

# PREPARING to Read

## from the Mahabharata



### Build Background

**The World's Longest Epic** The *Mahabharata* (mə-hā-bā'rə-tə) is the longest epic in the world. Composed of 100,000 Sanskrit couplets in 18 books, it is eight times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. It was recited by bards for generations before being written down sometime between 400 B.C. and A.D. 400. The author is said to be Vyasa (vyā'sə), a legendary sage who also appears in the story as the grandfather of the main characters.

The translator of the epic, J. A. B. van Buitenen, describes it as an encyclopedia of Brahman-Indian civilization, containing "history, legend, edification; religion and art; drama and morality." Children in India today are taught stories from the *Mahabharata*, and both ancient and modern writers have drawn on it for inspiration. The English director Peter Brook has produced Broadway and film versions of the epic for Western audiences.

### The Mahabharata Story

**Clashing Cousins** *Mahabharata* means "great epic of the Bharata dynasty." The Bharatas were an ancient ruling family of India; in fact, the official name of the Republic of India is Bharat. The conflict in the story centers on two branches of the Bharata family: the Kauravas ("descendants of Kuru") and the Pandavas ("descendants of Pandu"). These cousins are rivals for a kingdom in north-central India.

The Kauravas are the 100 sons of the blind king Dhrtarastra (drĭ-tə-rāsh'trə). They are demons in human form, born from pieces of flesh that were incubated in separate pots. The oldest is Duryodhana, a jealous plotter. The Pandavas are the five sons of Dhrtarastra's brother, Pandu. These sons—Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva—were actually fathered by gods. Yudhisthira, being the oldest of the cousins, is the rightful heir to the kingdom, but Duryodhana arranges to have the Pandavas exiled. He then burns down their house, but they escape.

#### Kauravas

**Duryodhana** (dŏr-yō'də-nə)  
His 99 brothers

#### Pandavas

**Yudhisthira** (yŏ-dĭsh'thĭr-ə)  
**Bhima** (bē'mə)  
**Arjuna** (ār'jŏo-nə)  
**Nakula** (nə-kŏŏ'lə)  
**Sahadeva** (sā-hā-dā've)

## Connect to Your Life

You will read an excerpt from early in the epic, when the Pandavas and Kauravas (also called Kurus) are boys being raised together. Guided by the great teacher Drona, they are training to be warriors. Recall a time when you were part of a group learning a discipline, such as martial arts, music, or running. Perhaps there was a student who did better than others in the group. What set him or her apart?

## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS:

#### CHARACTERIZATION IN AN EPIC

The word **characterization** refers to the techniques a writer uses to develop characters. In an epic, the hero is usually developed through his superhuman actions, his noble speeches, and the admiring or fearful reactions of other characters.

**Epithets**, brief descriptive phrases such as “king of men,” also point out a hero’s greatness.

#### ACTIVE READING: SEEING CONTRASTS

Epics celebrate qualities that are admired in a culture. Arjuna’s admirable qualities stand out when he is **contrasted** with, or shown as different from, others around him. For example, Arjuna is equally skillful with all weapons, whereas each of the other students excels with only one kind of weapon.

**READER’S NOTEBOOK** As you read this excerpt, make a list of the personal qualities Arjuna reveals. Also list qualities shown by the other students.

Arjuna	Other Students

#### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

esoteric honed invincible peer unvanquished

While the Pandavas are in exile, the great warrior Arjuna wins the hand of the princess Draupadi (drou’pə-dē) by stringing a bow that no one else can bend and hitting a target. When he gets home and tells his mother that he has won a prize, she tells him to share it with his brothers. Because he cannot disobey, all five brothers share Draupadi as a wife.

**A Necessary War** The Pandavas eventually return home. For a while, they and the Kauravas split the kingdom and rule different parts, but Duryodhana goads Yudhisthira into wagering his right to the kingdom in a dice game. When Yudhisthira loses, the Pandavas must go into exile again for 13 years. At the end of the 13 years, the Pandavas come back to claim the kingdom, but Duryodhana refuses to give it up. The cousins go to war.

