

# Miguel street analysis essay



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Miguel Street has been variously classified as a group of short stories, as a series of sketches, and as a novel. The latter classification is supported by the fact that it is unified by a single narrator and by several patterns and themes. Furthermore, although each chapter is dominated by a single character, those major characters reappear as minor characters in other chapters. At the end of the book, all the characters who still live on Miguel Street gather to present to the narrator (who is departing for college) gifts representing their own attitudes toward life. Thus, the narratives are tied together, justifying the label “ novel.”

According to V. S. Naipaul, the genesis of Miguel Street was a shout that he remembered from a Port of Spain boyhood: “ What happening there, Bogart?” The purpose of the novel is to answer that question. What happens in Miguel Street seems to be a repeated pattern of aspiration, defeat, and adjustment, all defined and judged by Miguel Street itself.

In this close community, characters search for an identity which will be respected by the Street. Bogart, for example—the first character whose life is explored in the novel—has made himself popular by the mysterious self he has created, a tailor who never sews, an imitation Humphrey Bogart who disappears from time to time and returns with elaborate accounts of his adventures, every time more like an American gangster, expansive but chilling. When Bogart is arrested for bigamy, his real problem becomes clear. Unable to father a child with his Tunapuna wife, he has impregnated a girl in Caroni; forced to marry the Caroni girl, he has returned to Miguel Street and to the men whom he can impress. Having proven his virility to himself, Bogart can act like Bogart. Unfortunately, he has had to commit bigamy in

order' to do so, and even on Miguel Street, he is not safe from the law. Hat understands why Bogart returned to Miguel Street: " To be a man, among we men."

For Popo, the second character in the novel, the respect of the Miguel Street men comes only after the desertion of his hardworking wife. Discouraged, drunk, angry, and rowdy, Popo is accepted as a man, whereas before he was only a " man-woman." Although his reputation dwindles when he brings back his wife and remodels the house to please her, Popo once again impresses Miguel Street when he is arrested for large-scale thievery of materials and furniture. Unfortunately, on his return from prison, Popo turns industrious; Miguel Street men believe that profitable employment should be left to the women.

Structurally, every chapter is related thematically to those which precede it and to those which follow it. Thus, the account of Popo's difficulties with his wife and with his reputation for virility is followed by that of George, who is an outcast on the Street because he beats his wife and his children incessantly, and by that of George's son Elias, who cannot pass any examination to better himself but who refuses to complain about his job driving a cart just as he has refused to admit his father's brutality. The sketch of the mad Man-man, finally removed from the Street and committed to an institution, is followed by the story of B. Wordsworth, who possesses the imagination but not the talent of a poet, and who, like Man-man, disappears from Miguel Street. Like B. Wordsworth, Big Foot is a pretender, and like the poet who does not write, Big Foot vanishes when his cowardice becomes general knowledge. In the final sketch of this group, Morgan, the

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maker of fireworks and the would-be comedian, also must flee from the judgments of the Street.

Titus Hoyt, Laura, and Eddoes all keep their places on the Street and are among the friends who give appropriate gifts to the narrator at the end of the book. Moving from one pedagogical project to the next, Hoyt never gives up. Similarly, the prolific Laura moves cheerfully from pregnancy to pregnancy, cracking briefly only when a daughter follows her pattern. The final story in this group, that of Eddoes, also deals with a determined survivor, who finds joy in the discards of others, which he finds at the dump, and eventually in a discarded baby, supposedly his.

Although the book does not develop chronologically, it ends with the narrator becoming an adult and leaving Miguel Street, not to escape its judgments but to acquire an education. Unlike Elias, he passed the necessary examinations; unlike so many of those on the Street, he has a real opportunity to alter his life.

### The Characters

Growing up in Miguel Street, the narrator learns to respect people whom outsiders might lump together as ignorant slum-dwellers. He comments, “we who lived there saw our street as a world, where everybody was quite different from everybody else. Man-man was mad; George was stupid; Big Foot was a bully; Hat was an adventurer; Popo was a philosopher; and Morgan was our comedian.” Naipaul reveals his characters by accurate recording of dialogue and through the narrator’s ongoing reporting of gossip, facts, and his impressions as well as those of others. In the beginning of “

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The Pyrotechnicist,” for example, the narrator contrasts the Street’s assessment of Morgan as “our comedian” with his own later understanding of Morgan’s personality.

