

## CLASS XII ENGLISH LITERATURE

### B. Wordsworth: The story

'B. Wordsworth' is taken from Naipaul's collection of short stories titled Miguel Street. This story is narrated in first person through a boy-child's perspective. The story highlights the plight of a 'poet' whom the child encounters. The two share a very easy-going relationship and the child seems to instinctively understand and empathize with the 'poet'. Narrated in a humorous and fun manner, the story revolves around the themes of solitude, alienation, admiration, love for nature and the role of the artist in the society. This story is brought to life through the colloquial language, the rich Caribbean setting and its exploration of the complex intricacies of human relationship and artistic expression.

#### Key points to remember

One day, B. Wordsworth shows up at the narrator's 'house. He's smartly dressed, speaks good English and says he wants to watch the bees. He claims to be the greatest poet in the world, that B. stands for black and that William Wordsworth was his brother.

He then tries to sell a poem and finally gets chased away by the narrator's mother.

A week later, the kid meets him in Miguel Street. They go to 85 house in Alberto Street and feast on mangoes. The kid stains his shirt, gets thrashed by the mother and goes to 3'5 house.

B. Wordsworth tries to comfort him by showing him the wonders of nature and the beauty of the night sky. They go to St Clair Avenue, the Savannah and walk to the race course. On being asked why he kept his gardens untended, B tells the kid a story about how a girl and a boy poet fell in love, got married, how they hoped for a child and how the girl died with the unborn kid . She had loved the garden and the husband left it as it was. One day, Mr B. tells him that he's writing the greatest poem in the world and that the line of the month is "The past is deep." They meet often and go to the Botanical Gardens, The Rock Garden and the Chancellor Hill. Mr B. earns his living by singing calypsos as nobody buys his poems.

One day the boy visits him to find him in a sick state. Wordsworth then tells him a "funny story", instructing him to never come back again: he tells the boy that everything about him, his poetry and the poet-lovers was a lie. The boy goes home crying.

The boy walks past Alberto Street after a year. B.Wordsworth's house and the mango trees are replaced by concert buildings. It's as if he had never existed.

#### B. Wordsworth: Analysis

Taken from a collection of short stories titled Miguel Street, V.S Naipaul's B. Wordsworth presents before us a complex relationship between a young boy and a rather remarkable man which is forged with great ease and simplicity.

Revolving around the themes of identity, alienation, friendship, admiration and the role of the artist, B Wordsworth is narrated in the first person by a little boy who comes in contact with a man of the same name. One day, the man appears in the narrator's house to 'watch the bee's'. He's smartly dressed, clearly unlike the beggars who come to his house everyday. The narrator is quick to detect the coldness

with which his mother accosts the man. In contrast to her, the narrator doesn't judge the man and talks to him in a friendly manner. Perhaps this ease of reaching out and communicating with the other enables the narrator-kid to know and understand the life of an interesting, lonely man and perhaps become the only one to do so.

Wordsworth helps the narrator-kid grow and teaches him important lessons about life and leisure. The narrator's strict mother serves as a foil to B. Wordsworth's accommodating nature. He lets the boy discover things by himself and even entertains his idea of placing the pin on water to see what happens next. He teaches the kid to delight in everyday experiences we take for granted and presents him a fresh pair of eyes with which to observe and soak in the wonders of the natural world.

Miguel Street, the collection from which the story is taken features many interestingly odd characters and B. Wordsworth's is certainly one of them. The characters in the book often struggle with their identities and, owing to the colonial past of the region, find themselves shaped by the colonial experience. B. Wordsworth's story highlights the alienation of the artist from the society he lives in and tries to come to terms with role s/he might play in it.

One of the first things the narrator notices about the man is his English which quite unlike that of his Trinidadian folks. Though he speaks good English, there is a hint of artificiality about it:

Black Wordsworth calls himself the 'greatest poet in the world' and claims that William Wordsworth was his brother. Like his Romantic counterpart who was an acclaimed 'Nature Poet', B. Wordsworth loves to spend time with nature. But he isn't known by anybody as a poet. Though his marginalized status may be attributed to his color, it is difficult to state whether he actually writes poems at all.

