Samuel Selvon was born in 1923 in Trinidad, where A Drink of Water from his short story anthology Ways of Sunlight is set. The son of an East Indian father and a half-Scottish mother, Selvon always thought of himself as Trinidadian and a part of the Creole culture which developed from the fusing into one society of a mixture of different nationalities. Samuel Selvon died in 1994.

A Drink of Water

The time when the rains didn’t come for three months and the sun was a yellow furnace in the sky was known as the Great Drought in Trinidad. It happened when everyone was expecting the sky to burst open with rain to fill the dry streams and water the parched earth.

But each day was the same; the sun rose early in a blue sky, and all day long the farmers lifted their eyes, wondering what had happened to Parjanya, the rain god. They rested on their hoes and forks and wrung perspiration from their clothes, seeing no hope in labour, terrified by the thought that if no rain fell soon they would lose their crops and livestock and face starvation and death.

In the tiny village of Las Lomas, out in his vegetable garden, Manko licked dry lips and passed a wet sleeve over his dripping face. Somewhere in the field a cow mooed mournfully, sniffing around for a bit of green in the cracked earth. The field was a desolation of drought. The trees were naked and barks peeled off trunks as if they were diseased. When the wind blew, it was heavy and unrelieving, as if the heat had taken all the spirit out of it. But Manko still opened his shirt and turned his chest to it when it passed.

He was a big man, grown brown and burnt from years of working on the land. His arms were bent and he had a crouching position even when he stood upright. When he laughed he showed more tobacco stain than teeth.

But Manko had not laughed for a long time. Bush fires had swept Las Lomas and left the garden plots charred and smoking. Cattle were dropping dead in the heat. There was scarcely any water in the village; the river was dry with scummy mud. But with patience one could collect a bucket of water. Boiled, with a little sugar to make it drinkable, it had to do.

Sometimes, when the children knew that someone had gone to the river for water, they hung about in the village main road waiting with bottles and calabash shells, and they fell upon the water-carrier as soon as he hove in sight.

‘Boil the water first before drinking!’ was he warning cry. But even so two children were dead and many more were on the sick list, their parents too poor to seek medical aid in the city twenty miles away.

Manko sat in the shade of a mango tree and tried to look on the bright side of things. Such a dry season meant that the land would be good for corn seeds when the rains came. He and his wife Rannie had been working hard and saving money with the hope of sending Sunny, their son, to college in the city.
Rannie told Manko: ‘We poor, and we ain’t have no education, but is all right, we go get old soon and dead, let him have plenty learning and come a big man in Trinidad.’

And Manko, proud of his son, used to boast in the evening, when the villagers got together to talk and smoke, that one day Sunny would be a lawyer or a doctor.

But optimism was difficult now. His livestock was dying out, and the market was glutted with yams. He had a great pile in the yard which he could not sell.

Manko took a look at his plot of land and shook his head. There was no sense in working any more today. He took his cutlass and hoe and calabash shell which had a string so he could hold it dangling. He shook it, and realized with burning in his throat that it was empty, though he had left a few mouthfuls in it. He was a fool; he should have known that the heat would dry it up if he took it out in the garden with him. He licked his lips and, shouldering the tools, walked slowly down the winding path which led to his hut.

Rannie was cooking in the open fireplace in the yard. Sunny was sitting under the poui tree, but when he saw his father he ran towards him and held the calabash shell eagerly. Always when Manko returned from the fields he brought back a little water for his son. But this time he could only shake his head.

‘Who went for water today by the river?’ he asked Rannie.

‘I think was Jagroop,’ she answered, stirring the pot with a large wooden spoon, ‘but he ain’t coming back till late.’

She covered the pot and turned to him. ‘Tomorrow we going to make offering for rain,’ she said.

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poui: the national tree of Trinidad – pink or yellow

Next day, Las Lomas held a big feast, and prayers were said to the rain god, Parjanya. And then two days later, a man called Rampersad struck water in a well he had been digging for weeks. It was the miracle they had been praying for. That day everyone drank their fill, and Rampersad allowed each villager a bucket of water, and Manko told Sunny: ‘See how blessing doesn’t only come from up the sky, it does come from the earth, too.’

Rampersad’s wife was a selfish and crafty woman, and while the villagers were filling their buckets she stood by the doorway of their hut and watched them. That night she told her husband he was a fool to let them have the water for nothing.

‘They have money hide up,’ she urged him. ‘They could well pay for it. The best thing to do is to put barb’ wire all around the well, and set a watchdog to keep guard in the night so nobody thief the water. They say you too poor to give away for no thing. Charge a dollar for a bucket and two shillings for half-bucket. We make plenty money and come rich.’

When Rampersad announced this, the villagers were silent and aghast that a man could think of such a scheme when the whole village was burning away in the drought, and two children had died.

Rampersad bought a shotgun and said he would shoot anyone he found trespassing on is property. He put up the barbed wire and left a ferocious watchdog near the well at nights.

