "Come to the station."

"Oh, yes, when I was in Mesopotamia they put me on half-ration once," he said, and walked on to the station. He paused, tilted his head to the side and remarked, "This road is not straight ..." A few carriages and cycles were coming up to him. He found that everything was wrong about them. They seemed to need some advice in the matter. He stopped in the middle of the road, stretched out his arms and shouted "Halt!" The carriages stopped, the cyclists jumped off and Singh began a lecture: "When I was in Mesopotamia -- I will tell you fellows who don’t know anything about anything." The policeman dragged him away to the side and waved to the traffic to resume (MD 25).

One of the men blocked at the road junction is the accountant of Singh’s old office. He recognizes him and goes to him, alarmed at his strange appearance and doings. He finds the crumpled envelope in Singh’s hand, takes it and brings out its content -- a letter of
appreciation for his artwork and a cheque for a hundred rupees as a gift. He tells him that it is from the General Manager. As the crowd watches, Singh presses the letter worshipfully to his eyes. When the accountant assures him that Singh is perfectly all right and sane, he falls at his feet and tells him that he is a God to say that he is not mad. When he goes to his office on the next pension day they ask him what toys he is making. He tells them that he would never make toys again and that it is no occupation for a sane man. The poor man has agonised over the letter because he is afraid that it must be some bad news. The fear forces him into a peculiar loneliness. When a man creates a world for himself in that way it is difficult for anybody else to penetrate that world and to enter into proper communication with him.

Narayan reproduces this condition in its varying degrees. This is the mental condition of Iswaran before he rides into the river on his imaginary stallion in the story “Iswaran”. The unexpected good news upsets him thoroughly and he becomes a King in his imagination, riding his war-horse. His repeated failures in the examinations and the humiliation all round as the consequence isolate him even from his parents and others. That isolation is aggravated by this shock. The tenuous connection with the outside world gives way and he becomes a denizen of his imaginary world -- typically a world of romance with no connection with the world of reality.

Such is the world of all people who allow themselves to be possessed by one idea. Raju of The Guide, Mohan of “Selvi”, Subbiah of “Half-a-rupee Worth”, and even Margaiah of The Financial Expert are all characters suffering this isolating mono-mania. In fact that tendency is there in anybody. Swami expands his address at the universal
level, and his friend Rajan forgets to mention even his own address in the letter he writes his friends in Malgudi from Madras.

Quite a few kinds of loneliness can be identified in Narayan's stories. Iswaran is obsessed so much with his failure that his success in the examination drives him out of his senses. Subbiah's obsession with making money drives him so hard that he dies for a trifle of eight-annas. There is something ghoulishly sad about this kind of loneliness. But far away from this type of loneliness is the compelling loneliness of the Talkative Man. He belongs to the category that suffers from a sense of insecurity and inadequacy. The Talkative Man tells yarns about his adventures with tigers and men and road engines to reassure himself of the power of his imagination and to grab people's attention by something unique.

These stories do not indeed develop such ideas, but they are suggested. There is an isolation of the characters, which is really frightening. When Raaga tells his people of his adventure they just refuse to believe it and conclude he should have picked somebody's pocket. This demeaning of a person's ventures, going solely by the person's track record, is something that happens everywhere and all the time. A time might come very soon when poor Ranga is himself unable to vouch to himself for the momentousness of the event which is enforced on him trying his fate. This loneliness is here given a comic slant but it has all the essentials and potentialities of a story on tragic alienation.

So is it with "Half-a-rupee Worth" the story of Subbiah. Here is a cruel kind of loneliness that a man imposes on himself. This loneliness has its origin in the man's avarice: the obsession with material possessions which isolates him from his fellowmen and makes a monster of him. But this monster is the result of the failure to realise the
ultimate values of life -- the failure to ask oneself what all wealth is worth ultimately. The more man gets attached to the outward signs of prosperity, the farther he goes from true communion and the soothing influence of community and goodness. Tolstoy's great short story "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" speaks the same truth. The very title of Narayan's short story "Half-a Rupee Worth" indicates the moral of the story.

The opening paragraphs of the story describe how Subbiah turned into rice merchant who loved every inch of his dingy shop:

He liked the smell of gunny sack, he liked the smell of rice and husk, and he loved the warm feel of rice in his basket when it arrived fresh from the mill (ON 117).

His father had put him into the shop when he was only a boy. In those far-off days Subbiah had longed to be free, like other boys, but his father had resolutely imprisoned him in the shop:

Those were days when Subbiah loathed the rice bags which hemmed him in at the shop: he longed for the crowded streets, cinemas, football matches, and wrestling tournaments, which he glimpsed through the crowded shop door. But his father more or less kept him chained to the shop and discouraged all his other interests in life: "Boys should be horse-whipped if they are not to become brigands." He practised this theory of child-training with such steadfastness that in due course the little man had no eyes for anything in life except rice and no head for anything except the
price of grain, and he dreamt of rice and thought of rice and spoke of rice

*(ON 117 - 118)*.

This is a marvellous passage beautifully bringing out the perversion of the human instincts of a normal boy and it is the consequence of a person thrusting himself into another person's life as its arbiter and moulder. The boy had desired the freedom of the open world, the crowds that made company. But unfortunately he could only glimpse the crowded streets through the crowd at the shop door. The rice bags "hemmed him in at the shop" -- imprisoning him more and more closely. His father kept him chained to the shop and stifled all his other interests in life. His vision of life and of child-training was based on a cruel, narrow idea and he exercised his authority over his son's life with a horse-whip in hand, so much so the boy lost all natural contact with life. While a boy still, he became the little man with no eyes for anything except his business. His very instincts were corrupted and he dreamt of rice. Thus he became a mono-maniac.

The loss of naturalness however had its compensation. This deliberate shutting himself away from the world of men made Subbiah rich, and he surrounded himself with comforts and displays of wealth. There is something pathetic in this obsession with money and money-making. He becomes rich at a terrible cost to himself. He loses his capacity for human feeling and becomes a literal monster:

He gave his wife and children all the outward equipment of status, and made money hand-over-fist by heartlessness, shrewdness and slyness. There seemed to be no reason why it should not go on till eternity -- the same set of activities and interests, going on and on, money piling up and rice coming in and going out, and then one or the other of his sons to
acquire his shape and appearance and continue the work. This seemed, for all practical purposes, a region beyond life, death, and change (ON 118 - 119).

His assumptions were thus a crass negation of nature and human limitations -- a wilful blindness to realities of life's rhythms. But Subbiah went on to make himself richer when apparently disastrous developments confronted him: he learnt how to turn everything to his advantage, and traded on men's fears and miseries and thrrove on other people's difficulties. He did not scruple to take advantage of the anxieties of people, and sold rice to people at a high premium pretending that there was acute scarcity.

One evening, he is accosted by a poor man who begs him to sell him some rice, when he is about to close his shop:

"You must open your shop and give me rice. I can't let you go." Subbiah was stopped by the fervour of the other's speech. "My two children are crying for food and my old mother is nearly on the point of collapse. They've been starving" (ON 122).

This concern of the poor man, purely emotional, contrasts him with the cold, calculating, monstrous merchant. In all his poverty the poor man is human and in all his prosperity Subbiah is not. Subbiah, exploiting the poor man's anxiety, increases the price six-fold, and takes the man's half-rupee and disappears, asking him to wait there. Trying to take rice out of his hoarding in his secret godown, Subbiah is killed when the bags tumble down on him. The next morning the poor man frantically searching for him traces him here:
In a corner they saw an electric torch lying on the floor and then a half-rupee coin, and a little off a hand stuck out of a pile of fallen bags. At the inquest they said, “Death due to accidental toppling off of rice bags” (ON 124).

The obsessive secrecy Subbiah practises renders him helpless at last, and his family is orphaned. Narayan leaves the reader with the question: “What was the worth of his soul? Half-a-rupee?”

This story does not present a character who is worthy of being called a tragic character. Nor is he presented as a comic figure. But the logic of the story has a relentlessness and an inexorability that gives it a special quality. The end is unexpected and the mortality is emphatic. But again it could be noted that the prosperity and the fall are as unpredictable as anything else.

But with Subbiah there is no pronounced comic element; on the other hand there is the sinister in him, the growing heartlessness that all possession-obsessed characters in Narayan have. He makes money and it becomes the end and not the means:

He owned thirty acres of land in a nearby village, and visited it once a month to survey his possessions and make sure they were intact. He lent money at exorbitant rates of interest to desperate persons and acquired dozens of houses through their default. He became swollen with money. He sent his children to a school, bought them brocaded caps and velvet coats, and paid a home tutor to shout the lessons at the top of his voice every evening under a lamp in the hall. He loaded his wife with gold ornaments and draped her in gaudy Benares Silk. He added on to his house
two more stories and several halls and painted all the walls with a thick blue oil paint, and covered them with hundreds of pictures of the gods in gilt frames. All day he sat by his iron safe and kept shoving money into it, watching closely at the same time his assistants measuring out rice into gunny sacks, it was a completely satisfying and tranquil existence, the only break from rice-selling and coin-counting being the hours of sleep.

(ON 118).

He loses his feeling of human neighbourliness. His wife and children become symbols of an unreal sense of possession. In his way he is alienated from the people. It leads him to an utter blindness of the common realities of life and that leads him ultimately to his fall. It is the mean tragedy of a mean mind.

When at the end Subbiah’s whereabouts are not known his poor wife is the only person who knows where the secret godown is. Such a person could never have been very intimate to his “own people.” Yet he believes that his family would continue to prosper in life and he even has a pious philosophy to sustain him — “God arranges everything for the best.” He fully believes that he could have his way with God and Mammon:

He distributed a few annas for charity twice a week, and broke a coconut at the temple on Fridays in appreciation of God’s interest in his affairs. Gradually, with experience as his technique developed and improved, he became a master of his situation (ON 120).
This is the height of folly -- but the hubris that a small mind like him could achieve too. Such characters are the typical unheroic protagonists of Narayan’s world. With such characters, there is no development of a real tragic intensity.

Many great writers have indeed dealt with characters with mono-maniacs and have also presented their horrible loneliness. But their method in such stories has one common characteristic -- they all concentrate on the inner self of the character concerned. Famous examples can be Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, The Scrivener,” Leo Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” etc. That concentration gives their stories a tragic intensity. Young Goodman Brown undergoes experiences in just one night which make it impossible for him to be his normal self again. He is unable to treat his wife in the same way as he used to in the days before the eventful new moon night. Hawthorne himself asks the question whether Brown’s experiences really happened outside him or were events in his deeper self. In other words the reader wonders whether it is tragic hallucination, a sort of self-engendered, intense suffering or objective events. In Tolstoy’s story the poor clerk dies frightened that he has offended his boss. In such stories the suffering is presented with concentrated intensity. Narayan steadily turns his back on that intensity. Nevertheless the tragedy is there for the individual, unmistakable if only the readers are alert for it. Subbiah is indeed able to keep externally acceptable relationships with the rest of the world. This relationship is indeed false and he has no feeling for others -- be it members of his family or members of the public. As a matter of fact he acquires an outward respectability, and for all practical purposes, it grows.
Mohan of "Selvi" is another character of this type who thinks of nothing except making money through his relentless exploitation of Selvi. Raju of *The Guide* does the same thing. But their real spiritual isolation or even alienation does not throw them completely out of touch with their society. On the other hand the intensely lonely characters of Hawthorne, Melville or Tolstoy are paralysed by their alienation. Except in the terrible story of "Iswaran," Narayan does not take his characters to the ultimate alienation of physical death.

