Mahabharata Study Guide

Mahabharata by William Buck

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Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is the great national epic poem of India (offically known as "Bharat"). Comprising one hundred thousand stanzas of verse divided into eighteen books, or *parvas,* the poem is the largest single literary work in existence. Originally composed in the ancient language of Sanskrit sometime between 400 BC and 400 AD, it is set in a legendary era thought to correspond to the period of Indian culture and history in approximately the tenth century BC. Its main subject is a bloody feud between two branches of the ruling family of the northern Indian kingdom of Kurujangala, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Their conflict culminates in an epic eighteen-day battle and the annihilation of nearly all those involved in the war, except the victors, the five Pandava brothers—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—and a handful of others.

The poem's theme focuses on the Hindu concept *ofdharma,* or sacred duty. In essence, the epic story represents an extended exploration of the responsibilities set forth by the code of *dharma.* In addition to recounting a heroic tale, the *Mahabharata* contains a collection of writings on a broad spectrum of human learning, including ethics, law, philosophy, history, geography, genealogy, and religion. It also features a number of legends, moral stories, and local tales all woven into an elaborate narrative.

In the rest of the world, the poem is largely recognized for several of these exotic tales and for the *BhagavadGita,* which encapsulates many of the basic tenets of Hinduism. In India, the *Mahabharata* is considered one of the finest works on Hindu culture, and is widely read and studied. In addition, it continues to provide inspiration to new generations of Indian writers and artists, and is perceived as the nation's most valued classical work of literature. The encyclopedic character and cultural importance of the *Mahabharata* are characterized in this statement from the work:' "That which is found in these pages may be found elsewhere, but what is not in these pages exists nowhere."

Author Biography

Most scholars agree that the *Mahabharata* was not written by a single individual. Instead multiple authors compiled it over the course of several centuries. According to mythic tradition, however, the *rishi* (sage) Vyasa—who is also a character in the *Mahabharata*—wrote the work. In Sanskrit, the name Vyasa means "collector," "compiler," or "arranger." Thus, Vyasa represents the countless individuals who put together the various tales, stones, histories, legends, and treatises that are known collectively as the *Mahabharata.* A legendary figure occupying a prominent position in ancient Sanskrit literature, Vyasa is said to have composed the eighteen *puranas,* or "ancient tales," and to have written the four *Vedas,* the sacred texts of the Hindu religion. Also according to myth, he is supposed to have written more than 3 million stanzas of the epic poem, the majority of which were for the entertainment and enlightenment of the gods, while only one hundred thousand of the stanzas were to be repeated among human beings as the *Mahabharata..* The legend of Vyasa's creation of the poem is this: The great seer Vyasa wanted to write down the story of his people, the Bharata (an ancient Aryan tribe whose name has became synonymous with India). While meditating on how he would give the work to his disciples, the elephant-headed god of writers, Ganesha, appeared. The deity offered to write down Vyasa's story on the one condition that the wise man never stop telling his tale. If he did, the god would disappear, never to return. Vyasa weighed Ganesha's proposal and agreed to it, providing that he could stop if ever Ganesha failed to understand something he had said. The agreement was made, and thus, so the legend goes, the *Mahabharata* is filled with many digressions and complexities because of Vyasa's need to confuse and bewilder his scribe.

Plot Summary

Adi-Parva, First Book: The Origins of the Families

The story opens as Sauti, a storyteller returning from the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya, approaches several wise men, or *rishis,* in the forest of Naimisha. He relates to them the *Mahabharata* as he has heard it from Vaisampayana, a disciple of the poet Vyasa. Sauti begins by recounting the death of King Parikshit of the Bharatas at the hands of Takshaka, a *Naga,* or snake-man. King Janamejaya, Parikshit's son and successor, had held the snake sacrifice in order to avenge the death of his father, but the ceremony was stopped by the intervention of the learned *Naga,* Astika. Sauti then recounts the origins of the Bharatas (also known as the Kurus), a race descended from the great King Bharata of Kurujangala.