As April went, there was still no sign in the sky. In Las Lomas, the villagers exhausted their savings in buying Rampersad’s water to keep alive.

Manko got up one morning and looked in the tin under his bed in which he kept his money. There was enough for just two buckets of water. He said to Rannie: ‘How long could you make two buckets of water last, if we use it only for drinking?’
‘That is all the money remaining?’ Rannie looked at him with fear. He nodded and looked outside where the poui tree had begun to blossom. ‘Is a long time now,’ he said softly, ‘a long time, too long. It can’t last. The rain will fall, just don’t be impatient.’

Rannie was not impatient, but thirst made her careless. It happened soon after the two buckets were empty. She forgot to boil a pan of river water, and only after she had drunk a cupful did she realize her fatal mistake. She was afraid to tell Manko; she kept silent about the incident.

Next day, she could not get out of bed. She rolled and tossed as fever ravaged her body.

Manko’s eyes were wide with fright when he saw the signs of fever. Sunny, who had not been to school for weeks, wanted to do whatever he could, anything at all, to get his mother well so she could talk and laugh and cook again.

He spoke to his father after Rannie had fallen into a fitful sleep, with perspiration soaking through the thin white sheet.

‘No money remaining for water bap?’ Manko shook his head.
‘And no money for doctor or medicine?’ He shook his head again.
‘But how it is this man Rampersad have so much water wand we ain’t have any? Why don’t we just go and take it?’

‘The water belong to Rampersad,’ Manko said. ‘Is his own, and if he choose to sell it, is his business. We can’t just go and take, that would be thiefing. You must never thief from another man, Sunny. That is a big, big, sin. No matter what happen.’

‘But is not a fair thing,’ the boy protested, digging his hands into the brittle soil. ‘If we had clean water, we could get mai better, not so?’

‘Yes, beta,’ Manko sighed and rose to his feet. ‘You stay and mind mai, I going to try and get some river water.’

All day, Sunny sat in the hut brooding over the matter, trying hard to understand why his mother should die from lack of water when a well was filled in another man’s yard.

It was late in the evening when Manko returned. As he had expected, the river was nearly dry, a foul trickle of mud not worth drinking. He found the boy quiet and moody. After a while, Sunny went out.

Manko was glad to be alone. He didn’t want Sunny to see him leaving the hut later in the night, with the bucket and the rope. It would be difficult to explain that he was stealing Rampersad’s water only because it was a matter of life or death.

He waited impatiently for Rannie to fall asleep. It seemed she would never close her eyes. She just turned and twisted restlessly, and once she looked at him and asked if rain had fallen, and he put his rough hand on her hot forehead and said softly no, but that he had seen a sign that evening, a great black cloud low down in the east.

Then suddenly her fever rose again, and she was delirious. This time he could not understand what she said. She was moaning in a queer, strangled way.

It was midnight before she fell into a kind of swoon, a red flush on her face. Manko knew what he must do now. He stood

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*bap: father
*mai: mother
*beta: child
looking at her, torn between the fear of leaving her and the desperate plan that he had made. She might die while he was gone, and yet – he must try it.

He frowned as he went out and saw the moon like a night sun in the sky, lighting up the village. He turned to the east and his heart leapt as he saw the cloud moving towards the village in a slow breeze. It seemed so far away, and it was moving as if it would take days to get over the fields. Perhaps it would; perhaps it would change direction and go scudding down into the west, and not a drop of water.

He moved off towards the well, keeping behind the huts and deep into the trees. It took him ten minutes to get near the barbed wire fence, and he stood in the shadow of a giant silk-cotton tree. He leaned against the trunk and drew in his breath sharply as his eyes discerned a figure in the other side of the well, outside the barbed wire.

The figure stopped, as though listening, then began clambering over the fence.

Even as he peered to see if he could recognize who it was, a sudden darkness fell as the cloud swept over the moon in the freshening wind.

Manko cast his eyes upwards swiftly, and when he looked down again the figure was on the brink of the well, away from the sleeping watchdog.

It was a great risk to take; it was the risk Manko himself had to take. But this intrusion upset his plan. He could not call out; the slightest sound would wake the dog, and what it did not do to the thief, Rampersad would do with his shotgun.

For a moment, Manko’s heart failed him. He smelt death very near – for the unknown figure at the well, and for himself, too.

He had been a fool to come. Then a new frenzy seized him. He remembered the cruel red flush on Rannie’s cheeks when he had left her. Let her die happy, if a drop of water could make her so. Let her live, if a drop of water could save her. His own thirst flared in his throat; how much more she must be suffering!

He saw the bucket slide noiselessly down and the rope paid out. Just what he had planned to do. Now draw it up, cautiously, yes, and put it to rest gently on the ground. Now kneel and take a drink, and put the fire out in your body. For God’s sake, why didn’t the man take a drink? What was he waiting for? Ah, that was it, but be careful, do not make the slightest noise, or everything will be ruined. Bend you head down….

Moonrays shot through a break in the cloud and lit up the scene.

It was Sunny.

‘Beta!’ Before he could think, the startled cry had left Manko’s lips.