Narayan veers away from presenting this ultimate rite of isolation or loneliness or alienation. Subbiah is not presented anywhere as evolving a real relationship with anybody. For him and his family it is all merely a life of possession. It might be said that a possession possesses them. Yet they remain within the social framework. Naturally the question arises why Narayan does not present that ultimate step of isolation — whether it is a weakness in his vision or it has any other significance.

As a matter of fact this avoidance of elaboration of a very serious situation can drive Narayan to extravagant steps. "Out of Business" is an example. It tells the story of Rama Rao who goes out of work when a gramophone company of which he is the Malgudi agent goes out of existence. This is a bolt from the blue when he has managed to build a small bungalow in a good locality and is planning to buy a baby car for his use out of the five years of his connection with the company. The circumstances that drive Rao out of his job are characteristically absurd. A series of circumstances in the world of trade, commerce, banking and politics bring about a crash. The gramophone company, which has its factory somewhere in Northern India, automatically collapses when a bank in Lahore crashes, which is itself the result of a Bombay financier's death. The
financier is driving downhill when his car flies off sideways and comes to rest three hundred feet below the road. It is thought that he has committed suicide because the previous night his wife has eloped with his cashier.

Rama Rao has to move into a hole of a house and to rent his own bungalow out. The desperate man begins to depend desperately on an absurd daily venture — of filling up cross word puzzles. At last he spends five rupees on a bumper offer. He takes five rupees from his wife to send his solutions to the journal — though he knows that five rupees represent nearly a week’s food for the family. He is sure that he would get the prize and that even a part of it would be substantial enough to put him and family back on the rails. But even this fails:

In the evening instead of turning homeward he moved along the Railway Station Road. He slipped in at the level crossing and walked down the line a couple of miles. It was dark. Far away the lights of the town twinkled, and the red and green light of a signal post loomed over the surroundings a couple of furlongs behind him. He had come to the conclusion that life was not worth living. If one had the misfortune to be born in the world the best remedy was to end matters on a railway line or with a rope ("Dope? Hope?" his mind asked involuntarily). He pulled it back. "None of that," he said to it and set it rigidly to contemplate the business of dying. Wife, children ... nothing seemed to matter. The only important thing now was total extinction. He lay across the lines (AD 169).
But time passes and the train from Tiruchirapalli does not come to end his miseries. Presently he grows tired of lying down there and walks back to the station -- to learn that a goods train has derailed three stations off and the way is blocked. He thanks god for saving him. When he returns home, his wife tells him that their tenant wants to buy their bungalow. Rama Rao is jubilant. They can get four and a half thousand for it immediately. With half a thousand he could go to Madras and see if he could do anything useful there. She could run the house with what remains. The first step in the process of improvement is that they move to a better locality:

"Are you going to employ your five hundred to get more money out of crossword puzzles?" she asked quietly. At this Rama Rao felt depressed for a moment and then swore with great emphasis, "No, no. Never again" (AD 170).

There is a slight comedy in the wife's question but somehow the end suggests hope and its fruition. Narayan does not bother about questions like the reason for Rao's sudden surge of optimism. His interest lies in the casual-seeming happening and which yet produces unexpected changes.

Narayan recognizes that the whirligig of time keeps revolving and that people's fortunes keeping moving up or down. There are of course times when the readers do not perceive the movement or its nature. The movement up and the movement down are equally irresistible. "The Martyr's Corner" is a story that emphasizes this.

It is the story of Rama who runs a catering unit in the open near a cinema hall. He appears at his post between eight and ten in the night with his assorted edibles, catches the first show cinema crowd coming out, does a brisk business and goes home pocketing
a hundred percent profit. People envy him for achieving what graduates are unable to achieve. But Rama and his wife deserve every paisa of profit they make because they sweat through the day to make it. His stuff is good and he is alert and good humoured. His customers like him and his stuff. He has a kindly heart, though the kindliness is balanced by his enlightened self-interest. When some well-dressed man grudges the poor boot-polishing urchin a meagre sum for his services, Rama feels like recommending generosity:

"Give the poor fellow a little more. Don't grudge it. If you pay an anna more he can have a dosai and a chappati. As it is, the poor fellow is on half-rations and remains half starvation all day."

It rent his heart to see their hungry, hollow eyes; it pained him to note the rags they wore; and it made him very unhappy to see the tremendous eagerness with which they came to him, laying aside their brown bags. But what could he do? He could not run a charity show; that was impossible. He measured out their half-glass of coffee correct to the fraction of an inch, but they could cling to the glass as long as they liked (ON 105).

Obviously Rama has both his head and heart at the right places. He has nightmares of trouble with the traffic constable or the health-officer though in reality he has no problems. To put it short he makes a harmless existence plying a deservedly profitable trade. Narayan permits himself in this context a philosophical rumination. But it is so carefully worded that it does not sound like authorial comment. It is just a part of the story:
Rama's life could probably be considered a most satisfactory one, without agitation or heartburn of any kind. Why could it not go on for ever endlessly, till the universe itself cooled off and perished, when by any standard he could be proved to have led a life of pure effort? No one was hurt by his activity and money making, and not many people could be said to have died of taking his stuff, there were no more casualties through his catering than, say, through the indifferent municipal administration.

But such security is unattainable in human life. The gods grow jealous of too much contentment anywhere and they show their displeasure all of a sudden (ON 107).

All on a sudden Rama's fortunes take an irretrievable downward plunge. The corner where he does business suddenly gets involved in a political struggle and somebody dies right on the spot in a police firing. Some political party wants to make it a Martyr's Corner and gets the spot allotted to it by the municipality. Naturally Rama is evicted from the spot and has to move to a far corner which puts him quite out of the way of his customers. And somebody puts in the word that Rama's quality is not what it used to be. His savings take him along for a few months and then he takes up a server's job in a restaurant and for twenty rupees a month he waits eight hours a day at the table. He sticks to his job -- for his very life:

When some customer ordered him about too rudely, he said, "Gently, brother. I was once a hotel-owner myself." And with that piece of reminiscence he attained great satisfaction (ON 110).
But it is not merely the “good” people who fall in an unmerited way. Some people move up quite inexplicably and then move down equally inexplicably. “The Magic Beard” is indeed a story of the Talkative Man and so it is one of the tongue-in-cheek farcical narrations.

He tells of a particularly grey patch in his chequered career. All his efforts at making a living failed. Somebody then advised him not to shave or cut his hair till he found some means of earning. So, when he goes to Madras some time later he has a venerable beard and mane. One day when he stands at a street corner, most dejectedly with just three pies in his pocket, an old woman applies for alms. When he barks at her, she asks him if he would have been thus unkind to his own mother. She thus revives in him unhappy memories of his bad behaviour to his mother. He gives his last coin to the beggar. In a quarter of an hour she comes back full of good cheer. She says that he has a lucky hand and so she has made a lot of money in fifteen minutes. In sheer frustration he asks her if she wouldn’t give him a commission. To his surprise she does. Soon enough his reputation spreads as a man with a lucky hand. He is soon able to open an office in George Town. He appoints beggars for various places. Every morning at ten o’clock he gives them each a coin. They ply their trade and pay him his fee regularly. He makes ninety rupees a month and sends fifty rupees to his wife in the village. Soon he opens many more centres. The next month he sends two hundred rupees home. And then, with his wife’s inspiration he plans for a better future. And in an evil hour an evil thought comes to him:
Why should I still wear the frightful jungle on my face and head? My vow was fulfilled. I was earning money (ASTW 130).

His magic touch leaves him. His clients lose their capital. That is the end of the career for him.

If this is a slender thread to base a comment on Narayan's attitude and perceptions, the reader has only to recollect more serious and sustained work of Narayan. How does Raju, the jail-bird of *The Guide* become a saint of international repute? A beard and a mane impose on him a sort of compulsory sainthood. *Margayya* of *The Financial Expert* becomes affluent and then is impoverished in the same inexplicable way.

Narayan does not seem to believe in the intensities that lead to tragedy of the intense style. His is the world of the average and the less-than-average and that the fire that burns in that world is a slow fire, dull and smoky. Many people suffer but the suffering is not the intense torture of an Ivan or a Bartleby. One element of Narayan's vision becomes clear. While characters like Subbiah gradually take on the evil quality of a mania, they are still accepted by society as respectable citizens.

Another type of character appears in other works. The novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* records the struggle for freedom and ends with the martyrdom of the Mahatma. But in the process it deals with the usual style of Narayan characters. Great events are seen in terms of the people and many of the men and their motifs are shown to be surprisingly commonplace. The girl Bharati collects money from people for the freedom struggle but Sriram donates because he is enchanted by Bharati. He becomes a Gandhian for Bharati. Later he becomes a freedom fighter and participates in the Quit India
Movement. He confronts a white estate owner but is nonplussed by his courtesy and good will. Sriram, expecting an occasion for fire-eating and heroics is disappointed and confused. Later he becomes a terrorist when somebody sings the praise of terrorism and faults Gandhian ahimsa. He goes to jail and comes out with a changed heart. His love for Bharati steadies him. He meets Bapu with Bharati and gets his consent for their marriage the next day in his presence. But the Mahatma is killed that evening. Neither Gandhiji nor his companions are presented larger than life. When the rich man in Malgudi vacates his bungalow for housing Gandhiji his motives are characteristically selfish. The administration and the public all behave with characteristic averageness. Sriram’s grandmother faults Gandhi for his struggle because it troubles the common tenor of life. Thus in this novel of India’s great moments there is no heroics, no fire eating, no hero-worship. This avoidance of the higher intensities marks Narayan’s refusal to turn away from the actual. He refuses to non-humanize life. It may be because of this that he never deals with politics or social life or family life per se. He sees all these streams flowing together inseparably. So the Hindu-Muslim riots do not take him far afield from his characters and their concerns. In this novel he refers to the refugee camps but does not indulge in sub-stories.

But Narayan works out another paradox; while the socially accepted lot have such monstrous characteristics, those who belong to the sphere of the socially condemned actually display humane traits. Subbiah can swindle with no qualms a poor man with starving children. But, the pick pocket Raju of “Trail of the Green Blazer” one whose calling the society does not approve of, actually gets himself into trouble by trying to return without being noticed what his victim seems to have meant for a child. He has
pursued his victim for quite sometime and has won his prize and the success gives him
good thoughts. Just before his success he has watched the victim buying a balloon. At
that time he has talked to himself loudly enough for Raju to have overheard him--“this is
for a motherless boy. I have promised it to him” (108). He finds in the purse ten rupees
in coins and twenty in currency notes and a few annas in nickel. Raju tucks the annas at
his waist in his loincloth and wishes to give them to beggars. He thinks about the blind
fellow yelling his life out at the entrance to the fair and nobody wants to be generous
towards him. He tells himself that people seemed to have lost all sense of sympathy these
days. He bundles the thirty rupees into a knot at the end of his turban and wraps this
again round his head. This will see him through the rest of the month and he can lead a
clean life for at least a fortnight and take his wife and children to a picture. But the purse
also contains the balloon for the motherless boy:

Raju almost sobbed at the thought of the disappointed child -- the
motherless boy. There was no one to comfort him. Perhaps this ruffian
would beat him if he cried too long. The Green Blazer did not look like
one who knew the language of children. Raju was filled with pity at the
thought of the young child -- perhaps of the same age as his second son.
Suppose his wife were dead ... (personally it might make things easier for
him, he need not conceal his cash under the roof); he overcame this
thought as an unworthy side issue. If his wife should die it would make
him very sad indeed and tax all his ingenuity to keep his young ones quiet...
... The motherless boy must have his balloon at any cost, Raju decided
(MD 109).
In the effort to put the purse and the balloon back into the pocket of his victim Raju is caught. He is sent to jail. His statement that he was only trying to put back the purse becomes a joke in the police world. His wife tells him that he has disgraced the family. When he completes his prison term, he decides never to try to restore anything to anybody because he comes to the conclusion that God has gifted the likes of him with only one-way deftness -- those fingers are not meant to put things back.