Sauti quotes the story as told by Vaisampayana at the sacrifice. Vaisampayana describes the origins of Santanu, a descendent of Bharata loved by Ganga, the goddess of the Ganges river. She and King Santanu have a child called Bhishma. Later Santanu falls in love with Satyavati, a beautiful woman born from a fish. Long ago Satyavati had given birth to the poet Vyasa, but now she agrees to marry Santanu on the condition that her future son by Santanu would become king. Santanu tells his son Bhishma of this wish, and Bhishma forsakes his right to the throne. The two then marry, and Satyavati bears two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Chitrangada, the elder, becomes king after Santanu retires to the forest. But the new king is killed in battle before he can produce an heir and the young Vichitravirya takes his place. Bhishma, in an attempt to continue the royal line, abducts three princesses from a neighboring kingdom. Two of them, Ambika and Ambalika, agree to marry Vichitravirya, while the third, Amba, departs to be with her true love. But the young king dies of consumption before siring any children, so Bhishma asks his half-brother Vyasa to father children by Vichitravirya's wives.

When Vyasa approaches Ambika she closes her eyes, and thus her son Dhritarashtra is born blind. When her sister Ambalika sees Vyasa she turns pale with fright and her son, Pandu (meaning "pale"), is born with very light skin. Although Dhritarashtra is older, Bhishma makes Pandu king because his brother cannot see. Pandu marries Princess Kunti, who chooses him at her *svayamvara,* the ceremony of self-choice. Pandu also takes a second wife, Madri. He reigns as king of Kurujangala, living in the city of Hastinapura for several years and then retires to the Himalayas with Kunti and Madri. One day while out hunting, Pandu shoots a deer that curses him, foretelling that he will die while making love to one of his wives. The formerly sexually insatible Pandu avoids sexual contact with his wives, and encourages them to bear him sons from unions with the gods. His wife Kunti summons Dharma, the god of justice, who fathers Yudhishthira. Then she gives birth to Bhima by Vayu, the god of the wind, and Arjuna by Indra, the king of the gods. Madn also uses Kunti's mantra, evoking the gods called the Aswins, who give her twin sons, Nakula and Sahadeva. Meanwhile, Dhritarashtra has become king and marries Gandhari, who choses to live with her eyes blindfolded when she

learns that her husband is blind. As Vyasa had prophesied, Gandhari gives birth to one hundred sons and one daughter— all of whom come from a single ball of flesh that lies in her womb for two years. Called die Kauravas, the eldest son is Duryodhana, the second boy is Duhsasana, while the sole daughter is called Duhsala.

Several years later, Pandu gives in to desire and embraces Madri. He dies instantly, according to the prophecy, as does Madri, from fear. Pandu's sons, known as the five Pandavas, return with Pandu's widow Kunti to Hastinapura. They are welcomed by King Dhritarashtra, and raised with his own sons. All are instructed in the military arts by the tutors Kripa and Drona, as is Drona's son Aswatthaman. The Bharata princes excel at warfare, but Drona's star pupil is Arjuna. Adept with a bow, Arjuna's skills are unparalleled, until one day an even greater warrior arrives. This is Karna. The son of Kunti and Surya (the sun god), Karna was born with golden armor attached to his skin. But Kunti, young and unmarried, set her son adrift on a river to be found and raised by suitable parents. He was adopted by Adhiratha, a charioteer. None of the Pandavas realize that Karna is their brother, and the armored warrior bests them all in martial feats. Kripa, however, questions Kama's presence, noting that he is not a prince. Duryodhana is impressed with Karna— and more importantly, he has been looking for a warrior who could defeat Arjuna. Duryodhana and Karnabecome friends, but according to traditions of obligation, Karna is indebted to Duryodhana for his kingship and hence owes the prince a great favor. Led into battle by Drona, the Pandavas attack the nearby kingdom ruled by Drupada, and Drona seizes one half of the king's lands.