One ally of the Pandavas is their cousin Krishna. Krishna serves as Arjuna’s charioteer, but he is also a deity, an incarnation of the supreme god, Vishnu. He has descended to earth to restore *dharma* (law and righteousness). When Arjuna hesitates to fight against his kinsmen, Krishna lectures him on his duty. This moral lecture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is the most famous part of the *Mahabharata* (see page 128). After an 18-day battle, almost everyone is killed except the five Pandava brothers, and Yudhisthira is crowned king.



# from the Mahabharata

Translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen

## ARJUNA, THE MIGHTY ARCHER

Of the Kurus who studied with Drona, Duryodhana and Bhima excelled in combat with clubs. Asvatthaman<sup>1</sup> surpassed all in all the esoteric arts. The twins were masters on the sword hilt, beyond all other men. Yudhishthira was the best on chariots. But Arjuna was the best on every weapon. The Pandava, chief of the chiefs of warriors, was renowned on earth as far as the ocean for his insight, application, strength, and enterprise in all weapons. Both in weaponry and devotion to his guru, the mighty Arjuna was distinguished by his excellence, even though the arms drills were the same for all; among all the princes he was the outstanding warrior. The evil-minded sons of Dhrtarastra could not stand the superior vigor of Bhimasena<sup>2</sup> and the expertness of Arjuna, O king of men.

When all their studies were completed, Drona assembled them all to test their knowledge of weaponry, bull among men. He had craftsmen fashion an artificial bird and attach it to a treetop where it was hardly visible, and proceeded to point out the target to the princes.

*Drona said:*

Hurry, all of you! Quickly take your bows, put your arrow to the string, and take your position aiming at this bird. As soon as I give the word, shoot off its head. I shall order you one after the other, and you do it, boys!

*Vaisampayana<sup>3</sup> said:*

The great Angirasa<sup>4</sup> first turned to Yudhishthira. "Lay on the arrow, invincible prince," he said, "and as soon as I have ceased talking let go of it!" Yudhishthira then first took his loud-sounding bow and at his guru's command stood aiming at the bird. And while the Kuru prince stood there with his bow tensed, Drona said to him after a while, "Do you see the bird in the treetop, prince?" "I see it," Yudhishthira replied to his teacher. After a while Drona again said to him, "Now can you see the tree or me, or your brothers?" "Yes," he said to each question, "I see the tree, and yourself, and my brothers, as well as the bird." Then Drona said, dissatisfied, "Run off then!" and scolded him: "You won't be able to hit that target." Then the famous teacher questioned Duryodhana and the other sons of Dhrtarastra one after the other in the same way, to put them to the test; and also Bhima and the other pupils and the foreign kings. They all said that they could see everything, and were scolded.

Thereupon Drona spoke smilingly to Arjuna. "Now you must shoot at the target. Listen. As soon as I give the word you must shoot the arrow. Now first stand there for a little while, son, and keep the bow taut." The left-handed archer

1. Asvatthaman (əsh-və-tā'mən): Drona's son.

2. Bhimasena (bē'mə-sā'nə): Bhima.

3. Vaisampayana (vī'shəm-pā'yə-nə): one of the reciters of the epic. He learned it from his teacher Vyasa, the reputed author.

4. Angirasa (ān-jīr'ə-sə): title given to Drona, identifying him as a follower of the great teacher Angirasa.

### WORDS TO KNOW

**esoteric** (ēs'ə-tēr'ik) *adj.* understood by only a certain group

**invincible** (in-vīn'sə-bəl) *adj.* unable to be conquered



Drona at the Well, Bhaktisiddhanta.

stretched the bow until it stood in a circle and kept aiming at the target as his guru had ordered. After a while Drona said to him in the same way, "Do you see this bird sitting there? And the tree? And me?" "I see the bird," Arjuna replied, "but I don't see the tree or you." Satisfied, the unvanquished Drona again waited a spell, then said to the bull-like warrior of the Pandavas, "If you see the bird, describe it to me." "I see its head, not its body." At Arjuna's words Drona shuddered with pleasure. "Shoot!" he said, and the Partha<sup>5</sup> shot without hesitation, cut off the tree-perching bird's head with the honed blade of his arrow, and made the target tumble to the ground.