The conclusion of the story has a twist worthy of an O.Henry story. But in Narayan the sentiments of the simple thief are quite normal. The thief is not evil; he is not even wicked. He just has certain “professional habits and convictions.” Within that frame work he has his sentiments and convictions. That is why a jail term makes no real impact on him. Like Tennyson’s Ulysses telling himself that Telemachus lives the way he has to even as he works his, Raju works his way while the others go their own ways.

Narayan has such characters in his novels also. One case in point is Ponnan -- the burglar who rescues Savitri in her suicide bid in The Dark Room. They do good but the world refuses to believe it because they are the people society has formally recognised as bad people. One thinks of O. Henry’s Soapy who is sent to jail just the moment he decides to give up his bad profession. But the really bad people are not punished in society. Yet there is retribution awaiting them also. If their prosperity is all extravagant, the punishment is no less extravagant. Poor Subbiah’s life is crushed out by the rice bags that have made him rich. In the novels too the theme could be read. Margayya of The Financial Expert has to go back to the shade of the tree to be a writer of petitions again. Raju of The Guide loses everything he makes and goes to jail. Mohan of “Selvi” also falls from his height.
But then there could be tragedies of other types also. Some of these are simple ironies of fate that any comic writer may emphasize. Yet in some of these stories, Narayan emphasizes the sad human condition. These also emphasize the unpredictability of life. "Another Community" refers to the Hindu-Muslim riots of October 1947. Yet these clashes have become the order of the day though the story actually deals with the time immediately following Independence. Everyone knows the holocaust of the partition riots, when Hindus and Muslims fell at one another's throats with stunning ferocity. Narayan does not want to name the two warring communities. Nor does he want to name the city or the protagonist of the story. He is just a middle class man who finds that life goes on on an even pace. He is a thoughtful person who believes in all the rational patriotic ideals.

Suddenly after the Independence comes a terrible change. His efforts to talk sense to the communalists and to make them realize the folly of violence fail miserably:

It was on the whole a peaceful, happy life -- till the October of 1947, when he found that the people around had begun to speak and act like savages. Someone or a body of men killed a body of men a thousand miles away and the result was that they repeated the evil here and wreaked their vengeance on those around. It was an absurd state of affairs. But there it was: a good action in a far off place did not find an echo, but an evil one did possess that power. Our friend saw the tempers of his neighbours rising as they read the newspaper each day. They spoke rashly. "We must smash them who are here ..." he heard people say, "They have not spared
even women and children!” he heard them cry. “All right, we will teach those fellows a lesson” (UBT 67 - 68).

He finds his own uncle making hectic preparations with all his community to meet any eventuality. He knows that the other community is also girding up its loins for the same purpose. He can visualize how horrifying the events could be. Frightening rumours do their rounds with frightening consequences. On the 29th of the month there is to be a showdown between the two communities, and he is shaken to the core of his being by the preparations. Almost the whole of the city stays indoors on the fateful day. But he goes to his office. It is typical of R.K. Narayan’s style of irony that this man who shudders visualizing horrors is an employee of an insurance company. That day when he tries to get back home by a narrow lane which is a short-cut, he is knocked down by a cyclist. The event in the beginning has no communal colour attached to it but assumes such a colour very soon. The cyclist and his people stab the poor fellow to death and throw him into a ditch. Even in his last moment the poor man thinks only of not telling his uncle the ill-treatment he receives at the hands of the other community:

But I will never, never tell my uncle what has happened. I won’t be responsible for starting the trouble. This city must be saved. I won’t utter the word that will start the trouble, that will press the button, so to say. That’ll finish up everybody, you and me together. What is it all worth? There is no such thing as your community or mine. We are all of this country. I and my wife and children. You and your wife and children. Let us not cut each other’s throats. It doesn’t matter who cuts whose; it’s all the same to me. But we must not, we must not. I’ll tell my uncle that I
Ironically, this peace-loving man becomes the first provocation and victim of the madness of the embattled communities. The tragic irony in this story is unmistakable. The tragic irony underlined by R.K. Narayan is missing here. It just happens and Narayan refuses to take any sentimental or patriotic mileage out of it. His interest is in the common life of the average people.

This story is one of the rare stories of Narayan in which he refers to specific events in the history of the nation. *Waiting for the Mahatma* refers to the freedom struggle and the Hindu-Muslim riots also. Another reference to the independent struggle is comic, and it is found in his first novel *Swami and his Friends*. It is a typical Swami comedy. Swami is interrupted on his way to school by the processionists. He watches the proceedings with the delight engendered from the unexpected freedom from school attendance and he throws his own Gandhi cap into the bonfire, not knowing that it is made of Khadi. There is a popular Tamil Dennis -- like character called Mulry. He threatens his mother with suicide if she doesn’t give him money for a film show. The exasperated lady tells him to go ahead with the suicide plan. The poor boy is reduced then to asking her what suicide means. He has to face his father that night who asks him what has happened to his cap. Otherwise the novel portrays small town life without special reference to the freedom struggle or to any other contemporaneously significant event or attitude.

If the tragedy of the young man is universalised by a deliberate anonymity as to the name of the individual, the communities and the town or city where it all takes place,
the tragedy of the poor young fellow depending solely on a drunkard master is described in “The Evening Gift” and it is a tragedy of a different kind. The story recalls to mind the Charlie Chaplin film *City Lights* in which the protagonist going to a pond to commit suicide sees a man already half way through the attempt there. He saves him with great difficulty. The saved person is a millionaire drunkard, and in his drunken gratitude he gives away his fat purse and his car to his saviour. The next day the events repeat themselves. The protagonist, himself a simple man, gives the money away to a blind flower girl, to give herself a new treatment for gaining her vision. Later he is arrested on the complaint of his forgetful benefactor, and he is sent to jail.

Young Sankar, coming from a very poor family in a distant village, finds a part time job with a drunkard:

His business consisted in keeping a wealthy drunkard company. This wealthy man wanted someone to check his drink after nine in the evening and take him home. Sankar’s physique qualified him for his task. “Don’t hesitate to use force on me if necessary,” his employer had told him. But that was never done. Sankar did all that he could by persuasion and it was a quite familiar sight at the Oriental Cafe Bar -- the wrangling going on between the employer and his servant (*UBT* 96).

The young man is not happy with his fate. To add to all his worry he gets an urgent letter from home, asking him to send a hundred rupees -- otherwise their house would be lost to the family’s creditors. That evening his master is rather cross with him in his drunken mood and dismisses him with four month’s salary -- with one hundred and twenty rupees. Sankar takes it as a God-send.
But the next day he is arrested by the police and taken to the presence of his master. The master has forgotten that he dismissed Sankar the previous day with four month’s salary. It appears that after Sankar’s departure the previous day, he was robbed and was injured in the process. He asks Sankar why he should have gone all that length when he would himself have given him money enough if only he had asked for it. He takes the money that Sankar has, kindly withdraws the police complaint and sends him away empty-handed! This unpredictability of life is of a different kind. It makes the reader wonder how comic or tragic it is.

Narayan has a very wide variety of themes and moods. There are stories like the one involving the Talkative Man, describing how the speaker kept dodging a hungry tiger as it patiently stalked him; or the story of the “Lucky Winner” of a road engine in a raffle who is driven mad by the terrible engine, dragging him into untold miseries until an accident pushes it into a disused well much to the gratitude of the owner of the machine and the owner of the well. Or the story of the poor man who undertakes to remove the deeply entrenched statue of a Whiteman to oblige the enthusiasm of the administrators of Free India and then finds himself in a pickle because it is suddenly discovered that the Whiteman was a great lover of India.

No story of Narayan, farcical or comic, seems to be limited to a simple idea. The Talkative Man bullies compulsively. But the question is whether the man bullies because he is an irrepressible imaginative liar or whether there is something more than that to him. Another important question is whether he is a person who has to believe in these yarns himself because he is deeply frustrated by his own consciousness of serious limitations. The need for other people’s attention may be the result of many
circumstances -- like a perception of neglect by those who should have given him affection. Being starved for affection can be a terrible debilitating circumstance. This obsession can give him an arresting eloquence even though people do not believe him. Wholly at the other extreme of this mental condition is the being of the Falstaff who plays roles for the sheer pleasure in playing roles.

There are stories in which the element of farce and banter gives way to a very convincing seriousness. The significance in “Half-a-rupee Worth” suggests the question whether it is quantity of rice or the price of the soul of the man whose one education in life has been to twist and contort other people’s needs and sufferings to his own advantage. There are other stories like the “Gateman’s Gift,” where a man’s superstitious fear drives him almost to madness when he receives by registered post an appreciatory gift. The death of young Iswaran of ‘Iswaran’ who rides into the river imagining himself a rider because his mind is unsettled by passing an examination after several fruitless attempts is equally teasing. In “Forty-five a Month” there is the unforced pathos of a house-holder, who has to sell his soul to a crushing commercial machine -- so that he cannot give his child the love that fills his heart.²

To move on. Narayan’s narrative style has a subtlety that almost escapes observation by virtue of its appropriateness -- its obviousness. He can juggle the point of view -- from the first person singular as in the Talkative Man type stories to the conventional third person, he finds many possibilities. For example, the third person narrative is often interwoven with the associative stream-of-consciousness, seen through the narrator’s eye. For all such subtlety, Narayan passes for a very simple writer.
Narayan’s stories present a certain mingling of light and shade, a gentle humour verging on whimsicality, suddenly deepening into a penetrating perception of human depravity, which is yet not bitter or condemnatory, but compassionate with a sense of the futility of all this personal effort in the context of a larger and mysterious universal destiny. In his perceptive book on Narayan, William Walsh has an expressive phrase to describe the unique spirit of Narayan:

He has been formed by the immense weight of the inherited tradition of India in balance with a positive but subdued individuality. Narayan’s novels are comedies of sadness ...(Critical Appreciation.7)

This mingling of humour and pathos enriches his works because the characters become live and develop without being obliged to answer to any preconceived notions or ideologies of the author. It might be said that Narayan is one of the few “pure artists” of India in the twentieth century. It is characteristic of Narayan that often his stories extend into the world of the grotesque. Many of them are neither purely comic nor purely tragic. He refuses to invent any story with the glow of tragedy and equally determinedly avoids pure comic glitter.