The Pandavas return to Hastinapura and Yudhishthira becomes heir to the throne of Kurujangala. Jealous and fearing the loss of his future throne, Duryodhana hatches a plot to destroy the five and acquire the kingdom for himself. While his cousins and Kunti are visiting the town of Varanavata, they are to stay in a special house constructed by one of Duryodhana's henchmen which he plans to have burned. Before the Pandavas leave, however, Vidura warns Yudhishthira of the planned trap. Bhima plans an escape route by digging a tunnel under the house through which they escape. Kunti and the five Pandavas are thought to have perished in the flames. They actually flee into the forest.

While traveling in the wilderness, Bhima happens upon Hidimba, the beautiful sister *of a Rakshasa,* or forest-demon. Hidimba-asur. Bhima falls in love with her and kills her brother as the fiend is about to kill the Pandavas and Kunti. Hidimba bears Bhima a son, Ghatotkacha, "the pot-headed." The five brothers, disguised as *Brahmans* (religious men), and their modier continue to wander through the forest. Bhima slays anodier *Rakshasa,* Vaka, saving the people in the village of Ekachakra. Hearing of the upcoming *svayamvara* of King Drupada's daughter, Draupadi, the Pandavas set out for his kingdom. Arjuna, still in disguise, succeeds in the king's test of skill with a bow, and wins the beautiful Draupadi as his wife. Fulfilling a prophecy, Draupadi marries not just Arjun but all five of the brothers. Dhritarashtra hears that the Pandavas are alive and consults his advisors. Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura suggest that the kingdom be divided. Yudhishthira becomes king and the Pandavas construct the splendid city of Indraprastha.

Yudhisthira's rule at Indraprastha is peaceful for more than a decade. Meanwhile Arjuna leaves his brother's kingdom for twelve years. He visits the wise and mighty Krishna in the city of Dwaraka. There he falls in love with Subhadra, Krishna's sister, and embarks on several adventures.

Sabha-Parva, "Assembly Book": The Game of Dice

Back in Hastinapura, Duryodhana is still powerfully jealous of five Padavas and their growing power and wealth. He consults his uncle, Sakuni, asking him how he might defeat the Pandavas. Sakuni points out that Yudhishthira has a weakness for gambling, and if challenged to play at dice will not decline. Duryodhana invites the Pandavas to Hastinapura, and offers the challenge, which Yudhishthira accepts, playing against the cunning Sakuni in place of Duryodhana. But Sakuni cheats at the game, and soon the Kauravas win Yudhishthira's wealth and kingdom, and also his four brothers, their wife Draupadi, and Yudhishthira himself.

The Kauravas have Draupadi brought forcibly before them. She is in traditional monthly seclusion, so it is especially offensive that her privacy is thus violated. Compounding the insult to her honor, Duhsasana humiliates her and attempts to strip off her clothing. Bhima, enraged by this treatment of his wife, vows that he will kill Duhsasana and drink his blood. King Dhritarashtra rebukes his sons for their behavior and offers to grant Draupadi any wish to make up for the wrong done to her. She asks the Yudhishthira and his brothers, whose freedom has been forfeited in the dice game, beset free. The king does this. As the Pandavas and their wife turn to leave, the Kauravas, hoping to thwart their future vengeance, suggest a final gambling match. The losers of this final throw of the dice must spend twelve years in forest exile, and a thirteenth year living in disguise in a foreign kingdom. The Pandavas agree; but Sakuni cheats again and they lose.

Vatta-Parva, "Forest Book": Exile in the Forest

The five Pandavas—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—and their wife Draupadi depart for the Kamyaka forest. While there, under the advice of Vyasa, Arjuna leaves the others and goes in search of weapons to aid them when they return and seek to avenge themselves against the Kauravas. He encounters Shiva, god of destruction, who gives him a weapon called Pasupata. Later, Arjuna's father, Indra, appears and takes his son up to heaven. There Arjuna meets a heavenly dancer, or *Apsara,* named Urvasi. Because Arjuna resists her amorous advances, she curses him so that he must spend one year of his life as a eunuch.

Back in the forest, Yudhishthira meets the *rishi* Vrihadaswa. The seer relates the story of Nala and Damayanti to comfort the grief-stricken king. Soon Arjuna returns from Indra's heaven. He recounts his adventures to his brothers and Draupadi. Meanwhile, Duryodhana and Sakuni plan an expedition to the forest, hoping to taunt their exiled cousins.

