

## REVISION GUIDE

# Of White Hairs and Crickets

Rohinton Mistry

### VOCABULARY

**Engrossed** – fully absorbed in something, to the point of distraction.

**Spotch** – a messy spot or irregular mark.

**Cherubic** – having a sweet, innocent appearance, like a young angel.

**Uproot** – to forcibly remove or tear out completely.

**Drab** – dull, boring, and lacking in colour.

**Embossed** – decorated with a raised design or pattern.

**Mamaiji** – a term of respect for a grandmother in some Indian cultures.

**Classifieds** – a section of a newspaper with small advertisements for jobs, housing, etc.

**Threadbare** – fabric worn so thin the threads show, implying age and poverty.

**Plaster** – material used to coat walls, often crumbling in older buildings.

**Enshroudings** – a colloquial term referring to things that cover, conceal, or obscure, often with a sense of mystery.

**Roje** – a religious day of fasting observed by Parsis.

**Gujarati** – a language and people from the state of Gujarat in India.

**Countenance** – a person's facial expression, often revealing their emotions.

**Duleendar** – a slang term, likely similar to the English term damned, used to express annoyance or frustration.

**Bajnar** – a market or shopping area.

**Bunya** – a term referring to a corner shop usually selling groceries and snacks.

**Kustis** – sacred thread worn by Parsi Zoroastrians after initiation.

**Covetous** – showing a strong desire to possess something, often belonging to another.

**Parsis** – an ethnoreligious group following Zoroastrianism, originally from Persia.

**Entranced** – filled with wonder, fascination, and delight.

**Shellac** – a resinous substance used as a varnish or coating, making surfaces shiny.

**Enmity** – a feeling of active hostility and dislike.

**Samosa** – a savoury fried pastry filled with spiced vegetables or meat.

**Bhajia** – a spicy Indian snack, often made from fried vegetables dipped in a batter.

**Sevganthia** – a popular Indian snack made with chickpea flour in a noodle-like shapes.

**Repasts** – an older term referring to a meal or the act of eating.

**Dysentery** – a serious intestinal infection causing diarrhoea and blood loss.

**Diphtheria** – a contagious bacterial infection affecting the throat and respiratory system.

**Retorted** – to reply in a sharp or witty way, often in anger.

**Chori-choopi** – meaning 'secretly' or 'on the quiet' in a Hindi/Urdu context.

**Acquiesced** – to accept something reluctantly without protest.

**Enfeebled** – made weak or lacking strength.

**Throes** – a state of intense suffering or a violent struggle.

**Bouts** – A short period of any form of activity, often used to refer to periods of intense illness or exercise.

**Effluence** – a foul-smelling outflow or discharge.

**Scatological** – obsessively interested in excrement and obscenity.

**Mua ugheeparoo!** – likely a Gujarati exclamation expressing disgust.

**Tattling** – telling someone in authority about another's misbehaviour.

**Bootch** – a stopper, plug, or cork.

**Vagaries** – unpredictable changes or actions.

**Wick** – a piece of cord that draws fuel to a flame in a lamp or candle.

**Harbingers** – someone or something that foreshadow or signals something to come, often negative.

**Queasily** – feeling sick or nauseous.

**Shaik-chullee** – likely a term meaning 'fickle' or 'changeable'.

**Mica** – a heat-resistant mineral used in old stoves and lanterns.

**Afargaan** – a Parsi fire temple's sacred fire container.

**Thaali** – a metal serving platter, often with compartments for different dishes.

**Kuchrawalli** – a woman who collects garbage (often a marginalised role)

**Vitiating** – to spoil, impair, or corrupt.

**Quashed** – to suppress, or stop, something forcefully.

**Portly** – a bit overweight or stout.

**Bails** – small wooden pieces placed on top of the wickets in cricket.

**Maidaan** – an open field or playing ground.

**Erratically** – unpredictably and without a regular pattern.

**Yodel** – a playful vocal style with rapid changes in pitch, likely used as a childhood signal.

**Demeanour** – a person's outward behaviour or attitude.

**Muskaa-paalis** – 'flattering' or 'buttering up' in a colloquial sense.

**Yaar** – a term of friendship, like 'mate' or 'buddy'.

**B.E.S.T.** – An acronym for the Bombay public transportation system.

**Begrudge** – to resent or feel bitterness towards someone for having something.

## CHARACTER LIST

**The Narrator:** A 14-year-old boy, he embodies the story's **themes** of coming-of-age, lost innocence, family dynamics, and masculinity. We see him struggling with the reality of the changing world around him. In particular, he fixates on the fading of his childhood and the slow deaths of the adults around him. This manifests in his growing concern around his father's ageing. He's observant, often painfully so, but struggles to express his emotions, since he was not taught to express his feelings clearly due to the fact he is a boy who is raised in a traditional 20th century Indian environment.