Narayan is widely considered to have a special affinity to the middle class. Some critics seem to think that a socially sensitive artist should talk of the poor and also try to persuade his readers into a similar awareness. It is not evident how or why the middle class should be supposed to be incapable of the sufferings that the poor undergo. But
apart from this, the comment is inaccurate because Narayan does deal with the poor and their frustrations and despair. Only, he refuses to sentimentalise the poor and refuses to say that the world is inexorably moving towards a revolution that would end inequality and usher in the heaven of the Workers of the World. He can sympathise with the poor man but he can also see the badness in individual poor people. In other words he deals with the poor as he deals with the middle class men -- objectively quite often and sometimes even ruthlessly.

William Walsh refers to this adverse criticism of Narayan and defends him. But the very defence is on the defensive and apologetic:

I once heard leftist students in Madras bitterly attack Narayan for what they called -- inaccurately, I think -- his exclusive concern with the middle class, a treachery, they thought, to the Indian poor and the dominantly peasant character of the country. But Narayan writes chiefly about the Indian middle-class because he is a member of it, and it is the class he understands best. (ibid 8)

Narayan deals with the life of poor in his short stories. There are a few stories of Narayan whose titles are most piquant. “The Blind Dog” is one of these. The story has pathos -- but the pathos lies in a part-Wordsworthian and part un-Wordsworthian perception.

Narayan does deal with the poor (See discussions of the stories on the beggar and his dog, the once-successful snacks-dealer becoming a poor waiter in a hotel, etc.) But he refuses to sentimentalise them. He deliberately avoids the class conflicts and such other ideological notions. The poor are as subject to his irony and satire as the others.
A blind beggar and a stray dog become friends and the beggar shares his food with the dog. A bond of friendship develops between them. Attracted by the food the beggar eats, the dog goes to him and licks his hand:

The blind man stroked its coat gently tail to ear and said: “What a beauty

Very naturally, unforcedly, a great truth of the human mind is slipped in. Beauty does not lie in the object the physical eye sees. It lies in the heart that beats behind the eye -- it is what the eye half perceives and half creates. There is beauty for a blind man: it is revealed to him by his hand, which is informed by his heart. The dog is so grateful and he becomes the blind man's champion. When a village brat tries to take liberties with the beggar, the dog chases him out of the market place. The dog and the man are thus bound to each other by natural piety.

But soon comes a time when an element of selfishness gets into the beggar's attitude. The old woman helping him dies and one of the neighbours of the beggar in the market place, out of sheer goodwill, gives him a length of string to tie round the neck of the dog so that the dog could lead him about. In no time at all, the bond of affection is transformed into the bond of tyranny and exploitation. The string becomes really the symbol of the beggar's tyranny and the dog's slavery. The dog loses his freedom completely. To the extent of his loss his master gains. The master is now able to wander
from place to place, and the people admiring the sight of the faithful dog leading his
master tip them generously. Impelled by the desire to make more money the blind man
heartlessly keeps the dog on its feet all the time. For all the services the dog renders him,
the beggar rewards him with suspicion and tyranny:

A dog is essentially an active creature who punctuates his hectic rounds
with well-defined periods of rest. But now this dog (henceforth to be
known as Tiger) had lost all rest. He had rest only when the old man sat
down somewhere. At night the old man slept with the cord turned around
his finger. "I can't take chances with you--" he said (AD 48).

The poor dog loses his health and he looks miserable but the beggar thrives and becomes
a moneylender. The people around hate him and pity the dog. One of them takes a pair
of scissors one-day and snips the cord. The dog runs away barking, his eyes sparkling
with joy.

The loss does not bring the beggar to his senses. He thinks that the dog has
ungratefully deserted him, and that he has a right of ownership over the dog. He seethes
with anger and swears to kill the dog when he gets at it again. But the people around are
happy. They assume that the dog would never return to him. For nearly three weeks, sure
enough, the beggar is reduced to helpless despair. But one night the dog returns to him
and promptly the beggar gets a steel chain to put round the dog's neck. He thinks that
real hunger has driven the dog back to him. He refuses to see that the dog was activated
more by love and gratitude than by hunger as he understands it. The people around are
sorry:
“Death alone can help that dog,” cried the ribbon-seller, looking after it with a sigh. “What can we do with a creature who returns to his doom with such a free heart?” (AD 51).

The transformation from two generous companionable creatures in a bond of friendship to heartless tyranny and selfishness on the one hand and trust and loyalty on the other is captured with remarkable ease in the story. It recalls a story in a poem by Wordsworth.

In the poem “Fidelity” Wordsworth describes a dog that sits in vigil by the side of its master who has lost his life weeks ago on a hilly track. In describing the gratitude of old Simon Lee Wordsworth says that the gratitude of people is often more saddening than their ingratitude. The beggar becomes a tyrant and tyranny is the pathetic result of his helplessness, but the dog’s sheer goodness of heart leads him into misery once again. The question arises: Who now is blind? The dog feels the good that his master did him once and goes to him again though he is a monster now. But the blind beggar sees very clearly his own advantage and acts in accordance with his selfish wisdom. The dog is blind to reality but is obedient to an ideal that he feels in the blood. The beggar is blind to that ideal but can see his own advantage with an uncanny vision. The beggar in his greed is typical of the common run of humanity. But no one who knows the misery of a blind beggar’s life can blame him for his anxiety to make more and more of money. Narayan sees badness also as the result of understandable human fears. But he neither endorses it as a committed social realist might, nor condemn it as a moralist might. He is content to reveal one facet of reality.

If the beggar symbolizes human greed and selfishness that saps what goodness there is in a man’s mind, the gardener in “The Axe” symbolizes the helpless love that an
old man feels even for the trees and plants that he has grown. As the years roll on
everything changes and great glories crumble to the earth. Velan becomes a gardener
when he is eighteen. An old gardener takes him as an assistant when Velan comes from
his village, angry with his father. The old man is rearing a garden on a big patch of land
where a big house is to come up. As the house grows with brick and mortar the garden
grows too. But there is one difference between the garden that grows and the house that
grows. To the gardener the garden is something alive and responsive. When the old man
falls sick, Velan becomes the chief gardener:

Velan was proud of his position and responsibility. He keenly watched
the progress of the bricklayers and whispered to the plants as he watered
them, "Now look sharp, young fellows. The building is going up and up
everyday. If it is ready and we aren't we shall be the laughing stock of the
town." He heaped manure, aired the roots, trimmed the branches, and
watered the plants twice a day, and on the whole gave an impression of
hustling Nature; and Nature seemed to respond. For he did present a good
sized garden to his master and his family when they came to occupy the
house (AD 186).

Velan loves the plants and when he sees the house he admires it too. When the years
pass the master's family grows too. Velan himself has fourteen children, loses eight of
them and also his wife. Velan lives in the out-house perfectly contented and happy
demanding nothing from life. He has been able to regain his ancestral property in his
village and his sons live in the village.
But soon, the old master of the house, so young when he entered the house, dies. His sons quarrel with one another, lock up the house and leave. Velan stays on. Now and then tenants come and go, and they ill-treat the garden. The house is locked up and Velan is left behind to look after the garden. Finally the owners sell the house and the garden and tell Velan that he could go back to his village because the new owners propose to pull down the house, wipe out the garden and build flats.

To the new buyers neither the old house nor the garden means anything.

"Heaven alone knows what madness is responsible for people building houses like this..."

They went round the garden and said, “we have to clear every bit of this jungle. All this will have to go [...]” “All the trees, except half a dozen on the very boundary of the property, will have to go. We can’t afford to waste space. This flower garden ... H’m it is... old fashioned and crude, and apart from it the front portion of the site is too valuable to be wasted...” (AD 191).

What impels Velan’s hasty exit from this house and its garden is the coming of the woodcutters who begin to go at his beloved margosa tree with their axes. He pleads with them: “This is my child. I planted it. I saw it grow. I loved it. Don’t cut it down...” (AD 192).

When they tell him that they cannot disobey the company’s orders, he begs them not to start cutting it till he has gone far away. They oblige him. He gathers his clothes in a bundle and rushes away.
The story does not speak of the petty difficulties of day-to-day life. That kind of writing might have pleased the committed social realist. But Narayan is not interested in these. His eyes fasten on the peculiarities of feelings in individuals who appear quite common-place. There is a parallel here with Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. The cutting of the tree seems to symbolize the fall of organic life—mutual affection and non-commercial living. Such a living has its pleasures though it is not conducive to material prosperity. The margosa tree that stands in the garden becomes an eloquent symbol:

Hundreds of parrots and mynas and unnamed birds lived in the branches of the margosa, and under its shade the master's great-grand-children and the (younger) grand-children played and quarrelled (AD 187).

Between Velan and the land there seems to be some sort of a tacit relationship—when he hustles it, Nature seems to respond and with the growing of the garden his own life grows, and there are ups and downs in the careers of the garden and the gardener. But to the successive new-comers the garden means nothing, and soon the house is in ruins and gathers the reputation of being a haunted house. To the real estate promoters who come at the end the land is nothing more than a source of income. Narayan does not seem to be interested in his characters for the reason that they are rich or middle class or poor. He is concerned with their minds and their deeper experiences.

The quest for a philosophy in Narayan's creative writing, finds that it does not lie in classifications of rich and poor. He seems to be much more interested in the way in which each individual fails or partially succeeds in establishing relationships with the rest of the world—with kith and kin and with outsiders. The very complex system of social
life that envelops humanity makes for the isolation of individuals. Even in a small family, there is so much of non-understanding between its members, if not, plain misunderstanding. But there seems to be no escape from the tangle of this life. The complexity has choked meaning out of life and has put people in their separate cells. Narayan's novels and short stories take the family as their special world:

The family, indeed, is the immediate context in which the novelist's sensibility operates, and his novels are remarkable for the subtlety and conviction with which family relationships are treated — those of son and parents, and brother and brother in *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937); of husband and wife, and father and daughter in *The English Teacher* (1945); of father and son in *The Financial Expert* (1952); of grandmother and grandson in *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) (Walsh, Ind Lit 74).

But William Walsh also points out that for all the reader's sense of "the intense and even smothering life of the family" becomes increasingly aware of the truth Narayyan expresses in *The English Teacher*: "A profound and unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life" (Critical Appreciation 7).

This theme is embedded in "Forty Five a Month" also. Venkat Rao loves his child Shanta. When one day she asks him to take her to cinema, he feels unhappy and guilty:

Here was the child growing up without having any of the amenities and the simple pleasures of life... He had hardly taken her twice to the cinema. He had no time for the child. While children of her age in other houses had the dolls, dresses, and outings that they wanted, this child was growing up all alone and like a barbarian more or less. He felt furious
with his office. For forty rupees a month they seemed to have purchased him outright (*AD* 143).

The apparent omniscient narration succeeds in capturing the protagonist's point of view with absolute clarity and naturalness. Venkat Rao of "Forty-Five a Month" plans to show his office that they do not own his soul. He promises to take the child to the cinema that evening. But his wife is cynically realistic and tells him not to make false promises to the child. He goes to the office, resolved even to resign if he were not given permission to leave office early that day: "Here is my resignation. My child's happiness is more important to me than these horrible papers of yours" (*AD* 144). But his manager tells him that there should not be anything more urgent than office work. Finally Venkat Rao carries his letter of resignation to the manager. The manager, not aware of anything about Venkat Rao's resolve, tells him casually that he has recommended him for a five-rupee increment. Venkat Rao goes to his seat with greater loyalty to his office than ever and it is 9 o'clock in the night when he goes home:

Shanta had already slept. Her mother said, "she wouldn't even change her frock, thinking that any moment you might be coming and taking her out. She hardly ate any food; and wouldn't lie down for fear of crumpling her dress..."

