

Sample Précis for Short Story Author Project

“A Temporary Matter”

SUMMARY

In “A Temporary Matter” Jhumpa Lahiri tells the story of a married couple in their early thirties. Shoba is a copy editor and her husband, Shukumar, is finishing his dissertation. The story opens with a notice from the electric company telling them that their power would be cut off for one hour between 8:00 pm and 9:00 pm. The repair work would only be a “temporary matter” for the next five days and then the power would return to normal. It becomes clear early on that Shoba and Shukumar’s relationship is strained. They are sharp and impatient with one another. We find out one of the major reasons for this stress is that Shoba went into labor while Shukumar was out of town and delivered a stillborn. But when the lights go out and they are having a candlelight dinner that Shukumar made they begin to show signs of romance. Shoba has them play a game that she used to play in India when the lights would go out. She asks her husband to tell her something he has never told anyone before. They take turns revealing secrets during the blackouts each evening while they eat dinner in the candles’ glow. Some are romantic, some are confessions of moral lapses, “the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other or themselves” (Lahiri 18). After five nights of what appears to the reader and to Shukumar as a rekindled romance, Shoba announces, with the lights on, that she has signed a lease for her own apartment. In retaliation for this hurt, Shukumar tells Shoba the one thing that he knows will hurt her the most and what he has kept a secret for six months: he held their still-born baby and he was a boy. Since the baby died, Shoba had taken solace in the fact that she did

not know the gender of the child. The story ends with them sitting at the table in darkness and crying “for the things they now knew” (Lahiri 22).

RESPONSE

In “A Temporary Matter,” the title takes on an ironic meaning. We think we know what the title means after the first sentence of the story: “The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour. . . .” (Lahiri 1). While the blackouts are only a temporary matter, the problems of Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage are more permanent. The doctor who delivered the dead baby will also make reference to the short-term effects of this event: “Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks” (Lahiri 4). He assures Shukumar that she would be able to have children in the future and that this event would only be a temporary setback. Even Shukumar believes that the way that the two of them avoid each other will soon pass, “that he and Shoba would get through it all somehow” (Lahiri 5). As we find out later, a temporary matter refers not only to the electricity, but also the main characters’ marriage.

Since the story is written in a third person limited point of view, we have access to Shukumar’s thoughts, but not to Shoba’s. This choice in point of view is effective because like Shukumar, the reader can only guess Shoba’s motives and thoughts. Her announcement that “she had signed the lease” on an apartment in Beacon Hill “that night before coming home” (Lahiri 21) comes as much as a surprise to the reader as it does to Shukumar. It is only after the announcement that we can go back through the story and see how Shukumar (and we) could have predicted the story’s outcome. If Lahiri had chosen to let us in on Shoba’s thoughts, the ending would not have been as effective because we would not have felt the shock of Shukumar quite as intensely.

Lahiri uses characterization to give us clues about Shoba's character that add up to make perfect sense with her final decision to leave Shukumar. For example, we learn that Shukumar is very thorough both in her job and her personal life. Lahiri describes the code and assortment of colored pencils she uses to edit textbooks and the food she has in her pantry that she would be able to use to make an impressive meal in case an unexpected guest came by for dinner. She had prepared and stored enough food in plastic bags and mason jars "to last for their grandchildren to taste" (Lahiri 7). We find out that it is typical for Shoba to "prepare for surprises, good and bad" (Lahiri 6). She purchases an extra skirt or purse in case one would get ruined. She has her own bank account that she puts her bonuses in so that she won't be unprepared like Shukumar's mother was when her husband died. She buys extra toothbrushes in case they have an unexpected overnight guest. Shukumar's reaction to all of these preparations is one of astonishment and awe. He seems impressed by "her capacity to think ahead" (Lahiri 6). All of these precautions build a logic upon which we can see that Shoba is always a few steps ahead of catastrophe. When put altogether, it doesn't seem so surprising that she would have taken her money out of her personal account and rented her own apartment. Ironically, the very things that Shukumar admires about Shoba are the qualities that give her the strength to leave him.

The dialogue in this story is where most of the action is and helps shape our understanding of the characters. The conversations between Shoba and Shukumar give us clues to their character and provide some tension in the story. We know from their actions before they speak that there is some friction between the two characters, but when they speak to each other there is some real tenderness. For example, Shoba recalls after they had dated for two weeks that she had peeked in his address book to see if he had written her in. Even though he hadn't she tells him, "But I didn't give up on you" (Lahiri 13). This kindness is in direct contrast with

"the silences" that had become their normal way of life (Lahiri 12). The dialogue allows us to see Shoba and Shukumar interact. It is more objective because other than the nightly conversations, all of their interactions are remembered through Shukumar and are therefore skewed to his understanding and interpretation. We are not privy to Shoba's motives for revealing the secrets she does, but we do find out many more details about Shukumar's confessions. Perhaps this intimate knowledge of Shukumar's thoughts helps us to side with him and understand why he would say the one thing that he knows would destroy his wife, why he tells her about their son.

THINGS TO NOTE FOR YOUR OWN PRÉCIS

- separate the summary and response and label
- summary gives a quick idea of what the story is about (you can tell what happened, who the characters are without having read the story)
- response is much longer than the summary
- the response is organized by element of fiction (or some other clear and logical organizing factor)
- each paragraph of response has a topic sentence that controls the paragraph
- examples are cited throughout the response
- citations are noted with parenthetical documentation (page number in parentheses)
- the author and title of the story are apparent