The gods observe Krishna and Arjuna.

While there, the Kauravas engage the army of the powerful Chitraralha, king of the Gandharvas, who imprisons them. Arjuna, armed with magical weapons, arrives and frees his cousin. Duryodhana, shamed by this turn of events, seeks to starve himself in the forest instead of returning, humiliated, to Hastinapura. Rebuking his hastiness, however, his brother Duhsasana dissuades him. Later, Jayadratha, king of Sindhu sees Draupadi in the forest and instantly falls in love with her. He abducts her while the Pandavas are away hunting. When they return, the brothers track down Draupadi and Jayadratha. Yudhishthira decides to spare the unscrupulous king's life and lets him go. Soon another *rishi,* called Markandeya, appears. He relates the tale of the princess Savitri to the Pandavas.

Elsewhere, Indra endeavors to win Kama's armor from him. Though warned by his father of this plot, Kama allows Indra, disguised as a Brahman, to remove his natural protection. In exchange he asks that the god give him a powerful dart. Guaranteed to kill any enemy, the weapon may be used only once. Back in the forest, Nakula happens upon a magical lake. Though forbidden to drink the water by an unseen voice, he disobeys and falls dead. Sahadeva, Arjuna, and Bhima follow and do the same; all are killed. Lastly Yudhishthira walks to the lake. Seeing the dead bodies of his brothers, he hears the same warning. Then the voice asks him to answer its questions. Yudhishthira does this satisfactorily, and the voice reveals itself to be his father, Dharma. The god of justice, finding Yudhishthira truly worthy, then brings his brotiiers back to life.

Virata-Parva, "Book of Virata": The Thirteenth Year of Exile

During their final year of exile the Pandavas travel to the city of Matsya in the kingdom of King Virata. Each takes a disguise. Yudhishthira becomes Kanka, a Brahman and dice-player. Bhima takes the name of Vallabha, claiming to be a cook formerly in the service of King Yudhishthira. Draupadi assumes the identity of Sairindhri, a serving-maid in the employment of Virata's queen. Sahadeva calls himself Tantripala, a cowherd and talented astrologer. Nakula disguises himself as Granthika, a horse-keeper. Arjuna invokes Urvasi's curse, becoming the eunuch Vrihannala, the singing and dancing instructor of Virata's daughter. One day toward the end of the last year of exile Kichaka, Virata's general, happens to see Draupadi. Enthralled by her beauty, he desires her as his wife. Draupadi refuses, but Kichaka will not yield. She asks for Bhima's aid, and he kills the general, crushing him to death. Back in Hastinapura, Duryodhana hears of Kichaka's demise and launches an invasion against Virata's kingdom. Arjuna, with the assistance of Virata's son, Uttara, as his charioteer and armed with his magical Gandiva bow, defeats the attacking Kauravas. Soon after, at the end of the thirteenth year, the Pandavas disclose their true identities. King Virata offers his daughter to Arjuna in marriage, Arjuna accepts the princess as a fitting wife for his son, Abhimanyu.

Udyoga-Parva, "Effort Book": The Preparations for War

Eager for the return to his kingdom, Yudhishthira asks Krishna to travel to Hastinapura and secure Indraprastha from the Kauravas. Overriding the opinions of Dhritarashtra's other advisors, Duryodhana refuses to give away half of Kurujangala and war soon appears inevitable. Arjuna and Duryodhana both travel to Dwaraka to seek Krishna' s aid in the upcoming hostilities. Krishna offers a choice, himself—as an advisor, not a warrior—or ten thousand of his Yadava troops. Arjuna selects Krishna, while Duryodhana is pleased with the soldiers, despite the fact that he was not allowed to choose first. Both princes depart, and back in Kurujangala further preparations for battle are made. At a grand assembly, Krishna, the avatar or physical manifestation of the mighty god Vishnu, reveals his divine form. Undaunted, the Kauravas continue to marshal their forces for war. Bhishma, forced to lead their army as a general, reveals that he will not fight against Sikhandin, a warrior of the Pandava forces. According to legend, Sikhandin's soul was reincarnated from the princess Amba, who is fated to be the cause of Bhishma's destruction.

