



# The English Teacher

-By RK Narayan

# Introduction

The English Teacher is an autobiographical novel.

It tells a love story with a difference. It narrates the domestic life of Krishna a lecturer in English in the Albert Mission College, Malgudi. Though he is thirty years old, he feels bored with life in the absence of his wife and baby daughter.

They arrive after a few months, along with his mother. Krishna and Sushila, his wife, lead a happy contented life for several months. But then their house is not quite good, and so on an ill-fated day they go out on house hunting. As ill-luck would have it, Susila is stung by a flea, develops typhoid and dies after a few days.



The death of Susila is a stunning blow to Krishna. He is much upset and loses all interest in life and in his work at college. The only comfort to him is his little daughter Leela, who now occupies much of his time and attention.

He frequently wanders about a lotus-pond where he meets a Sanyasi who can communicate with spirits of the dead.

Through him Krishna is able to communicate with the spirit of his dear departed Susila. Krishna is thrilled, and regains his interest in life.



Krishna now meets the head-master of a new Children's School. He is very much impressed by his educational theories, gives up his job in the college to serve the new institution.

That very night he is able to communicate with the spirit of his dead wife directly, for the first time. At this, an ineffable joy descends upon his soul.

Human connections are not achieved easily in Narayan's fictional world.



A Brahmanical formality circumscribes the relationships within families, the father being especially aloof, often cold, and romantic love, when it occurs, is either a loss of self-control or so beset by anxiety and fear, that its failure comes, almost as a relief to the protagonists.

This is what makes so remarkable the first part of *The English Teacher*, where the narrator, Krishna, describes the quiet happiness of suddenly falling in love with his wife.

The happiness is celebrated here through the many details of domestic life: the little squabbles, the shopping expeditions, the reading of poetry, the fussiness over the first child, the search for a new house.



# Characters of the Novel

- Krishna
- Susila
- The Headmaster
- The Sage
- Leela





# Krishna

Krishna is by far a very caring and supportive husband to Susila. Unlike other Indian male protagonists, Krishna is an atypical Indian husband. He plays the role of a companion, a friend and even a nurse to Susila.

Far from being an orthodox husband, Krishna has allowed Susila to take over the financial aspect of his household. He allows Susila to plan the family budget, showing thus his trust on her.

He also uplifts Susila to an equal status and respects her rights. Instead of treating her as inferior, he manages to make her enjoy her freedom.



Romantic and passionate, Krishna also expresses his love in several ways. His poems, the comparison to jasmine flowers and the way he admires her while she prays show how much he is in love with Susila.

What makes Krishna a more admirable character is his devotion to Susila, even after her death.

Moving on in the novel, Krishna unveils new facets of his character. He remains loyal to Susila even after her death and he adopts a new role, that of being a mother figure for Leela. This indeed makes him an admirable character.





Even after being talked into re-marriage, he remains devoted to his only love, Susila.

However, as an English teacher, Krishna has been highly criticised as being too academic oriented. He is a robotic teacher who shows no major interest in imparting knowledge to his students.

He is a stark contrast to Leela's teacher who seems to be a more dedicated, creative teacher. The latter uses innovative teaching methodologies and invests his time and himself in his work



- As for Krishna, he seems more concerned about his end of month salary than the plight of his student. He adopts a teacher centered stance to his job.
- His weaknesses can also be seen in his lack of attention to Leela. His communication sessions with Susila make him somehow forget his duties and responsibilities towards Leela.



He focuses more on his relationship with a dead person, rather than being here for his daughter. He even ignores that Leela has joined school.

Near the ending part of the novel, he unveils his self-centeredness as he shares his intention to end his life without caring about what will happen to Leela.



# Susila

Though a quite short appearance of Susila, readers are still able to appreciate her character. She captures our interest as she stands out as an Indian wife.

Unlike traditional Indian wives, she refuses to be dominated by her husband. Instead she is the one who controls her family budget and that with a close fist.



She is very strict about the expenses of Krishna and takes a very stern stance with her husband.

As a woman, she stands as an embodiment of beauty as it seems that she pays great attention to how she looks. Her sari, the jasmine flowers , all make her an attractive woman.

As a mother, Susila is portrayed as a caring and attentive mother. Even when she is sick, she insists on combing the hair of Leela and keeping her clean and neat.



Her death evidently leaves a huge void in the life of Leela. She stands as a symbol of motherly love, always showering love on her daughter, Leela.

Susila also introduces one of the main concerns of the novel, the mystery of life after death. She paints such a positive image of how life is on the other side.

Though dead, readers are still able to grab more about her character, namely, her devotion to her husband and child.





# The Headmaster

The Headmaster, though nameless, is a focal character in the novel.

He introduces one of the key themes, namely education. He draws a contrasting picture of education with emphasis on creativity, imagination, playing and freedom.

He adopts a *laissez-allez* attitude towards education and this seems to work as Leela is eager to go to school even on Sundays.



His approach to education can highly be contrasted to that of Krishna.

The latter works mostly for his end of month salary. His lack of zeal is shown mostly by his monotonous and robot-like approach to his profession.

But, as any other character in the novel, the Headmaster also seems to be bearing many weaknesses.



As a headmaster, he stands for perfection but when it comes to his responsibilities towards his family, he seems to be a failure.

A shocking image of his family life is painted by R.K Narayan.

His children are pictured as being left on their own, leading an unhygienic life, a complete contrast to children in his school.



This might therefore explain the Headmaster's devotion to his school. It is a source of escape for him, an escape from his vociferous wife, his ill-mannered children and polluted and dusty living area.



# The Sage

The Sage, though a minor character, is closely linked to one of the main themes of the novel, namely, death.