Venkat Rao's heart bled when he saw his child sleeping in her pink frock, hair combed, and face powdered, dressed and ready to be taken out. "Why should I not take her to the night show?" He shook her gently and called, "Shanta, Shanta." Shanta kicked her legs and cried, irritated at
being disturbed. Mother whispered, “Don’t wake her,” and patted her back to sleep.

Venkat Rao watched the child for a moment. “I don’t know if it is going to be possible for me to take her out at all -- you see they are giving me an increment --” he wailed (AD 147).

There is love enough in the hearts of these people but the monstrous monotony of their life does not permit this love fair play. It is this love that should dispel the loneliness that creeps inevitably into the lives of these people. But the poor father watches with sadness, his inability to live up to the demands of fatherhood growing as the years go. It is not difficult to imagine families disintegrating when the wife is a little less understanding and compassionate than Mrs. Venkat Rao. This inexorable juggernaut of life in society is inescapable for the middle class man because he is tortured by genteel poverty. He cannot afford to ignore society though society gives him no help. These are the people who eventually grow into the crowds undone in a dead life, flowing along the London Bridge to or from their “homes”. Narayan very effectively presents here the way in which human beings turn into automatons by the sheer pressures of average life.

Loneliness at a greater intensity is the theme of the story “Iswaran.” This is the most painful loneliness that Narayan portrays. Poor Iswaran is trapped in the intermediate examination. He has spent years in trying to pass the examination -- “some people even said that you could see grey hairs on his head” (AD 82). His parents sympathized with him once, then grew critical and unsparing and finally lost interest in his examination. They often advise him to discontinue his studies but he clings to university education with a ferocious devotion. Now once again the results
are awaited. His father does not expect him to pass. With pretended callousness Iswaran walks out of the house, dressing himself specially and combing his hair with deliberate care:

He felt that they remarked among themselves that washing, combing his hair, and putting on a well-ironed coat, were luxuries too far above his state. He was a failure and had no right to such luxuries. He was treated as a sort of thick-skinned idiot. But he did not care. He answered their attitude by behaving like a desperado (AD 83-84).

But behind all his bravado there is a very sensitive heart:

But all this was only a mask. Under it was a creature hopelessly seared by failure, desperately longing and praying for success. On the day of the results he was, inwardly, in a trembling suspense (AD 84).

When people cut their unfeeling jokes at him, he talks back facetiously and when the results are on the point of being released, he tells them he has to be going on an urgent business -- to the Palace Talkies:

He sat in a far-off corner in the four-anna class. He looked about: not a single student in the whole theatre. All the students of the town were near the Senate House, waiting for their results. Iswaran felt very unhappy to be the only student in the whole theatre. Somehow fate seemed to have isolated him from his fellow-beings in every respect. He felt very depressed and unhappy. He felt an utter distaste for himself (AD 84 - 85).

This is the tragic insensitivity of the majority of the people to other people's feelings. Those around Iswaran, including his parents, think that he is thick-skinned and
an idiot. They do not ask themselves the question whether examination results are an
indication of one’s intellectual calibre nor whether passing an examination is
indispensable to one’s mental growth. For a time Iswaran is able to forget the
examination results. When he returns to the theatre he finds a number of students there
who are happy with their fate. Finally he leaves the theatre:

He felt a loathing for himself after seeing those successful boys. “I am not
fit to live. A fellow who cannot pass an examination ...” This idea
developed in his mind — a glorious solution to all difficulties. Die and go
to a world where there were young men free from examination who
sported in lotus pools in paradise [...] This solution suddenly brought him
a feeling of relief. He felt lighter (AD 87).

Then in sheer wasteful curiosity he goes to the Senate House. He has no hope of passing
and he does not find his number in the third class. To his great surprise, he finds that he
has passed with a second class:

He looked at the number again and again. Yes, there it was. He had
obtained a second-class. “If this is true I shall sit in the B.A. class next
month,” he shouted. His voice rang through the silent building. “I will
flay alive anyone who calls me a fool hereafter...” he proclaimed. He felt
slightly giddy. He leant against the wall. Years of strain and suspense
were suddenly relaxed; and he could hardly bear the force of this release.
Blood raced along his veins and heaved and knocked under his skull. He
steadied himself with an effort. He softly hummed a tune to himself. He
felt he was the sole occupant of the world and its overlord. He thumped
his chest and addressed the notice-board: "Know who I am?" He stroked an imaginary moustache arrogantly, laughed to himself, and asked, "Is the horse ready, groom?". He threw a supercilious side glance at the notice-board and strutted out like a king. (AD 89 - 90).

The pleasant shock unsettles him. He imagines that he is a king and in his mind his examination number-works strange tricks. He thinks that he owns horses. He rides into the river and the next afternoon his body comes up. Under the conviction that he has failed again, he has left behind a note for his father:

"My dear father: By the time you see this letter I shall be at the bottom of Sarayu. I don't want to live. Don't worry about me. You have other sons who are not such dunces as I am ..." (AD 91).

Narayan uses the consciousness of Iswaran to reveal the workings of his mind but they are revealed not through complex psychological patterns but through simple authorial, omniscient narration. This seeming simplicity helps Narayan to have the best of both the worlds. The callousness that is seen, is not in Iswaran; it is the other average people who are really thick-skinned. They are absorbed in their own worlds and they do not realize how their irresponsible bantering and gossip drive Iswaran to his unfortunate end. The narration is all the more interesting because Narayan never intensifies or heightens the pitch. The pathos is absolutely unforced and that is the typical greatness of Narayan's pathos.

To move on to the next idea. Comedy is a mansion with several rooms. Farce is one of them. Comedy can be virulently satiric or mystic or several other things. The
farce is based on imagination and an acknowledged improbability in terms of character and incident. It is the plot that matters more than characterisation. It is mainly of the theatre but it has entered the world of fiction also and sometimes farce can even be a kind of challenge to prevalent ethical notions. Aristophanes' *The Cloud-Cuckoo Land* is one of the early examples of a farce that satirizes existing conventions in society. Two men, frustrated in their efforts to be free in Greece, find their way, over the hills, into the "land" of the birds and advise the birds to re-establish their "ancient rights" and tell the very gods that they must pay tribute to the birds. They must build a huge wall in the skies which are their territory and prevent the offerings of human devotees from reaching the gods. The birds are inspired and follow the advice and the gods come to their knees. But the real thrust of the play is against the iniquitous governmental interference with private life and widespread corruption in the state. *Gulliver's Travels* is nothing if not a farce. But it is one of the most virulent and pointed satires not only on British political and social corruption of the day but also a very serious consideration of universal foibles of men that have affected men of all times. Such farce has basically the norms of satire, and its purpose is satire for the sake of correction.

But there can be another kind of farce which is hilariously funny, but the satiric element in it is marginal or incidental. The tales spun by P.G. Wodehouse, for example, fall under this category. Narayan's farcical stories fall into this category, too. His stories have no palpable social criticism. His main interest is in tapping certain idiosyncratic features of men. The Talkative Man is one such character. He spins out tales that are absorbing but one can feel that the author writes tongue-in-cheek. There are obvious exaggerations, and some of these stories have their base in well-known folk tales. To take
the Talkative Man as a serious story-teller is to misread him. He is a compelling story-teller. He has to be stretching yarns, that is his forte, and his weakness, too, and there is improbability in his tales looming as the most important constituent. There is an element of the deliberate bragging of Falstaff's two men in buckram growing in an instant to fourteen, which is meant to be provocation for challenge and further excitation of the comic imagination.

"A Night of Cyclone" may be considered in this regard. It is one of those efforts of Narayan behind which there is some ancient folk tradition. In every literature there are imaginative versions of sorrows coming not alone but in battalions. There is a verse in Tamil that almost sums up the situation described in this short story. It describes the plight of a person who is deluged by problems one night. There is torrential rain; the house collapses; the cow calves; and the list of miseries stretches on. The Talkative Man is the teller of the tale. He represents the type that amuses itself by such yarns, but when once the basis of the yarn is allowed everything that comes after that is logically acceptable. It inverts the pleasure of a detective story—the reader goes on asking what came next—and next—and next. That is the measure of the success of this type of story-teller. There is no deeper meaning in these stories than entertainment but incidentally they reveal a character that is happiest in such imagination. The Talkative Man is the comic counterpart of the narrator of the Arabian Nights. Incidentally this character enables Narayan to present events and experiences that cannot go into realistic fiction and are yet interesting. These sides of popular belief command the belief of a sizeable section of Indians, and they have a following in other cultures also. The readers
may ask whether the descriptions of spirits and ghosts and near-supernatural experiences -- are mere tales or part of some experience on a different plane of existence. In some of the Tales of the Talkative Man, Narayan presents this genre of experience too. For all his ironic vision and realism, Narayan is not one who contributes to the idea that reality is confined to palpable or rational or material experience. It is also possible to look at the talkative man as the type that is psychologically in need of others' attention as a result of some complex.

4 See the First chapter of E.M. Forster's "Aspects of the Novel."

One element of the farcical fiction of Narayan is that he goes on to present circumstantial evidence for his tales in quite a convincing way. The beginning of the story runs thus:

The Talkative man said:

It was in Vizagapatnam that I finally got a job. A Sowcar was building a mansion on the Beach Road and he gave me twenty-five rupees a month and a small house to live in. He labelled me supervisor of construction. At first the designation seemed to be vague. But I soon learnt what I was expected to do. A supervisor's job is no joke in the beginning: the contractor thinks that you are an upstart; the stone-mason has a feeling that you are an intruder; and the carpenter thinks that he is your equal in status. It is plain sailing when you have discovered your duty which consists in bullying the contractor, frightening the stone
mason, and pretending to be carrying out a general scheme of
retrenchment (ON 125).

There is nothing to be questioned in the location — Vizagapatnam and Beach Road; nor in
the Sowcar who wants to be represented at the building site by a supervisor; not yet,
probably, in the pragmatic description of the attitudes of the workmen and the duty of the
supervisor.

Then comes the catalogue of the blessings of the situation. This is to serve as the foil to
the catalogue of harrowing miseries that follow. This is the “felicity” from which the
hero falls:

Believe me when I tell you that I considered myself the most
blessed man in Madras Presidency at that time. Blessing number one:
work was easy. I generally conducted my supervision from my bed
through a window. Blessing number two: my wife and I were living in a
sweet idyll. Her temper was uniformly good in those days. It might have
been because she had not brought into the world our first boy; he was due
to make his appearance in a couple of months. Blessing number three: our
house was situated in the finest locality. The sea was not ten yards from
my door (ON 125).

