

For the Life of Laetitia: Overview

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Merle Hodge's *For the Life of Laetitia* (1993) is a coming-of-age novel set in Trinidad in the late twentieth century. Laetitia "Lacey" Johnson, a village girl from Sooklal Trace, wins a scholarship to a prestigious secondary school in La Puerta. To attend, she must leave the warm, crowded household of her grandmother Ma and go to live with her absent father, Mr. Orville Cephas, and his wife Miss Velma — people who are strangers to her. At school she forms a friendship with Anjane Jugmohansingh, a fellow scholarship student from Orangefield whose family regards her education as a waste. The novel follows Lacey's first year at secondary school: her confrontations with Mr. Cephas's cold authority, her growing understanding of what Anjane is up against, and the consequences when the people responsible for Anjane allow those conditions to continue unchecked.

The novel ends with a death, a breakdown, and a recovery. The thanksgiving at the end is not a resolution of what happened to Anjane; it is a recognition that Lacey survived, and that this is worth marking.

Key Relationships

Character	Role
Laetitia "Lacey" Johnson	Narrator and protagonist; scholarship student from Sooklal Trace
Ma (Mrs Wilhemina Johnson)	Lacey's grandmother; the household's moral centre; the person Lacey measures everything against
Pappy	Lacey's grandfather; quiet authority; formal where Ma is warm
Uncle Leroy	Ma's son; Lacey's closest male ally; practical, cheerful, devoted
Mammy Patsy	Lacey's mother; working in New York; enrolled in night school while Lacey is in La Puerta
Mr. Orville Cephas	Lacey's absent father; vain, controlling, status-obsessed; treats Lacey as a social prop
Miss Velma	Mr. Cephas's wife; once bright and lively; now diminished by years of his household
Michael	Lacey's half-brother; a frightened child whom Lacey quietly befriends

Anjaneer Jugmohansingh	Lacey's school partner and best friend; scholarship student whose family refuses to support her education
Miss Hafeez	Lacey and Anjaneer's form teacher; one of the novel's few wholly admirable authority figures
Mr. Joseph	Literature teacher; introduces Caribbean folktales alongside the set texts
Mrs. Lopez	Maths teacher; the novel's clearest example of institutionalised cruelty toward marginalised students
Ma Zelline	Family friend; a woman who chose independence over domestic submission; the novel's image of female self-sufficiency

Key Themes

- Education:** The novel insists that education is not free. Lacey's scholarship requires her to leave home and live with a man she doesn't know. Mammy Patsy's night school is only possible because Lacey is staying with Mr. Cephas — one woman's education is contingent on another woman's endurance. Anjaneer's education costs her family taxi fare and grocery money, and her brothers and father would rather save the money and keep her home. Hodge's argument is structural: access to education for women and girls in this society requires the agreement of men who often see no value in providing it.
- Gender:** The Cephas household is the novel's most extended study of what a marriage looks like when a man's authority is total and a woman's presence is barely audible. The radio scene, in which Miss Velma listens to her own music at the lowest possible volume and turns it off when Mr. Cephas turns on his, reduces the entire power arrangement to a single concrete image. Against this, the novel places Ma Zelline: a woman who chose not to marry and who runs her own household on her own terms. The contrast is structural: two women, two lives, two different degrees of permission.
- Class and Identity:** The secondary school in La Puerta operates as a site where students are invited to measure themselves against values that do not reflect them. The social studies teacher's Happy Family poster, Mrs. Lopez's contempt for students from the wrong kind of home, Anjaneer's shame about her roti at lunch — all of them enact the same logic: that what these children come from is insufficient. Lacey's refusal to accept this logic, whether in her social studies notebook or by refusing Mrs. Lopez's offer of special status, is one of the novel's defining threads.
- Race:** Trinidad is a multi-ethnic society, and the novel does not simplify its tensions. Mr. Tewarie's differential treatment of Black and Indian students, Marlon Peters's songs in

response, Mr. Cephas's contempt for Anjanees as "a coolie," Miss Hafeez's lesson on what the word "racist" actually means — all of these sit in the text without resolution. Hodge does not offer easy solidarity; she shows how racism operates among the oppressed as well as from above.

- **Death:** Hodge spends the entire novel showing precisely what kills Anjanees: her brothers' refusal of taxi fare, her father's contempt for her ambition, domestic labour that exhausts her past the point of recovery, the anaemia that a doctor said required rest she could never get, and Mrs. Lopez's sustained campaign to make her feel she had no right to be in a classroom. The sentence Anjanees drink poison is the result of all of that. The novel does not permit the reader to be surprised; it insists that Anjanees's death has a cause, and the cause is a system, not a single event.
- **Family and Belonging:** Lacey belongs to Sooklal Trace, to Ma's household, to the specific textures of village life — the garden, the sugar-cakes, Uncle Leroy's voice. La Puerta is a place she lives but does not inhabit. The question running through the novel is whether she can find a way to hold onto who she is while also becoming who she is going to be. By the end, the answer is yes, at cost, and with Anjanees's memory carried forward into every early morning.