Then, Naipaul’s narrator sums up Morgan as “the sort of man who, having once created a laugh by sticking the match in his mouth and trying to light it with his cigarette . . . does it over and over again” and concludes by quoting Hat’s comment that Morgan is “not so happy at all.” Thus, in a sense, Naipaul circles his characters, viewing them from various perspectives, including the perspective of the adult narrator as he reviews the simpler evaluations of his youth.

Although everybody in Miguel Street is presented as being different from everyone else, there are also similarities in outlook which set the people of the Street apart from most of those who read about them. In the Street, there is a real understanding of what might be called the artistic temperament. Thus, the carpenter Popo is no more respected when he makes chairs for sale than he was when he worked industriously on an unnameable product, and Bhakhu, who is driven to tinker with all the mechanical vehicles which come his way, is evaluated as almost a “mechanical genius,” despite his inevitable disasters. The attitude seems to be more important than the product. Therefore, the Street accepts B. Wordsworth as a poet, without asking to read his poem, and only his own need to admit his failure eventually drives him from the Street.

Titus Hoyt, the teacher without credentials, remains and is respected. Since most of the people on Miguel Street substitute dreams of glory for

achievement, the society itself has learned to find happiness in its illusions. It is ironic that when Bolo wins the sweepstakes—one of the few occasions in the novel on which a dream comes true—he cannot accept his good fortune: Believing that he is being mocked, Bolo tears up his winning ticket. One of the delightful qualities in Naipaul's characters is that they are so imaginative, so irrational, so inconsistent, and so ill at ease with reality.

### Themes and Meanings

The themes of the novel are those truths which the narrator learns as he grows up on Miguel Street, values which the community holds in common, values which are moral rather than legalistic. Indeed, Sergeant Charles, the local officer of the law, is given to apologizing for enforcing it, and no one in the Street seems to think less of anyone else simply because he is given a prison sentence. Sometimes, as with Popo, he will return a hero.

The Street, however, has its own standards. It disapproves of the cruelty of George toward his wife and his children, the beatings, the forced marriage of his daughter, the contempt toward his intelligent son. Although occasional beatings may be necessary, the kind of pleasure that Mrs. Hereira's lover takes in brutality is deplored. Nor does the community approve of the coarse language and the rudeness toward women which they observe in Laura's lover Nathaniel. Indeed, the Street is delighted to learn that Laura beats him, rather than his beating Laura, as he boasted.

It is significant that the triumphs in Miguel Street are not worldly successes, but endurance, dignity, and compassion. "One of the miracles of life in Miguel Street," comments the narrator, "was that no one starved." Nor were

children neglected; thus Eddoes' baby Pleasure is cared for by all the women in the Street. Observing the lives of those around him, the narrator learns the importance of self-respect; sympathetically, he tells no one that he has seen Big Foot's cowardice. He also learns the value of beauty from the eccentric painter Edward, the would-be poet B. Wordsworth, and Hat, the collector of tropical birds. Finally, he learns the importance of imagination, which enables all the individuals of Miguel Street to accept one another's peculiarities and to take joy in the possibilities which each day brings. It is clear that the values learned by the narrator are the themes of Naipaul's novel.

### Critical Context

Miguel Street was the third of V. S. Naipaul's first four books, all of which were set in his native Trinidad. Like *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), which preceded it, Miguel Street is both comic and optimistic. In his later works, particularly those after *The Mimic Men* (1967), Naipaul becomes more pessimistic.

It is significant that in Miguel Street, as in *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, the hopeful tone arises partly from the fact that even in the slums of Trinidad there is a spirit of community. In the later works, Naipaul writes about characters who are isolated, rather than accepted, as lonely Caribbean students in England or as Indians or whites in hostile Africa. His own experience as an East Indian growing up in Trinidad and later transplanted to London gave him insight into three societies which he came to see as all in a condition of decay.