These blessings are the precise points that aggravate the miseries galore that follows. But
the Talkative Man never plunges into his story inviting or provoking incredulity. Then
follow the casual hints of the impending disaster. The workmen come, pointing out the
weather and prophesying that it is going to be a rough day, asking for a suspension of
work on the site, but he sends them back to work. When he goes out, he finds some shops closing, and he senses an air of panic everywhere, and one school boy goes bitterly weeping because his teacher has told them that the world is going to end that day. He finds his wife laughing at this prophecy, and he also jokes about it, but neither of them feels at ease. He finds that the workmen have left without his permission. And then there is the transformation:

I do not remember where exactly the game commenced. At about three, I found the elements in a fiendish glee and about to break their accumulated fury on Man. The coconut trees edging the sand were swaying to and fro almost touching the ground each time. The sea looked sinister in the gloomy light. I wondered if it was the same sea that used to make me poetic and sentimental at times. The water was reddish-brown in colour, the colour of dirty blood. Each trembling wave stood half as high as a coconut tree ready to fall on and devour the earth any minute. From that brown simmering expanse terrible gurgling and hissing noises rose in the air (ON 126-127).

Then his wife goes to bed saying she is not feeling well. She begins to groan in labour. And then she tells him that he has to light the oven and cook. He is unable to light the oven — cooking and related jobs are a mystery to him — and he wonders how houses and shops caught fire in this world. The house is filled with smoke. Now things begin to appear in a non-idyllic light: “My wife then reminded me that there was a little milk in the storeroom, which was only a dignified name for a particular corner in my wretched kitchen” (ON 128). Rummaging all the pots in the storeroom for some usable food
material, he gets stung by a big black scorpion in a pot. As he rolls on the ground with pain, the storm gathers strength. The water gets into the house, and his wife, writhing on her cot, admits that she has labour pain and begs him to bring some help. “I was savage enough to curse her for choosing that day,” he admits (ON 128). When he sets out for the purpose, his umbrella flies away in the storm and the hurricane lantern fails. Struggling up an eminence to reach his nearest neighbour, he belatedly recalls that he is a European who keeps a ferocious bulldog, and retraces his steps. He struggles along in a different direction to a doctor’s residence, sucking his scorpion-stung finger and weeping loudly like a child. He learns that the doctor is away at Bombay, and the doctor’s wife takes him for a thug, judging from his terrible appearance! He bluffs his wife that help is on its way. Then the kitchen of the house collapses. The lights go out. The windows are smashed:

I sat stunned for a while. Then, groping about in the dark I tried to fix up the window with my hand (which was still smarting with scorpion venom) against the ferocious gale. And all the time my wife was killing me with her cries pitched in various keys. I became mad with rage, hurt my hand worse, and fell into wild abusing. I dropped the window down and stood agape as the loud, lusty cry of a newborn baby pierced the stormy darkness (ON 131).

There the Talkative Man ends his story and shows to his listeners “the gentleman who arrived on that fine night” — the son who was born that eventful night.

“The Tiger’s Claw” is another story that records the Talkative Man’s encounter with a man-eater. A man-eater had held a reign of terror for nearly five years in the
villages that girt Mempi forests, says the author, and it was at last killed by professional hunters. Naturally the people of the villages celebrated it and lionised the hunters. The body of the tiger was taken in a procession. The Talkative Man is provoked by all this, and takes aside the narrator and his companions with the words, “Lost in wonder! If you’ve had your eye full of that carcass, come aside and listen to me...” (AD 67).

The Talkative Man once worked for a fertilizer company, and they sent him once to a god-forsaken village in the vicinity of the Mempi Hills just because its name appeared in the railway list. A few trains passed through Koppal every day but only one stopped there. The railway station in the place was an “ex-railway compartment.” When the Talkative Man went to the village the stationmaster was so thrilled to see a new face that he took him to his house for stay. In the night, however, the Talkative Man did not want to stay in that small house because the stationmaster had a large family. The stationmaster reluctantly allowed him to sleep in the railway station. The Talkative Man deposited himself in one corner of the compartment and placed the chair against the door for protection because the stationmaster had warned him that there were many tigers around. The Talkative Man’s forays into verisimilitude are spontaneous but quite elaborate:

I’d at least eight hours before me. I laid myself down: all kinds of humming and rustling sounds came through the still night, and telegraph poles and night insects hummed, and bamboo bushes creaked. I got up, bolted the little station door and lay down, feeling forlorn. It became very warm, and I couldn’t sleep. I got up again, opened the door slightly to let
in a little air, placed the chair across the door and went back to my bed

(*AD 69 - 70*).

He had a dream in which he saw far-off a line of cat-like creatures moving across the slope. Then he suddenly felt that the cats were right behind him -- and also that they were full-grown tigers, not cats, and he saw himself rushing back to his shelter. The dream was shattered by the noise of the chair that barricaded the door coming hurtling through the air and falling on him. At the door was a tiger, pushing himself in:

> It was a muddled moment for me: not being sure whether the dream was continuing or whether I was awake. I at first thought it was my friend the station-master who was coming in, but my dream had fully prepared my mind. -- I saw the thing clearly against the star-lit sky, tail wagging, growling, and above all, his terrible eyes gleaming through the dark (*AD 70*).

The Talkative Man slips in some dubious wisdom about wild animals that he has picked up somewhere and credits himself with the instinctive realization of the truth of such observations:

> Somehow wild animals are less afraid of human beings than they are of pieces of furniture like chairs and tables. I have seen circus men managing a whole menagerie with nothing more than a chair. God gives us such recollections in order to save us at critical moments; and as the tiger stood observing me and watching the chair, I put out my hands and with desperate strength drew the table towards me, and also the stool. I sat with my back to the corner; the table wedged in nicely with the corner
When the tiger moved slowly forward, the Talkative Man wielded his chair like a shield. For sometime the tiger was held in check by his fear of the chair. But in course of time he lost that fear and moved forward. How long all this took none can say: time seemed to stand still for the man. Then God gave him one more significant recollection and he reached for the sharp knife on the table and armed himself with that, and he was out of the reach of the tiger literally by a hair's breadth. Tired of the game, the tiger thrust his paw towards him, and with desperate courage the man gave the paw a vicious stab with the knife. The tiger was maddened with pain and twice more repeated the attempt to reach the man, and each time he drove the knife into the paw, and each time managed to cut off a toe of the tiger. In his brand of garrulous humility the Talkative Man says:

And I cut out, let me confess, three claws, before I had done with him. I had become as blood-thirsty as he. (Those claws, mounted on gold, are hanging around the necks of my three daughters. You can come and see them if you like sometime) (AD 73).

When the station-master and the porter at last made their innocent appearance the tiger pursued them. The station-master ran back home and shut the door, and the porter on foot went up a tree, with the tiger half way up behind him:

Thus they stopped, staring at each other till the goods train lumbered in after 5.30. It hissed and whistled and belched fire, till the tiger took himself down and bolted across the lines into the jungle (AD 73).
The tiger never again came to these parts and confined his ravages to other parts of the slopes. When he saw the body of the tiger in the procession he realised in a moment that it was his old enemy. He tells his listeners:

"You seemed to be so much lost in admiration for those people who met the tiger at their own convenience, with gun and company, that I thought you might give a little credit to a fellow who has faced the same animal, alone, barehanded. Hence this narration." (*AD 73 - 74*).

The group checked it up, and found the toes missing, and the place in the right fore paw was marked by a black scar:

The man who cut it off must have driven his knife with the power of a hammer. To a question, the hunters replied: "Can't say how it happens. We've met a few instances like this. It's said that some forest tribes, if they catch a tiger cub, cut off its claws for some talisman, and let it go. They do not usually kill cubs" (*AD 74*).

Romance at short notice is the forte of the Talkative Man. Narayan lets him wind into his story with the half-informed cock-sureness of the villager who has seen a little of the outside world. He can win a ready audience by the gripping elaboration of his yarns, and the step from apparent facts to fantasy is imperceptibly short. It is the typical weapon in the satirist's armory; used seriously, it becomes what it is in Swift's hands persuading many to write to the British Press of the day that they had known Captain Lemuel Gulliver and that his only fault was that he had left unrecorded several other more interesting adventures that they had all had together.
“Old Bones” is the Talkative Man’s foray into the world of the supernatural. As a canvassing agent for his fertilizer company one night he stays in a dak bungalow, and he is accompanied on the occasion by his nephew, a young boy. The old watchman leaves them alone for the night though they try to persuade him to stay with them for the night. The nephew is nervous about the loneliness in the large, rickety old house. When the Talkative Man is about to doze off late in the night, there is a sudden bang of a window and door and he comes back to bed. The nephew is deep asleep. But the Talkative Man hears a battering at the front door and when he asks “Who is there?” the sound moves off to some other part of the house. He is unable to light the lamp, and soon its glass chimney flies off the table and splinters on the floor.

I flashed the torchlight on the boy, fervently hoping that he still slept; but he was sitting up in bed.

“Raju, lie down, it is nothing,” I began.

“You lie down if you like,” replied the boy. His voice was changed. It was gruff like an adult’s. There was no banging on the doors now...

(AD 173).

The boy is possessed by a ghost, and with enormous strength he hurles his fat uncle out of the bungalow and shuts the door on him. The uncle pleads with him to let him in, and the boy says that he is not Raju but Murugesan. Murugesan’s ghost tells the Talkative Man that the people there are defiling his bones and that he would not move away till that is stopped. The ghost tells him that when he spent a night in the bungalow once, the watchman of the place suffocated him and stole his purse, and buried him under the tamarind tree in the backyard of the bungalow. Now the place is dirty, pigs nose about
on his grave, and passers by defile his bones. The ghost wants his bones to be dug out from under the tree and thrown into the nearby well. Until that is done, says the ghost, he would not move away. The Talkative Man does the job, trembling in every fibre of his body. When he gets at the bones and throws them into the well, he hears the voice of Murugesan say “Many thanks. Good-bye.” The Talkative Man runs to the front, finds the door open, and the nephew on the floor. He carries the little fellow to his bed, and when the boy wakes up, he is normal though he tells his uncle that he has had all sorts of wild dreams. When the watchman comes in the morning, the Talkative Man asks him whether he knows a person called Murugesan, and he threatens to tell the police. The old man falls at his feet and begs him not to ruin an old man:

Till I reached the bus road I debated within myself whether to tell the police, but ultimately decided against it. I am a busy man, and getting mixed up in a police-case is a whole-time job. Some day when I don’t have much work I will take it up (AD 177).

Concludes the Talkative Man. That about the police is incontrovertible folk-wisdom.

Ghost stories arouse and maintain the audience’s interest especially because not many have the temerity to completely disbelieve in them. Narayan deals with some supernatural experiences in his autobiographical writings and in *The Bachelor-of Arts*. This short story is a comic exploitation of the supernatural.

“Old Man of the Temple” is one more story using the supernatural. But here the Talkative Man, for once, confesses to something that beats him: his beginning of the story underlines this:
It was some years ago that this happened. I don't know if you can make anything of it. If you do, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say; but personally I don't understand it at all. It has always mystified me.

Perhaps the driver was drunk; perhaps he wasn't (AD 156).

Such humility disarms the sceptic hearer and cajoles him to lend his ears. The varying of the tone of the narrator helps Narayan to gain for him a momentary credibility.

The Talkative Man takes a taxi to go to Kumbum. It is driven by a young man called Doss who is known to him. He is a steady fellow. Late in the night in the dark half of the month, he passes across the village Koopal. He is dozing when all on a sudden Doss swerves the car and shouts "You old fool! Do you want to kill yourself?" He points to the middle of the road and says to the Talkative Man that he does not understand what that old fellow wants to do, trying to kill himself. But the Talkative Man sees nobody there. There is an old temple close by but there is no man anywhere nearby. Doss says that he saw the old man open the door of the ruined temple and come out; but the Talkative Man finds the doors fast, and feels that they had not been opened for centuries. When they go back to the car, Doss asks him whether he permits the old man to travel with them for the old man says that he would get off at the next milestone.