Hodge's Method

Hodge narrates in the third person but from a position so close to Lacey's consciousness that the novel reads as intimate first-person testimony. The voice is specific: Trinidadian in its syntax and idiom, direct in its observations, controlled even in the scenes of highest emotional pressure.

The novel's most important technique is what it withholds. Anjanees's death is not given as a scene; it arrives as a sentence a classmate says in a school corridor, an event that has already happened. The breakdown that follows is not described in real time; we learn its extent gradually, from the inside, as Lacey comes back. Hodge trusts the accumulation of specific, ordinary detail to carry the emotional weight: the garden with its baby pumpkin, the smell of mothballs in the travelling bag, the hard round sweetness of a green mango from Uncle Leroy.

Narrative Techniques

Rhetoric: Hodge uses rhetoric sparingly, but its presence is always significant. Mrs. Lopez's classroom speeches use rhetorical questions and selective emphasis to humiliate: "And take Miss Jugmohansingh now — always sleeping in class, when she is here at all. Girl, why you don't just stay home and help them make garden?" The question assumes its own answer and places Anjanees in a position where any response confirms the premise. Ma Zelline's speech to Lacey uses the same structural tool in an entirely different register: "Don't mind no Cephas, no Circus-horse... You have the best chance. See and do good!" Equally direct, but pointing toward

possibility rather than exclusion. The contrast is Hodge's argument: rhetoric is a technique, and what matters is whose interests it serves.

Allegory: The novel is not allegorical in the totalising way that *Animal Farm* is, but individual elements carry allegorical weight. Anjanees death is the novel's central allegorical statement: she does not die of one cause but of a system, and the cause-effect chain Hodge constructs across the whole novel is an allegory of how structural inequality operates. The radio scene in Chapter 6 is allegorical: Miss Velma's radio at the lowest possible volume, silenced when Mr. Cephas turns on his, is an image of any arrangement in which one person's presence is permitted only at the discretion of another. The Happy Family poster in the social studies classroom is an allegory of whose family is considered normal enough to represent everyone.

Juxtaposition: Hodge structures the novel through constant juxtaposition. Ma's household in Sooklal Trace — warm, crowded, full of food and noise and care — is placed directly against the Cephas household in La Puerta: tidy, cold, governed by performance for others. The contrast is not between poverty and comfort; Ma's household is not wealthy. It is between belonging and non-belonging. Anjanees exhaustion — arriving late, studying on the bus, managing domestic labour at home, arriving halfway through lessons — is juxtaposed with Lacey's comparative stability. Mrs. Lopez is juxtaposed with Miss Hafeez in nearly every scene involving formal authority: the same institution, the same title, producing opposite conditions for students like Anjanees.

Foil: Lacey and Anjanees are the novel's central foils. Both are scholarship students from outside La Puerta, both intelligent, both readers. The difference is not in ability or character but in material conditions: Lacey has a father, however inadequate, who provides a roof in the city; Anjanees must commute from Orangefield, manage a household, and fight every day for the right to be in a classroom at all. Miss Velma and Ma Zelline are foils: both women of an earlier generation, both intelligent, both constrained by the same society. Ma Zelline chose independence and lives on her own terms; Miss Velma submitted and has been diminishing ever since. Uncle Leroy and Mr. Cephas are foils: both men with authority over Lacey's circumstances. Leroy exercises that authority through care; Cephas through control.

Situational irony: The scholarship that gives Lacey access to education requires her to leave the household that formed her and live with a man who treats her as a social prop. The system designed to open doors forces her through one she would not otherwise have chosen. More devastating: the school in La Puerta, which should represent the system working, is the place where Anjanees is most systematically destroyed. Mrs. Lopez's classroom, which exists to teach mathematics, is the environment in which Anjanees receives her most explicit messages that she has no right to be there. The institution that should be most committed to her future is the one most actively undermining it.

Approaching For the Life of Laetitia in Paper 02

Paper 02 questions on prose fiction typically ask about character, theme, or the writer's narrative methods. Strong answers will demonstrate:

- **Specific knowledge of the novel's events**, referenced precisely rather than paraphrased loosely
- **The ability to connect individual scenes to larger themes**: the radio scene is not just about Sunday morning; it is an image of the entire marriage
- **Attention to Hodge's method**: the close third-person narration, the withholding of Anjane's death as direct scene, the use of Creole idiom and dialogue, the way domestic detail carries thematic weight
- **Understanding of the novel's social context**: the scholarship system, colorism and racial hierarchy in Trinidad, the domestic economy of village households, the cost of education for women

If the question asks about a character, connect that character to the novel's structural argument: Miss Velma is not just an unhappy wife; she is the novel's image of what happens to bright girls when the system removes them from education and puts them in men's households. If the question asks about a theme, anchor it in specific scenes and Hodge's specific choices in how she presents them.

Exam Tip

The novel's power lies in its accumulation of specific, ordinary detail. When you write about it in an exam, be specific: name the scene, describe what happens in it, and then explain what Hodge is doing with it. The radio scene, the photo album, the instruments protest, the Happy Family poster, the sentence Anjane drink poison — each of these is a precise, deliberate image. An answer that engages with the specifics of these scenes will always score higher than one that discusses themes in the abstract.