**Daddy:** The narrator's father is a complex figure. He's loving and wants the best for his son, but also carries a resigned sadness and frustration with their circumstances. He clings to dreams of "a better job," yet the constant search for it makes him both hopeful and weary. Due to this, he is a figure of **contrast** in the story, but gradually it appears that, overtime, his weariness and sadness are beginning to overwhelm his hopes and dreams. He is fixated on ageing, and continually plucking out his 'white hairs' in an effort to look young.

**Mummy:** Often in the background, Mummy is a figure who represents quiet resilience and practicality. Her giving nature, offering food to less fortunate neighbours, adds a subtle layer of compassion to the story. However, differing from Daddy, Mummy appears

to already have largely accepted the family's current situation, no longer believing that their circumstances will change and instead resigning herself to her situation. This becomes obvious when she dismisses, out of hand, Daddy's reactions to the potential job offer in the magazine he was reading.

**Mamaji:** The narrator's grandmother is a traditional figure, disapproving of some changes in the world. Though her frailty is evident, her spirit remains strong. Her spinning of thread subtly connects her to themes of life, fate, and the passage of time. This connection helps to show her greater understanding of life, as she has lived for longer than the other characters in the story, which also explains why she appears to accept her current situation more than Daddy, Mummy or the narrator. While they struggle to come to terms with their situation, she likely came to terms with it a long time ago, hence her jovial, if rather biting and sarcastic, attitude.

**Viraf:** The narrator's best friend, he is a kind of **foil**. Initially more responsible and 'grown-up', the sudden tragedy of his father's illness reveals his vulnerability. Viraf's situation sparks a shift in the narrator and a greater awareness of what he currently has, and what he is going to soon lose.

## SETTING

The story unfolds primarily within a single apartment in the decaying fictional Firozsha Baag apartment complex, likely in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. The **timeframe** is **post-independence India, likely in the 1960s or 70s**. The details of the apartment are where the story comes alive: the decaying building with its outdated calendars, the cramped spaces, and the shared veranda – all convey a sense of a family and community clinging to an older way of life. The **descriptions** are realistic, even mundane, focusing on worn objects and daily routines. This type of detailed setting is common in both **social realism** and **coming-of-age** stories, where the environment mirrors the internal struggles of the **characters**.

Furthermore, the consistent **semantic field** of decay used in the setting for this story helps to tie it closely to its main **themes**. For example, the old calendars in the narrator's family's apartment are being used to hide the unrepaired damaged areas of their apartment, but overtime even the calendars, that are being used to cover up these issues, are rotting away. From this we can see that the attempts to ignore the inevitable issues the family faces, mainly death and being trapped where they currently are, can no longer be ignored as their attempts to hide these problems, both Daddy's overly jovial attitude and the calendars, are starting to come apart. Furthermore, the cramped nature of the apartment shows the family's poverty but also their closeness; while the narrator may not initially acknowledge it, he is very close to his family and this is why the threat of his father's inevitable death frightens him so much. However, perhaps the

most important feature of the setting is the wider apartment, as each figure in the apartment and their repetitive actions only adds to the feeling that everyone in the building is on a dull march to their death. One minor figure who shows this is Nirman Hansotia, whom the narrator states will be shaving his face, “besides two steaming cups, one of boiling water and the other tea” by 7 O’clock. The fact the narrator is so aware of this only further adds to the tragedy of his growing understanding of the inevitability of change, while people like his Daddy, Mummy, Mamaiji, even Nirman Hansotia may repeat the same cycles each day, eventually they will be forced to accept change.