**"His English was so good, it didn't sound natural, and I could see my mother was worried. "**

One cannot help but feel that he's quite lost about his identity. Parts of his identity seem to contradict others. He claims to be the greatest poet in the world. Yet we don't see his poetry. His poem remains unfinished and he seems to have fallen in an artistic paralysis after writing the line the past is deep. He dismisses the story he tells the kid after having narrated it with much passion. He is poet who earns his living by singing Calypso songs. A lot in him seems to be imitation and he seems have a divided identity.

Furthermore, he also comes across as a kind person with a great degree of emotional intelligence. Before his death, he makes the narrator promise to never return after he's told him a funny story: of how all he'd said about the poet's wife was a lie. His voice breaks in the process. It might be a lie, it might not. What seems to be the case though is that it was a true story and that he's lying now. If so, it is actually a profound gesture he's making here. B. Wordsworth is undoubtedly a lonely man. He finds a friend in the young narrator with whom he can share his loneliness and transforms the boy's outlook towards life. However, when he knows his end is near, he attempts to erase his existence from the mind of the young boy by saying that everything he's ever said is a lie. After having expressed his credo to perhaps the only person through his story, i A

The setting and the local colour of the story gives it a very distinctive appeal. The Caribbean setting With its palm and mango trees, the Chancellor Hill, the Race Course and the Port of Spain, combined with the

sights of Miguel Street provide a distinctive visual appeal to the reader. On the other hand, his colloquial diction helps us 'hear' the language of the people inhabiting the story.

Wordsworth's story highlights the alienation of the artist from the society he lives in and tries to come to terms with role s/he might play in it. B. Wordsworth lives in the margins. Nobody buys his poems and he doesn't seem to have any agency in the public life whatsoever. But he does have a great influence on the personal life of the boy Which results in artistic expression in the form of the boy's narration. B. Wordsworth's is a poetry that is lived, not written. He lives his life like a poem.

The theme of the relationship between art and material wealth is found in the utterances of B. Wordsworth and the hardships he has to face to eke out a living by selling his poems for twenty cents and signing Calypso songs. When the narrator's mother refuses to buy his poem, his response, though a funny one, has some truth in it :

**'My mother say she ain't have four cents.'**

**Wordsworth said, 'It is the poet's tragedy.'**

Again, later in the story, we find him unable to be able to believe that material well-being would be his share even if he wrote the greatest poem in the world:

**'But you will be the richest man in the world when you write the greatest poem?'**

**He didn't reply.**

This silence on his part speaks volumes about the chasm that exists between poetry and material prosperity.

Whether B. Wordsworth actually writes good poems or whether he is a delusional person fancying himself a poet is an unimportant question. Such assessment makes the very mistake which the narrator avoids of placing a value judgment on B. Wordsworth's worth. What is more important is his personal life, the past he's been through and the relationship he develops with the boy. When his story about the girl and the child is taken into account, the line "The past is deep" Which he takes a full month to write bears a completely different meaning rather than When Viewed as a disjointed utterance of a madman.

It is true that B. Wordsworth comes across as a strange person but it is this very 'strangeness' Which endears him .He cares about the 'lesser things' in life and can see himself as a part of the universe. His lazy loiterings may appear as escapism but if at all, it is an escape to discovery. This is perhaps what the narrator feels when he lies on the grass with B. Wordsworth after getting thrashed by his mom, watching the night sky.

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of the young boy by saying that everything he's ever said is a lie. After having expressed his credo to perhaps the only person through his story,

He tries to erase his memory from the very person's mind so as to relieve him from the burden of missing someone and allow him to explore life in his own terms. In short, he tries to negate himself for the sake of the other which is perhaps the most profound gesture a human being can make. This noble gesture of self-effacement carries a note of sacrifice with it.

The final paragraphs portray a poignant picture of B. Wordsworth's fate. A year after his last visit the narrator walks along Alberto Street only to find B. Wordsworth's hut replaced by a two-storeyed building. The mango, the plum and the coconut trees have all been cut down. The hard, man-made material replaces the living signs of nature and the last line is an awfully sad one which sums up the life of B. Wordsworth:

**It was as though B. Wordsworth had never existed.**

This strange story about a strange person may appear humorous at first sight but at its core lies a tragedy of tremendous magnitude: One with a profound lesson that can radically change one's outlook towards people, places and the very nature of human existence.

**Assignment:**

- 1. Read the Lesson well.**
- 2. Discuss the relationship shared by the poet B. Wordsworth and the boy. [Answer this question in the copy]**