The dog sprang up at the sound and moved with uncanny swiftness. Before Sunny could turn, it had sprung across the well, straight at the boy’s throat.

Manko scrambled over the fence, ripping away his clothes and drawing blood. He ran and cleared the well in a great jump, and tried to tear the beast away from the struggling boy. The dog turned, growling low in the throat as it faced this new attacker:

Manko stumbled and fell, breathing heavily. He felt teeth sink into his shoulder and he bit his lip hard to keep from screaming in pain.

Suddenly the dog was wrenched away as Sunny joined the fight. The boy put his arms around the dog’s neck and jerked it away
from his father with such force that when the animal let go they both fell rolling to the ground.

Manko flung out his arm as he sprang up. In doing so, he capsized the bucket of water with a loud clang. Even in the struggle for life he could not bear to see the earth sucking up the water like a sponge. In fear and fury, he snatched the empty bucket and brought it down with all his strength on the dog’s head.

The animal gave a whimper and rolled off the boy and lay still.

‘Who that, thiefing my water?’ Rampersad came running out into the yard, firing his shotgun wildly in the air.

‘Quick, boy! Over the fence!’ Manko grabbed the bucket and tossed it over. He almost threw Sunny to safety as the boy faltered on the wire. Then he half-dragged his own bleeding body up, and fell exhausted on the other side.

Sunny put his arm under his father and helped him up. Together they ran into the shadow of the trees.

The noise of the gun and Rampersad’s yells had wakened the whole village, and everyone was astir.

Father and son hid the bucket in a clump of dry bush and, waiting for a minute to recover themselves, joined the crowd which was gathering in front of Rampersad’s hut.

Rampersad was beside himself with rage. He threatened them all with jail, screaming that he would find out who had stolen the water and killed the dog.

‘Who is the thief? You catch him?’ The crowd jeered and booed. ‘It damn good. Serve you right.’ Clutching his father’s arm tightly, Sunny danced and chuckled with delight at Rampersad’s discomfiture.

But suddenly silence and darkness fell together. A large black blob of cloud blotted out the moon. The sky was thick with clouds piling up on each other and there was a new coolness in the wind.

As one, the crowd knelt and prayed to the rain god. The sky grew black; it looked as if the moon had never been there. For hours they prayed, until Manko, thinking of Rannie, gently tapped his son and beckoned him away. They walked home hand in hand.

It was Sunny who felt the first drop. It lay on his hand like a diamond shining in the dark.

‘Bap?’ He raised questioning eyes to his father. ‘Look!’

As Manko looked up, another drop fell on his face and rolled down his cheek. The wind became stronger; there was a swift fall of some heavy drops. Then the wind died like a sigh. A low rumble in the east; then silence. Perhaps Parjanya was having a joke with them, perhaps there would be no rain after all.

And then it came sweeping in from the north-east, with a rising wind. Not very heavy at first, but in thrusts, coming and going. They opened their mouths and laughed, and water fell in. They shouted and cried and laughed again.

Manko approached the hut where Rannie lay, and he was trembling at what he would find. He said to the boy: ‘Beta. You stay here. I go in first to see mai.’ The boy’s face went rigid with sudden fear. Though he was already drenched to the skin, he took shelter under the poui tree in the yard.

Manko was hardly inside the door when he gave a sharp cry of alarm. He thought he saw a ghostly figure tottering towards him, its face luminous-grey. He flattened himself against the wall and closed his eyes. It was cruel of the gods to torment him like this.
This was not Rannie: Rannie was lying in bed in the next room, she could not be alive any more.

‘Manko.’ It was her voice, and yet it was not her voice.

‘What noise is that I hear? Is rain?’

He could not speak. Slowly, he forced himself to stretch out his hand and touch his forehead. It felt cold and unnatural.

He withdrew his hand, and began to tremble uncontrollably.

‘Manko,’ the lips formed the words. ‘Manko, give me water!’

Something fell to the floor with a clatter. He saw that it was a tin cup, and that she had been holding it in her hand. She swayed towards him, and he caught her. Then Manko knew that it was a miracle. Rannie was shaking with cold and weakness, but the fever was gone, and she was alive.

Realization burst upon him with such force that he almost fainted.

He muttered: ‘I will get some for you.’

He picked up the cup and ran out into the lashing rain. Sunny, watching from the poui tree, was astonished to see his father standing motionless in the downpour. He had taken off his shirt, and his bare back and chest were shining with water. His face, uplifted to the sky, was the face of a man half-crazy with joy. He might be laughing or crying, Sunny could not tell; and his cheeks were streaming, perhaps with tears, perhaps with Parjanya’s rain.

Connections to Economics:

Choose three economic concepts and explain how they are demonstrated in the story.

Example: Scarcity

“A Drink of Water” demonstrates the concept of scarcity because water is a scarce resource on the island. There is not enough water to supply the entire island for free, so it becomes a valuable commodity.

Productive Resources
Supply
Demand
Opportunity Cost
Specialization
Trade