## PLOT SUMMARY

- A teenage boy (the narrator) must reluctantly pluck his father's white hairs – a constant reminder of his father's ageing. He feels a mix of resentment and love. While the task is unpleasant, it is one he has done regularly for his father and acts as a form of bonding ritual for them. It does, however, also lead to some disagreements between his father and his grandmother, Mamaiji, as she thinks it will bring bad luck. The boy remembers his childhood fondly - in particular playing cricket with his father on Sundays, although his father is now too old to play anymore.
- The family lives in a run-down apartment, clinging to traditions and outdated belongings. Each of the family members has a different response to this situation. The narrator’s father is constantly attempting to escape this current lifestyle by finding a better job, and repeatedly fails. He wants to send the narrator to America, and puts pressure on himself to succeed for the sake of his family. The narrator’s mother, in contrast, seems to have grown tired of these constant escape attempts, and now has fallen into a melancholic acceptance of the situation. Finally, Mamaiji has already accepted the situation, finding enjoyment in sneaking the narrator food from door to door salesmen, and other simpler things, like arguing with her son-in-law.
- We learn that the narrator’s carefree childhood is largely over. We see this from his description of the gradual moving away of many of his friends, like Francis who could no longer work at the apartments after he was accused of stealing, and even more poignantly from the narrator's reference to the fact that his father no longer takes him to play cricket. He misses those simpler times, and it is at this point that the narrator becomes more aware of the worsening situation he is trapped in.
- The narrator’s father finds a job advertisement in a magazine, and the narrator notes that his father is going into his usual cycle. He finds a job offer, gets excited, makes promises for the changes that will happen in their life and then

nothing comes of it. Usually his mothers joins in on this brief bout of hopes and dreams, this time she refuses to be involved. She is clearly tired of the endless promises that come with no results.

- After getting fed up with plucking his father's hairs and refusing to continue, the narrator leaves their families apartment. The narrator observes his neighbours, including his friend Viraf who currently has their local doctor at his house. He sees his friend is upset, and acts insensitively towards him, despite wanting to make him feel better. The narrator believes he is unable to deal with emotional situations like the one his friend is facing. Eventually the narrator follows Viraf into his home, and sees that Viraf's father has suddenly fallen seriously ill, bringing the fear of death and change closer to home.
- Witnessing Viraf's pain changes the boy. He is still unable to clearly express any empathy for Viraf, despite clearly feeling it, and instead quickly returns to his family's apartment. He regrets having left his father and wants to return to spend more time with him, but still feels awkward and unable to express emotions. He is unable to ask his father if he can continue with the task of plucking his hairs, despite clearly wanting to continue.
- His father does not ask for the narrator's help again, leaving to shave and looking saddened by the experience of being ignored by his son and reproached by his wife. The story ends with the boy's heavy sense of helplessness. The task of plucking the white hairs hangs unfinished, highlighting the impossible battle against time. Instead the narrator is left crying into his pillows on his bed, made to cry because of his inability to express his feelings clearly to those around him. He wants to express his empathy for his friend's plight but he cannot, he wants to express his love for his family but he cannot, instead he can only cry alone.

## NARRATIVE VOICE

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" uses a **first-person narrative voice**, revealing the world through the eyes of a young teenage boy. His **perspective** creates a blend of naive observation and surprisingly mature insights. A **juxtaposition** likely created by the fact he is a teenager, both still a child in some ways but an adult in others. We sense his frustration with the monotony of plucking his father's white hairs, yet he also feels a deep love and desire to help. When confronted with Viraf's father's illness, the boy's world fractures; he witnesses the harsh realities of adult life and experiences a shift from childhood resentment towards compassion. His voice carries a lingering melancholy as he observes the decay of his surroundings and the struggles of his family, mirroring his own loss of innocence. The fact that this comes from a teenage boy, only highlights the tragedy further, as we know that, due to his young age, he is going to live through the death and decay of all the adults he refers to in the story, including those in his own family.

## QUOTATIONS

**“Each Sunday, the elimination of white hairs took longer than the last time.”**

The use of **alliteration**, with the words ‘longer’ and ‘last’ creates a sense of monotonous drudgery. The task is relentless, a stark reminder of ageing and the passage of time – **themes** central to the story. The **comparative adjective** ‘longer’ creates a **focus** on time, while the reference to ‘last’ **foreshadows** the later **themes** of death and concerns around finality that emerge in the story. Furthermore, notice the **noun** “elimination”; it has a harsh, almost clinical feel, reflecting the boy’s resentment towards this unwanted duty, a resentment he will later come to regret.

**“An ill-omened thing, I’m warning you, Sunday after Sunday.”**

Mamaiji’s superstitious pronouncements add a layer of **folklore** and tradition to the story. Her repetitive warnings about plucking hairs become a kind of **refrain**, underlining the **conflict** between generations. The “ill-omen” suggests the narrator’s actions are disrupting something larger, possibly fate itself.