When Phalguna<sup>6</sup> had succeeded in the task, Drona embraced him and deemed Drupada and his party laid low in battle.<sup>7</sup>

A few days later the great Angirasa went with his pupils to the Ganges<sup>8</sup> to bathe, O bull among Bharatas. When Drona had plunged into the water, a powerful crocodile that lived in the river grabbed him by the shin, prompted by Time. Although he was quite able to save himself, he ordered his pupils, "Kill this crocodile and save me!" hurrying

them on. He had not finished speaking before the Terrifier<sup>9</sup> with a burst of five arrows killed the crocodile under the water, while the others were still coming from everywhere in great confusion. And upon seeing the Pandava make such quick work of his task, Drona deemed him the best of all his students and was mightily pleased. The crocodile, cut to many pieces by the Partha's arrows, let go of the shin of the great-spirited Drona and returned to the five elements. Drona Bharadvaja then said to the great-spirited warrior, "Receive from me, strong-armed Arjuna, this outstanding

invincible weapon that is named Brahma-Head, along with the instructions of how to release and return it. It should never be used against human beings, for if it is unleashed on one of little luster, it might burn up the world. This weapon, son, is said to be without its match in all three worlds.<sup>10</sup> Therefore you must hold it carefully; and listen to my word: should ever a superhuman foe oppress you, hero, use this weapon to kill him in battle."

The Terrifier gave his promise with folded hands and took that ultimate weapon. And the guru again said to him, "No man in the world shall be your peer as an archer!" ♦

5. the Partha (pār'tə): Arjuna. This title designates him as a son of Prtha-Kunti.

6. Phalguna (pəl-gōō'nə): Arjuna.

7. deemed Drupada (drōō'pə-də) . . . laid low in battle: Drona had agreed to teach the princes only if they would later attack King Drupada, Drona's former friend, who had snubbed him.

8. Ganges (gān'jēz'): a river in India, sacred to Hindus.

9. the Terrifier: title given to Arjuna.

10. all three worlds: the earth, the atmosphere, and the sky.

#### WORDS TO KNOW

**unvanquished** (ūn'vāng'kwīsh't) *adj.* undefeated

**honed** (hōnd) *adj.* finely sharpened **hone** *v.*

**peer** (pīr) *n.* equal



## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What was your reaction to Arjuna?

### Comprehension Check

- How does Drona test his students' skills in archery?
- How does Arjuna show that he is the best student?
- How does Drona reward Arjuna?

## Think Critically

**2. ACTIVE READING: SEEING CONTRASTS** Review the two lists you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. In what ways is Arjuna different from the rest of the students?

**3.** Judging from your list of Arjuna's qualities, which traits do you think were admired in ancient India?

**4.** What is your opinion of Drona as a teacher?

THINK ABOUT

- how he responds to Arjuna
- why he scolds the other students
- why he does not save himself from the crocodile

**5.** Why do you think Indian parents still tell this story to their children? What lessons does it contain?

## Extend Interpretations

**6. Comparing Texts** Does Drona remind you of any other figure from literature, films, or comics? Explain.

**7. Connect to Life** Think about any lesson you found in the story. Based on your own experiences, do you think this lesson is true?

## LITERARY ANALYSIS: CHARACTERIZATION IN AN EPIC

The word **characterization** refers to the techniques that a writer uses to develop a character. A writer may

- describe a character's physical appearance
- present the character's actions, words, thoughts, or feelings
- present other characters' reactions to the character
- make direct comments about the character

**Epithets** are a form of direct commentary often used in epics. They are brief descriptive phrases, such as "bull among men," that suggest a character's qualities.

**Activity** What alerts you that Arjuna is a hero? Go back through the selection and identify techniques used to characterize Arjuna.

Physical Description	Character's Actions/Words/Thoughts
Other Characters' Reactions	Narrator's Direct Comments/Epithets