Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard

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Plot

- Shahkot, a small town in Punjab, India, is suffering a terrible drought. A pregnant woman, Kulfi, has wild cravings for food and covers the walls with drawings of it. The moment the monsoon breaks and the Red Cross drops food, she gives birth to a boy, named Sampath, "good fortune".
- Twenty years later Sampath is dreamy and hopeless at work. He hates his job at the post office and secretly reads other people's letters. At his boss's daughter's wedding he gets drunk and strips and dances in a fountain, and is sacked.
- He takes a bus out of town to an abandoned guava orchard and climbs a guava tree, where he finally feels at peace. When his family try to bring him down, he tells the crowd secrets he learned from the letters, and they think he is a holy man. His father, Mr Chawla, sees a chance to make money, and the family move to the orchard.
- A spy from the Atheist Society tries to expose him. Monkeys arrive and get drunk on alcohol brought by visitors, then terrorise the town. The officials argue about what to do while Sampath, now trapped by new expectations, longs to escape.
- When the officials and army come to remove the monkeys, Sampath seems to have turned into a large guava, which the monkeys carry off into the forest. The spy falls into Kulfi's cooking pot.

Characters

- Sampath: wants only to escape responsibility and the dull life expected of him; in the tree he finds peace, until fame traps him again.
- Kulfi: his strange mother, who understands him. She forages for exotic ingredients and cooks extraordinary meals.
- Mr Chawla: his practical, money-minded father, who turns his son into a business.
- Pinky: his headstrong teenage sister, who falls for the boy who works at the Hungry Hop ice-cream stall. Ammaji: the kindly grandmother.

- The officials, the spy and the crowd are comic figures who show how foolish and gullible people can be.

Themes and context

- Escape and freedom from family and social expectations.
- Nature against the modern world: the peaceful orchard against the noisy town and its officials.
- The exploitation of religion: Sampath's "wisdom" becomes a money-making show, and the crowd believes what it wants to.
- Absurdity: the comedy of crowds, bureaucrats and drunk monkeys.
- Kiran Desai's first novel, published in 1998; it won the Betty Trask Award. It was inspired by a real man who lived in a tree for many years.

Form, structure and language

- Third-person narration with comic, exaggerated situations, close to a **fable** or folk tale.
- Vivid, sensuous language, especially about food, colour and the natural world.
- A magical, open ending: Sampath's transformation into a guava lets him escape for good.

Key terms

Satire	Mocking people or society to criticise them, like the officials and the crowd.
Absurd	So silly or illogical that it's funny.
Fable	A story, often with animals, that teaches a lesson.
Magical realism	A realistic story in which something magical happens as if it were normal.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What is happening in Shahkot when Sampath is born?
2. What does the name Sampath mean?
3. Where does Sampath work at the start?
4. Why is Sampath sacked?
5. Where does Sampath go to live?
6. How does Sampath seem to know people's secrets?
7. Who sees a way to make money from Sampath?
8. Which society sends a spy to expose Sampath?

Your notes

Answers

1. A drought ends as the monsoon arrives
2. Good fortune
3. The post office
4. He gets drunk and strips at his boss's daughter's wedding
5. Up a guava tree in an orchard
6. He read their letters at the post office
7. His father, Mr Chawla
8. The Atheist Society

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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