**“Mamaiji spun enough thread to keep us all in kustis.”**

This seemingly simple statement is rich with **symbolism**. The spinning wheel is traditionally associated with life, fate, and the passage of time. Mamaiji’s endless spinning hints at her own struggle against mortality, while the kustis (sacred threads) represent their religious identity and traditions. It creates an **image** of a woman defiantly trying to weave a protective barrier for her loved ones.

**“So her silence was surprising.”**

The use of **silence** reveals the narrator’s keen eye for observation. He notices silences as much as spoken words, hinting at his sensitivity. It marks a shift – usually talkative Mummy has fallen silent in the wave of her husband’s optimism, forcing the reader to wonder *why* this is surprising. It clearly shows a sudden shift in her attitude, towards being more sceptical of her husband’s plans and more accepting of the situation she is trapped in.

**“The British left seventeen years ago, time for their stove to go as well.”**

This seemingly practical statement carries the weight of post-colonial sentiment. The stove acts as a **symbol** of colonial rule, and the desire to get rid of it shows a desire to shed the remnants of a foreign past and embrace a new identity. However, the story subtly questions whether the “better life” can really be found simply by replacing old appliances. This desire for change clashes with Mamaiji’s traditional way of life and the family’s economic reality. Furthermore, the narrator’s fondness for the stove shows that, despite its colonial origins, the amount of time it’s spent with the family has made it, in his eyes, part of the family, showing his tendency to prefer nostalgia to signs of change.

**"And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here."**

This line, filled with a mix of hope and despair, is a common sentiment in stories focused on changing societies and social mobility. The use of the **hyperbole** "No future here" shows the despair that the narrator's father actually feels, as to him there is no opportunity or potential for growth in India, forcing him to push his son to move to another country. Due to this, America becomes a **symbol** of opportunity, progress, and leaving behind the limitations of "here." Yet, there's sadness too, a possible loss of family connection and cultural roots.

**"Nothing happens when you plan too much."**

Mummy's statement, delivered with a touch of bitterness, cuts against her husband's tendency to build hopeful fantasies. The **juxtaposition** of the intensity of Daddy's efforts against the lack of results, it shows a philosophy of acceptance born out of repeated disappointment. This quotation reveals the undercurrent of frustration and quiet resignation present within the family, a **counterpoint** to the overt focus on dreams and new jobs.

**"At night, I stood on the veranda sometimes to look at the stars."**

This beautiful line conveys a quiet yearning. Unlike the bustling streets of Chaupatty, the night sky is unchanged, providing solace in its vastness. It might hint at the boy's longing for something enduring, something larger than the confined world of the apartment. The stars create a **contrast** between the limits of his reality and the boundless nature of possibility. However, this is contrasted with the use of the **symbolism** attached to the stars. While the stars are clearly beautiful, they are unreachable linking to the impossibility of his family's attempts to get the narrator away from their poverty stricken lifestyle.

**"It had been such a long time since we last played cricket."**

Cricket isn't just a sport here. It functions as a **symbol**, a reminder of how childhood joys and bonds with his father have slipped away. It emphasises the **theme** of loss, how growing up brings about changes that can't be reversed, even if those changes aren't entirely bad.

**"But then one Sunday, halfway through the game, Daddy said he was going to rest for a while."**

The **time adverb** "then" implies a **point of change**, a break from the usual pattern of Sunday cricket matches. Daddy's need to rest mid-game signals a loss of his former strength and vitality. It's a subtle yet powerful reminder of time's effects. This moment becomes even more poignant when looking back from the story's end. It **foreshadows** the complete absence of cricket later in the narrator's life, hinting at the fading of a



cherished activity that once connected him to his father and by extension, the fading of the narrator's childhood.

**“His hair was dishevelled as I had left it, and I waited, hoping he would ask me to continue.”**

The focus on Daddy's dishevelled hair subtly reinforces the **theme** of vulnerability brought about by time. It stands in **contrast** to the fastidious attention usually paid to his appearance. The narrator now longs to be asked to continue the hair-plucking ritual, signifying a newfound desire for connection. Yet, as the links between the term 'dishevelled' and the **semantic field** of decay that is spread throughout the piece shows, this time for connection is gone as the decay, along with the misery and acceptance of stagnation attached to it, begin to affect his father.