Bhishma Parva, "Book of Bhishma": The Battle Under Bhishma's Command

In order that he might relate the events of the battle to Dhritarashtra, Vyasa grants Sanjaya the power of heavenly sight, allowing him to see all things. On the first day, the armies gather on the vast Kurukshetra plain. Arjuna, viewing the assembled warriors—including his cousins, uncles, and grandfather—hesitates, unwilling to fight his kin. To dismiss his fears Krishna sings The *Bhagavad Gita,* or Song of the Lord. In it, Krishna assures Arjuna that all souls are immortal, and that death is only a temporary state between incarnations. Strengthened by these words, Arjuna prepares to engage his foes. Before the conflict, however, Yudhishthira removes his armor and puts down his weapons. He moves toward Bhishma and asks his permission to fight. Yudhishthira does the same to Drona, Kripa, and Salya. For nine days the Kauravas and Pandavas wage war. Each day both forces align themselves in different formations and clash; many die in the carnage. Each night the warriors retire to their camps, while *Rakshasas* and ghouls feast on the decaying bodies of the slain. In the evening of the ninth day of battle, the five Pandavas and Krishna travel to Bhishma's tent and ask him how he will die. They learn that he will not fight the warrior who was once a woman, Sikhandin. The following day Sikhandin, with the help of Arjuna, shoots Bhishma with his arrows. Soon, die general is pierced by Pandava arrows. Bhishma remains alive, however, and waits for the appropriate time of his death.

Drona Parva, "Book of Drona": Drona's Command and Death

Drona accepts Duryodhana's invitation to become the new general of the Kaurava army and vows to take Yudhishthira alive, thereby ending the war. In order to accomplish this goal, Arjuna must be lured away from his eldest brother; a task to be undertaken by Susarman and the five brothers of Trigartas. On the day of battle, Arjuna defeats the warriors from Trigarta and thwarts Drona's plan. Elsewhere Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, cut off from the main Pandava force by King Jayadratha, is slain by Duhsasana. That night Arjuna vows his revenge on Jayadratha. This he does the following day— despite the intervention of Kama—and Jayadratha lies dead. The battle continues into the night as Bhima's demon son, Ghatotkacha, draws his power from the darkness and fights for the Pandavas. But Kama intercedes, ending Ghatotkacha's destruction of the Kaurava forces by slaying him with his magical dart.

On the twelfth day of battle, Krishna devises a ploy to eliminate Drona. Bhima kills an elephant called Aswatthaman—the same name as Drona's son—and cries, "Aswatthaman is dead." Drona asks the usually honest Yudhishthira if this is true. The Pandava prince carries on with the lie in order to win the war. Overcome with despair, Drona ceases to fight. Dhrishtadyumna, seeing he is undefended, ends Drona's life, but Aswatthaman, still alive, is hungry for revenge. He uses the weapon of Narayana, which will kill all of those who do not immediately drop their weapons and turn their thoughts from war. Before the Pandavas are killed, the wise Krishna informs them of this defense and the warriors survive, preventing Aswatthaman \s vengeance.

Karna Parva, "Book of Kama": Kama's Command and Death

Following the death of Drona, Karna takes command of the Kaurava army. During that day of battle, Duhsasana attacks Bhima. Initially wounding him, Bhima retaliates by hurling his mace at the attacker. The Pandava prince then tears open Duhsasana's chest and drinks his blood—as he swore he would—thereby avenging the humiliation of Draupadi. Later, Karna and Arjuna battle. When Kama's chariot wheel sinks into the earth he calls to Arjuna to stay his arrows until he might raise it. He claims that to kill him in such an undefended position would be cowardly. Arjuna refuses to listen and beheads the mighty warrior.