The Talkative Man sees nobody nearby. For a moment he feels that Doss may be drunk but Doss assures him that he has never touched drink in his life. He tells Doss that he could rest awhile if he does not feel well. Doss is grateful. He sinks into a stupor in the driver's seat. When the Talkative Man revives him, he speaks in the piping voice of an old man. He asks the Talkative Man why people do not come to the temple any longer
and talk to him, and why the king does not come by in his annual procession. He is irritated by the incomprehension of the Talkative Man.

He tells the Talkative Man that he, Krishna Battar, built the temple single-handed and the king used to worship in the temple but now no one cared to come there. The Talkative Man tells him that he is dead and is only a ghost. Then Krishna Battar tells him how he was set on by robbers when he was one night coming through the forest. They thought that they had killed him, but he had ever since lived in the temple. The Talkative Man assures him that he is dead and advises him to go away. The old man wonders what would happen to the temple. The Talkative Man assures him that somebody else would take care of it. Krishna Battar tells him that his wife Seetha died four years back. He tells the Talkative Man that he would follow her if she asked him to go with her. The Talkative Man asks him to meditate on Seetha for a while. The old man does and suddenly cries out: "Seetha is coming! Am I dreaming or what? I will go with her..."

(AD 162).

Doss falls down in a heap trying to rush forward. The Talkative Man goes to the house some distance away and knocks. He hears someone say that it is "it" and ask the others to go to sleep: it would knock for some time and then go away. The Talkative Man sounds the horn and finally the family in the house comes out. One of them says that "it" used to bother the bullock carts going that way and to knock the doors in the night though it never harmed anybody. When he goes that way months later the Talkative Man hears that the bullock carts were troubled no longer and there was no knocking at their doors in the night. And the Talkative Man concludes that old Krishna Battar should have gone away with his wife.
"Lawley Road" takes with another type. It is a short story that laughs at the hypocrisy of social gestures and it is narrated by the Talkative Man. He speaks of the time immediately following the 15th of August 1947. Till that day, says the Talkative Man, the Municipality of Malgudi kept itself in the background but to celebrate the day of liberation it did everything in its power. The streets were swept, drains were cleaned and the national flag was hoisted. There were many processions. There were even tears in the eyes of the Municipal Chairman as he watched these proceedings. The goings on bring a train of recollections into the mind of the Talkative Man:

For years people were not aware of the existence of Municipality in Malgudi. The town was none the worse for it. Diseases, if they started, ran their course and disappeared, for even diseases must end some day. Dust and rubbish were blown away by the wind out of sight; drains ebbed and flowed and generally looked after themselves[...]. The Municipal Chairman looked down benignly from his balcony, muttering, "We have done our bit for this great occasion." I believe one or two members of the Council who were with him saw tears in his eyes. He was a man who had done himself well as a supplier of blankets to the army during the war, later spending a great deal of his gains in securing the Chairmanship

(ON 89).

This is typical of Narayan's satire. The municipal chairman has no weakness for patriotism. But some of his associates think that there were tears in his eyes when the National Flag was hoisted. This lover of the motherland has made his pile through supplies to the army. However, freedom—eve sees him an avid public servant spending a
great deal of money to become a leading public servant of his locality. The talkative man makes acid comments thus on the political character of the country since Independence. The classic comment of the artful dodger of *Oliver Twist* on the courts of England -- "This ain't the shop for justice!" comes to mind.

Then the Municipal Chairman and others vie with one another in finding new names to every street and landmark in the city, and for quite some time the postman has trouble in tracing the localities. Finally they rename Lawley Extension named after an Englishman who had ruled the province as Gandhi Nagar and decide to remove his harmless statue from a junction of roads. They dig up a lot of history to prove that Lawley had been a ruthless and insulting Britisher. But the statue is mounted on a steadfast pedestal and the Municipality calls for tenders to demolish the pedestal and remove the statue. The lowest tender is for forty thousand rupees. Finally the Chairman offers to give the statue to the Talkative Man, his friend, if he would do the job. The Talkative Man thinks that it would be sound business: it may cost him five thousand to remove the statue (contractors and their estimates being what they are), and the three tonnes of metal might fetch something in the market -- or probably he could sell the statue to the British Museum! So he borrows money from his father-in-law and recruits fifty coolies. Finally he has to demolish the pedestal with some dynamite sticks. Then he removes the statue to his residence -- he could find it no other shelter, and has to send his family to his father-in-law's since the legs of the statue jut out of his small room in his Kabir Lane house! The Municipality passes a resolution thanking him.

But soon comes trouble. It is soon discovered that Lawley -- Sir Frederick Lawley (of the statue) -- had settled down in India and had cleared the jungles and built the
town of Malgudi. He founded the first co-operative society in India, and the first canal system arranging for irrigation of thousands of acres of land and he had declared that “Britain must quit India some day for her own good ....” Now the Government orders the Municipality to reinstall the statue! When the Talkative Man asks for a compensation for his troubles, the people of the town think him their enemy and parade in front of his house shouting slogans. But he asks for anything above ten thousand rupees. The Municipality threatens to sue him under the Ancient Monuments Act. He replies suitably. The impasse continues for six months.

Then the government asks the Municipality to explain why the existing Council should not be dissolved since it has not done anything on the statue issue. The Municipal Chairman is frightened. Then the Talkative Man gives him a suggestion: why not he buy his house and put up the statue in the house? The Municipal Chairman is convinced when the Talkative Man tells him this:

“It’ll indeed be a grand gesture on your part, unique in India, ....” I suggested he ought to relieve himself of some of his old blanket gains.

“After all .... how much more you will have to spend if you have to fight another election!” It appealed to him. (ON 96).

He does what the Talkative Man proposes and renames Kabir Lane as Lawley Road.

The story shows up the ways of self-seeking politicians who pretend to be patriotic for lining their purses. They put up any show if that would profit them. Every gesture of public spirit is just some clever man’s gamble for some personal political gain. The Talkative Man has a cynical -- or realistic -- vision of democratic life in India. He is prophetic. The story is an example of a satire of prevailing conditions through a farce.
Next, “Engine Trouble” is one of the most beautiful of Narayan's short stories describing, perhaps a comedy of miseries. It is again the Talkative Man who narrates this story. He describes an exhibition that came down to Malgudi. He drew a lucky lot one-day, and won the unlikely first prize of a road engine. He did not know what to do with it, but the showman did not have a driver for the engine and he barely permitted the winner to keep his prize on the grounds till the show lasted. Anyhow, he fell in love with the machine and its shining brass parts. His friends told him that even as scrap the machine would fetch a few thousand rupees. The philosopher in him mused: “How ignorant we are! How little did I guess that my troubles had just begun!” (AD 195). Then the Municipality notified him that he would have to pay rent for occupying the Gymkhana Grounds. No individual or public body wanted to buy a road engine. When another exhibition was to be organised, he was asked to remove the engine within twenty-four hours. He enlisted the services of a dismissed driver to drive the engine, and the temple elephant to pull the engine from the front, and fifty coolies to push it from behind. The driver sat at the wheel and started the engine, and the men pushed and the elephant pulled, and a big crowd stood round watching the fun. The elephant was annoyed with all this and went berserk, and the driver lost control and the engine brought down a wall of a house and the men fled. He had now to redo the wall, provide the medical treatment for the injured elephant, etc. Endless trouble followed, and he was on the point of bankruptcy. But at last fate came to his rescue: there was a terrible storm and earthquake one day; the engine was swept off and it dived into a disused well in the compound and fully sealed it off. The house owner was delighted. He had been planning to close the well, but the cost had been keeping him away. Now he was happy that the engine had
closed the well. He cemented the engine in, and told the Talkative Man that he would rebuild his wall himself. The Talkative Man became quite aggressive now, and asked for compensation for the many expenses he had incurred because of the machine. The other man willingly paid all the compensation.

Narayan's farces are full of the peculiar humour of the slightly macabre imagination of folk tales. He fills them with the circumstantial talk that fills his more serious stuff with details, and the other or minor characters in the short stories have their function clearly cut out for them. They serve to emphasize the point that is to be made through the main characters.

Farcical or realistic, Narayan's stories raise important in conception. These relate to the critical attitude the reader adopts what he reads. There are metaphysically debated questions in modern literary criticism like "Does a work of art expresses or manifests a vision or a meaning?" The reader tends to see a meaning in a work because the artist has chosen to put together certain select details of life in his work, and the selection is taken to imply a certain concept or meaning. Such meaning is essentially based on a vision of life. From the earliest literature we have, there is more than sufficient evidence of the involvement of artists in passionate quests for meaning and also confident assertions of meanings. Such meanings can be broadly divided into meanings based on faith and meanings devoid of faith.

Apart from these questions that refer to the relationship between a writer and his work, there are also questions of a more existential-philosophic question. One question that influences the thinking on human life is the question of suffering and the role of fate in it. All tragedies and all serious literature deal with this question. If suffering is seen in
the context of just the life-span of one sufferer and the people with him the problem is poignant but seems to have no solution. But there is another way of looking at suffering. This sees suffering in this life as settling the accounts of an earlier birth. This posits that man does not understand the meaning of suffering because he does not see deep enough into the past to grasp the original cause of the suffering. Indian mythology is full of it. Dasaratha had to suffer the pangs of separation from his beloved Rama because he had once upon a time unwittingly killed the son of an aged couple entirely dependent on his services for their survival. There is the story of the eight heavenly creatures who offended sage Vasishtha and therefore were cursed by him to take human birth. They begged him for mercy and the compassionate sage relented. He modified the curse and granted that the seven who played no active role in the offence could just be born and immediately thereafter die; but the eighth one would have to live out a lifetime as a man though it would be a life of greatness. The group then trooped to Mother Ganga and begged her to help them. She promised help. Then she descended to the earth in the guise of a beautiful woman and the King who was walking along the river bank was charmed. He proposed to her and she accepted him on condition that she would leave him the moment he questioned any of her actions. The King made his promise and kept it, restraining himself from remonstrating with her when she threw their seven children the moment they were born into the floods of the Ganges. But when the eighth was born he could restrain himself no longer and asked her to desist. She did but left him that moment because he had broken his promise. This child grew up to be the great saintly warrior and royal counsellor Bhishma. The King was filled with sorrow seeing his children killed because he did not know that such death was their release from bondage.
This is the Hindu concept of Karma. Such a conception of suffering takes the wind out of the sail of most tragic questioning. If suffering is seen as the way an individual pays for his past deeds, suffering could be understood as a balancing and retribution, leading ultimately to liberation. Such a conception would take the sting out of many questions of meaning in life.