He is introduced in the aftermath of Susila's death and contributes massively in making Krishna overcome his solitude.

His character also makes readers get a beautiful insight into what happens after death.



He is able to communicate with the spirits and this mystic power brings back some tints of happiness in Krishna's life.

His place is one of absolute serenity and harmony and is the perfect place for one to meditate on the deepest meanings of life and death.

The first exchanges with Susila were not so convincing as Susila could not even remember Leela's name but the sage gradually drives Krishna into believing in his mystique power.





He opens Krishna to an entirely new world, a world unknown to us, readers. Krishna, unknowingly, becomes dependent on him for his weekly doses of happiness.

Krishna is so dependent on him that when the sage goes away for a few weeks, the idea of suicide crops into Krishna's life.



# Leela

Leela stands as a symbol of innocence and she is closely linked to major characters of the novel.

She mostly helps in highlighting key traits of Susila's, Krishna's and the Headmaster's characters.

Through her, readers are able to witness Susila's motherly feelings. Despite being sick, Susila insists on combing Leela's hair.




Leela also adds more poignancy to Susila's death, making it a more sorrowful moment.

Leela also helps in bringing forward the emotional facet of Krishna's character.

Through her character, R.K Narayan is able to picture Krishna as a dutiful and caring father.





Leela's contribution is more significant in introducing one of the main themes of the novel, namely, education.

Her love for her school and her willingness to go to school even on Sundays show the success of the Headmaster's innovative and creative education system.



# Themes in the Novel

- Love
- Education
- Death
- Finding Oneself/ Theme of Existentialism



# LOVE

Love is a key theme in the novel: marital love, motherly love, parental love among others.

Marital love and marital bliss encompass mostly the first three chapters.

RK Narayan provides a rather detailed description of the short lived marital happiness of Susila and Krishna.

It is an indepth insight into their marital relationship which makes Susila's death more poignant.





While many claim that the text bears many autobiographical elements, with Narayan's own wife dying of a long disease, the novel moves at a higher dimension.

Parental love is also treated as a key theme.

Krishna, though having been far from his daughter for long, quickly knits a strong bond with his daughter.

Later, after the death of Susila, he plays both the mother and father roles. He fills Leela's life with love so that the latter does not feel the emptiness left by her mother.



He, very patiently, takes care of Leela, ensuring that she gets access to education and grows up into a discipline girl.

Susila also showers motherly love on Leela.

She is seen to be constantly grooming Leela, combing her hair or even making up clothes for her.

R.K Narayan has invested a lot into picturing Krishna and Susila as devoted and caring parents.



# Education

The title of the novel itself announces one of the main concerns of RK Narayan, namely education.

Different approaches to education and contrasting teaching styles are shown in this novel.

While Krishna adopts a more repetitive and robotic approach to education, Leela's teacher focuses more on a creative approach.



Krishna is portrayed more as the conventional teacher, relying on parrot learning and an exam-oriented education system.

He does not seem to be too keen about his job. He teaches mostly for his monthly salary, making him more a benefit-oriented educator. He relies on books as learning tools and limits learner's knowledge to the content of the books.


Leela's teacher, on the other hand, is a dedicated teacher who values the imagination of the students. He believes in learning as being a fun activity.



Playing is prioritized over dusty and huge textbooks. He believes in learning beyond the classroom limits, in other words, learning in the open-air. His passion for his job is shown through his presence in his school even on Sundays.

He has very proudly exposed all the works of the students on the walls, showing thus how he gives value to each and every effort of his students.





The image drawn of his school reflects that of a space where students are free and learning at their own pace.

He does not focus on materialistic attachments as he states that he does not need any furniture in his school.





# Death

Having struggled through the death of his own wife, R.K Narayan has very brilliantly described the effects of death.

The theme, thus, bears a very strong autobiographical element.

The death of Susila is one of the most poignant moments of the novel as it brings major changes in the lives of Krishna and the other characters.



Other key themes are closely linked to this theme, namely, remarriage, supernatural beliefs, life after death among others.

The scenes before the death of Susila are highly significant. The house which was filled with the scent of Jasmine flowers, is gradually filled with the strong-smelling lethol.

Susila's room is turned into a restricted area and she becomes the highly contagious patient.



# Finding Oneself/ Theme of Existentialism

The theme of existentialism is very much anchored in this novel of RK Narayan.

In the opening chapters, Krishna seems to be pondering on the reasons of why he is teaching when his real devotion is to poetry.

He is an unenthusiastic English teacher and his mundane habits of going on walks by the river seem to be adding to his lack of zeal.



Susila seems to be the one giving him reasons to actually exist.

Susila introduces passion and marital bliss to Krishna. She makes him live the present in a better way and she even builds future plans for them.

With Susila, Krishna realises that he is more than just an English teacher.

Susila awakens the soft sides of Krishna, making him step out of his lonely life at the hostel and showing to build attachments with people and not with objects namely his old clock.



Krishna is thus able to redefine his importance in life, that of being an atypical husband and a caring father to Leela.

The death of Susila, however, makes him raise the question of 'Who am I?' again. It is at this moment in the novel that readers realise how dependent Krishna was on Susila.

Paradoxically, she is the one who has given him an identity and a purpose to live. Her death is so impactful that he forgets his more practical beliefs to indulge in a completely superstitious world of spirits.



# Conclusion

Thus, the present novel The English Teacher is an autobiographical and most acclaimed novel of Narayan.

In this novel he has effectively and artistically inserted all the literary elements like love theme, autobiographical elements, humour, pathos, irony, tragedy etc. Krishna is an immortal character of the novel.

Through the characters he expresses his views on education and philosophy of life.







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