**“Something inside me grew very heavy, and I tried to swallow, to dissolve that heaviness in saliva, but swallowing wasn't easy either, the heaviness was blocking my throat.”**

The **gustatory imagery** (imagery referencing taste or eating) of the final quotation reveals the narrator's internal turmoil. The **metaphor** of a growing "heaviness" embodies a complex mix of regret, sadness, and a sense of powerlessness. His attempt to "swallow" this emotional burden mirrors his struggle to process these difficult feelings. The physical blockage in his throat reinforces the overwhelming nature of his emotions, emphasising how deeply the events around him – his father's ageing and Viraf's sadness – have affected him.

## GENRE

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" primarily falls into the genre of **coming-of-age fiction**, with elements of **realism** and **domestic drama**. The story focuses on a young boy's growing awareness of his father's ageing and the subtle complexities of their relationship, all set against a backdrop of ordinary life. Mistry avoids exaggerated **plots** in favour of realistic portrayals of family tensions, unspoken emotions, and the everyday experiences that shape a young person's perspective. This focus on the mundane and the intimate places the story firmly within the realms of realism and domestic drama. It is, however, worth noting that while this story does fit within the genre of **coming-of-age** stories, it differs from the more standard tales in this category. For example, many of these stories tend to acknowledge the struggles of adulthood, but carry a small note of hope, something to show that children will be able to deal with the adult world. They may also show a significant development in the protagonist's character as he or she goes from a state of immaturity to maturity. However, within this story there is no small hint of hope, just layer upon layer of difficulty and pain, with an ending that is deeply depressing, and mostly just acknowledges the sheer weight of the stresses of adulthood, without any

solution. Overall, the notes of **realism** and **domestic drama** serve to overwhelm the usually more hopeful tones of a **coming-of-age** story, and bury them under a saddening focus on the reality of being trapped in poverty.

## CONTEXT

**Rohinton Mistry** was born in **1952** in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, into a Parsi family. He immigrated to Canada in 1975 and worked in a bank while pursuing his literary goals. Mistry's work often reflects his Indian heritage and explores themes of immigration, belonging, and cultural displacement. In the case of this particular short story, while it is not autobiographical, clearly pulls from his background among the Parsi community, as well as his understanding of the poverty present in India, and the difficulties some have in attempting to leave the country.

**"Of White Hairs and Cricket"** was originally published in **1987** as part of Mistry's short story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. This collection of interconnected stories is set in a fictional apartment complex in Bombay.

**Parsi Community:** The story's characters belong to the Parsi community, a Zoroastrian group with roots in Persia (modern-day Iran) who settled primarily in India centuries ago. Understanding the Parsi emphasis on community and their unique cultural traditions adds depth to the story's depiction of family life. Zoroastrianism is a particularly old religion, dating back to the 6th century BCE, which generally focuses on the battle between good and evil, as well as the sacredness of fire and water. Zoroastrians are a relatively small religion now, with the majority being in Northern India and Iran, and are generally very focussed on their own communities, rarely interacting with outsiders unless it is necessary. Some references to the importance of water are made within the text, and this is mainly due to the narrator's Zoroastrian links.

**Postcolonial India:** Though not explicitly stated, the story subtly hints at India's postcolonial identity. The economic anxieties of the father, the subtle allusions to Western influences, and the characters' navigation of tradition and change can be read through a postcolonial lens. Postcolonial India refers specifically to the period after India was able to become independent from the British Empire, after having been controlled by the Empire since 1757, in 1947. This is generally seen as a time where India was able to begin to reclaim its national identity, remove colonial elements from its society, and generally establish itself as a strong independent nation in the world.

## ATTITUDES

**Ageing is an inevitable and humbling process.** Mistry portrays ageing not as something to be feared but as a natural part of life marked by both vulnerability and quiet wisdom. The father's ageing body and the son's growing awareness of it highlight the passage of time, reminding us that even the strongest among us face the inevitability of decline.

**Parent-child bonds are complex and ever-evolving.** The story delicately explores the subtle shifts in parent-child relationships as children grow older. The son's initial reverence for his father gradually gives way to a more nuanced understanding of his flaws and weaknesses, alongside a lingering sense of love and protectiveness.

**Maturity comes from facing life's challenges, not avoiding them.** While the story doesn't condemn the desire to reclaim lost youth, it subtly suggests that true growth comes from navigating life's difficulties. The father's quiet acceptance of his ageing, his struggles to provide for his family, and his unspoken anxieties offer the son a glimpse into the complexities of adulthood.

## THEMES

- Parent-Child Relationships
- The Passage of Time
- Unspoken Emotions
- Maturity and Growth
- Vulnerability
- Ageing and Mortality