Albert Camus puts at the centre of his great novel *The Plague* the question of suffering and meaning. Many of the characters come to the question in one way or another. The doctor who works tirelessly to help the plague-struck population and his friend who sweats for the sufferers at great risk for himself have no faith in God, nor in a life after death. Yet they work tirelessly for the sufferers, to mitigate the suffering. They ask questions like, “Why does the calamity occur?” “And how does it abate?” They get no explanation. At the end of the novel the doctor loses his wife who has gone to a far away place to recover from her sickness. And his friend dies when the plague has almost disappeared and he dies laughing. The priest tells his congregation in the early stages of the pestilence that it is God’s punishment for their evil life and for their willful neglect of God’s warnings. The priest almost feels happy at this apparent proof of the reality of God. But then the death of a four-day-old baby of plague gives him the pause: what chance has this baby had for sin and retribution? What is His will that they should find peace in it? The meaning that could be read into it is typical of the vision that characterizes many modernist writers: life has no meaning. But man’s individual efforts could give it a nobility and meaning. Man has this capacity to invest it with meaning and that is what makes man’s life respectable.
Time and again this question comes up in much modern literature. The questions reappear insistently and are formulated in telling images -- like Hemingway's dog teasing an empty can and the old man returning to the sea after fetching ashore the huge skeleton of the fish that he has caught. These works are frankly in the tragic framework.

Much of Absurd Literature adopts a semi-comic or grotesque mode to pose the same questions. Their images are eloquent -- two tramps idling, waiting. There is not even a conversation when *Waiting for Godot* opens. These images have a frightening intensity. Possibly the times at which such literature was produced account for the tragic intensity of the desperate probing for meaning in life.

To speak of the works of Narayan after such considerations it might sound fanciful. But such considerations are not really far-fetched in connection with Narayan. Talking of his short stories, P.S. Ramana makes the following statement with reference to all Narayan's work:

However, Narayan is content to make a superficial survey of life around him, hardly ever taking his fictional narratives to such a point where he may have to raise serious questions about life, human predicament, social system or values, etc. He appears to avoid facing those aspects of the situations or characters which may be unpleasant or disturbing for him or his readers, requiring a questioning of ideological positions. In more than hundred stories that Narayan has written he has attempted to entertain by revealing the life pattern of an individual or by presenting a moment of crisis or dramatic conflict in a person's life. He has an acute power of observation and an eye for detail. Life around him
provides him with enough material to spin out readable stories. But he never attempts to view or seriously analyse the philosophical, ethical or social dimensions of what he attempts to present in case of an individual (71 – 72).

But reading Narayan’s works the reader may take a different impression. There is such variety in Narayan that labelling him with one precise name is well-nigh impossible. His favourite mode does not have moments of intense questioning and as a rule Narayan is remarkably free from the habit of image and symbol hunting for his stories. That leads to the feeling that he is a casual writer content with watching the superficial comedy of life. Narayan’s work is a challenge to conventional ideas of the short story. This is how one critic responds to his short stories:

In his short stories particularly, he seems to shut himself against certain extremely disturbing yet very real elements in life such as death of a beloved, the loss of honour or the heart-breaking pangs of infidelity. He seems to rest content with those aspects of life which provide him with harmless mirth which he passes on generously and genially and, to his readers. If he looks at the darker side of life at all, it is with almost indifferent detachment. Where he does succeed in presenting a character in misery, he verges dangerously on sentimentality. Exceptions are few, though of course, there are some. And the resulting Narayan world is a comedian’s delight, with a fantastic range of human absurdities; and with its afflictions and pangs being touched only lightly, a world enjoyable in the extreme, with just a show of tears, sooner wiped than appeared
This criticism is very self-revealing in that it states its limitations very plainly. To this writer certain "extremely disturbing, yet very real elements in life..." should be represented in stories if the work is to be considered serious. The confusion of values in the writer's thinking is clear because just in the sentence that precedes this quotation he says that Narayan came to "a particular healthy attitude" early in his life but never went beyond it. Naturally the question arises as to how a healthy attitude becomes "almost indifferent detachment" or sentimentality. The critic goes on to discuss a few stories to prove his point. These are precisely the stories that have a deeper layer of meaning than that which readily meets the eye.

Responses like this are based on an over simplified idea of comedy. Such responses assume that comedy could deal with a fantastic range of human absurdities, but could deal with afflictions and pangs only lightly.

There are two more examples of the comic--grotesque variety and they deal with astrology. Both of them deal with a person who marries a girl against the advice of astrology. Both the stories name the person as Krishna. The first story, "The White Flower," is about Krishna, a young graduate. Krishna falls in love with a girl he sees at the street tap. Quite uninterestingly, both sides find the love quite acceptable. The perfunctory analysis of material factors proves quite satisfactory:

The girl's father was prepared to set about her marriage, since she would be fourteen years old in the coming month. He found Krishna's credentials satisfactory: good family, rich and studying in the B.A. class.
Krishna's parents were satisfied with the girl's credentials: good family, good looks, good sign and educated up to Third form (RSIP 61).

But the villain enters-- in the form of the astrologer of the girl's party. He says that there is a serious flaw in Krishna's horoscope--Mars is in the seventh house, meaning short life for the wife. The girl's father does not want to take the risk. Responding to Krishna's woe-begone state his father consults an astrologer who declares that Mars is no longer strong enough in Krishna's horoscope to kill his wife. But the girl's astrologer maintains "that it would not be safe even to keep the two horoscopes in the same envelope." But when Krishna's father suggests that they might consult divine will, the girl's father agrees happily enough because he is not happy to miss such an eligible son-in-law. They go to the local temple to consult God. They place two flowers in front of God and ask a child to select one. The child picks up the wrong flower and the elders give up.

"Seventh House" seems to continue the story --- the protagonist is Krishna who has married the girl he loved in spite of Mars in the seventh house of his horoscope dooming his wife to early death. There are some differences in detail. Whereas that other Krishna's girl was known to him only by perfunctory sight, this Krishna's girl had been his classmate in school and their mutual love had grown at the expense of school classes and other commitments. This Krishna's father had originally been peeved that the bride's father did not appear eager enough but had at last agreed to the proposal. And this girl is a college girl. Finally the child at the temple begins to wail when asked to pick one of two flowers. That is taken for a bad enough sign. But despite the astrologers and divine will Krishna has married the girl.
And now his wife is sick with typhoid for three weeks, with the temperature never coming down from 103 °F. Krishna begins to wonder if it is the belated but implacable anger of Mars. He goes to the astrologer who assures him that it is Mars' anger and that under the circumstances, the survival of the person concerned is doubtful. At last in response to the tearful pleading of Krishna he mentions an elaborate ritual to propitiate and placate Mars. Krishna tells him that he could do it only with his wife's help. The astrologer feels pity. He tells him:

The trouble is, your love is killing your wife. If you were an indifferent husband, she could survive. The malignity of Mars might make her suffer now and then, mentally more than physically, but would not kill her. I have seen horoscopes that were the exact replica of yours and the wife lived to a ripe age. You know why? The husband was disloyal or cruel and that in some way neutralized the vigour of the planet in the Seventh House.

I see your wife's time is getting to be really bad. Before anything happens, save her. If you can bring yourself to be unfaithful to her, try that. Every man with a concubine has a wife who lives long..." A strange philosophy, but it sounded feasible. (AHTG 139 - 140).

And then Krishna faithfully prepares himself to break faith to his wife. A jatka man takes charge of him. But ultimately Krishna loses nerve, resigns himself to fate and turns homeward.

The fearful thoughts of Krishna make his pitiable condition very plain to the reader. In the heady days of youth the planets and their wills meant nothing to him. He
ignored them and married the girl of his choice. But age and fear mellow him -- or rot him. But this is normal human behaviour. So long as there is no risk or danger people have the courage to be rational and scientific. But only so long. Fears of possibilities cow them down and they are willing then to descend to any humiliating behaviour to save their skin. Krishna is a typical example. But the question is the significance of astrology.

"The Magic Cure," is a very short story but it also is based on the ironic perception of Narayan. Old Thayi has a bad condition and suffers from recurring and insufferable stomach pain. Kannan, a local trickster, convinces her that her stomach pain is not a health problem. An evil spirit has got into her. He tells her of a holy exorcist he knows. Thayi begs for his blessings. So Kannan brings the holy man to her hut one afternoon. The holy-man thwacks the old woman with the holy stick and tells her that the spirit has left her. He takes her silver jewellery and puts it in a mud-pot and asks her to bury something in a far corner of her backyard. He seals the pot with a cork and tells her that the evil spirit is imprisoned in the pot and would take three months to die. He warns her against opening this pot before three months. If she did, the spirit would come out and her head would go to pieces. After a few days the poor woman has her stomach pain again. She gets suspicious and opens the pot, only to find it empty. She lodges a police complaint and Kannan and his accomplice are made to return the booty:

As he gave her the jewels the Inspector said: "Go home. May God keep you off the hands of scoundrels. You really owe your jewels to your stomach ache. If you had not got the attack again you would not have suspected, and if you had not suspected you would not have opened the
mud pot for three months; and anything might have happened in three months, you know."

"I agree with you, master. You are learned and wise".

That evening Thayi went to the temple of Hanuman. She broke a coconut, lighted a piece of camphor before the God, and whispered fervently: "My father, I am grateful to you for the stomach ache you have given me"

(NSTW 137).

Narayan thus insists on this element of unpredictability in life.

To sum up, Narayan is a writer of stories which use the comic mode. But the comic mode does not preclude a serious involvement with life in all its facts, and it does not preclude a wistful sadness. Narayan's works deal with the sadness of loneliness and of many other shades of sadness. Narayan's vision has consistency.

Narayan is not a self-righteous writer, condemnatory in the style of the prophets. His approval and disapproval are both marked by tolerance. However, his attitudes are in some ways changed. For instance, he became more explicit on man-woman relationship. This relates not only to the portrayal of sexual intimacy between men and women but also to the establishment of socially unapproved sexual relationships.

Narayan does not campaign for or against ideas. Yet certain characteristic ways are found in his writings. He emphasises the unexpectedness and unpredictability of life. In Narayan's work things do not develop with compelling reasons. What is expected is thwarted and what is not expected happens. Narayan's heroes are ordinary people, not superman. Many of them are eccentric and cranky. But these characters have very unexpected experiences and Narayan's fictionally expressed convictions are not easily
imagined. There is a realist-psychologist in him who puts into relief the conflicts in the hearts of apparently prosaic and unsuccessful people.

Narayan is sensitive to the pathetic that lurks behind apparent consistency. A sort of comedy comes into being when the clash between the world's reading of a person and the reality are seen together. Narayan is in the company of many modernist who present the ignorant and self created loneliness of people. He often presents the way in which natural human instincts are perverted. Some stories even express a clear moral.

Narayan sees that the wheel of life keeps revolving bringing the rich and the poor up or down repeatedly. Why a person gets rich and why he returns to poverty can not be explained. People who move up the social ladder sometimes become monstrous. But those who are poor and socially condemned actually have very human traits. That goodness is sometimes presented in unbelievably ridiculous gestures. In many stories Narayan presents sad ironies of life.

In themes and moods Narayan presents variety -- people who live in fancy like the Talkative Man and people who live a humdrum life but who make great sacrifices even fore their pitiable lives. But such comedies of sadness and loneliness are not affected by any narrow idea of class and community. Narayan is very conscious of people who are selfish. There are also selfless people to whom even humble forms of life become beloved.

Narayan presents the way in which complex social systems lead to a lack of understanding between people. Sometimes we see the external expression of a character and take him for a comic figure. A person's repeated failures make him ridiculous figure. But he may silently suffer isolation. Such isolation can lead to horrible conclusions.