Salya Parva, "BookofSalya": The Defeat of Salya and Duryodhana

With Karna gone, Salya takes command of Duryodhana's army. Bhima first engages the king of the Madras, but the conflict ends in a stalemate. Then Yudhishthira, usually mild rather than savage, pursues Salya. Flanked by his brothers, Nakula and Sahadeva, the

eldest Pandava kills Salya and defeats his warriors. Duryodhana, seeing virtually his entire army destroyed, flees into the forest and seeks refuge at the bottom of a lake. Turning the water solid by means of a magical spell, Duryodhana stays hidden until the three remaining Kaurava warriors, Kripa, Aswatthaman, and Kritavarman arrive. They urge Duryodhana to defeat Yudhishthira or die in battle. Some nearby hunters hear this conversation and inform the Pandavas of their cousin's whereabouts. Yudhishthira then arrives at the lake and challenges Duryodhana to fight any of the five Pandavas with the weapon of his choice. If he wins he will be king. According to his choice, Duryodhana and Bhima battle with maces. The conflict continues and Bhima realizes that to win he must fight a deceiver with deception. He breaks Duryodhana's thighs with his mace, outraging Balarama as he watches the match. Krishna's brother calls Bhima an unfair fighter for attacking below the waist, and leaves forDwaraka. Still, Bhima is victorious, though Duryodhana upbraids him for his treachery. Later the eldest son of Dhritarashtra sends a message, making Aswatthaman his new general.

Sauptika-Parva, "Sleeping Book": The Destruction of the Pandava Army at Night

Aswatthaman, with the aid of a powerful weapon from Shiva, enters the Pandava camp and slays Dhnshtadyumna, Sikhadin, and the rest of the Pandava force in their sleep. Only the seven Pandavas not at the camp—the five brothers, Krishna, and Satyaki—survive the slaughter. When the seven catch up to Aswatthaman, he attempts to use the Brahmasira weapon, an implement of war so powerful that it is capable of destroying the entire world. Arjuna counteracts it with is own Brahma weapon, then withdraws it. But Aswatthaman is unable to stop his attack, and unintentionally redirects it toward the womb of Abhimanyu's wife, Uttarah, killing her unborn child. Krishna, however, restores the baby's life.

Stri-Parva, "Eleventh Book": The Lament of the Wives

The widows of the Kaurava and Pandava warriors, along with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, visit the battlefield to mourn and number the dead. Meanwhile, Yuyutsu and Sanjaya build pyres and perform funeral rites.

Shanti Parva, "Book of Consolation": Bhishma's Discourse

A grieving Yudhishthira speaks to Bhishma, who tells him the ways of kings, the origins of all things, and the duties of humankind.

Anusasana Parva, "Book of Precepts": The End of Bhishma's Discourse and his Death

Bhishma continues to tell Yudhishthira of the duties of kings, of the gods, and of the nature of life in this world. He then bids his friends goodbye and his soul ascends to heaven.

Aswamedha-Parva, "Fourteenth Book": Yudhishthira's Horse Sacrifice

Yudhisthira sacrifices a horse in order to purify the sins of the combatants in this war.

Asramavasika-Parva, "Hermitage Book": Dhritarashtra's Retirement

Dhritarashtra officially grants the kingdom of Kurujangala to Yudhishthira and departs for the forest, accompanied by Gandhari and Kunti. Vyasa and the Pandavas travel to their hermitage, and the *rishi* raises the souls of all the fallen warriors from the Ganges river so that the dead might visit the living for one night. Several years after the visit, the Pandavas hear news that Dhritarashtra and the two queens have been killed in a great forest fire.

Mausala-Parva, "Book of the Clubs": The Death of Krishna and the Yadavas

Thirty-six years after the end of the great battle, evil portents prophesy the destruction of Dwaraka— Krishna's city—in a mighty flood. Another curse tells of Krishna, incensed by an argument, picking up a handful of grass, which then became a club, and killing all of his people, the Yadavas. When Arjuna arrives to investigate, he finds that these stones are true and that Balarama and Krishna have died. Arjuna's former companion, Krishna, lies slain by an arrow that pierced his foot—the only vulnerable portion of his body—when a hunter mistook him for a deer.

Mahaprasthanika-Parva, "The Book of the Great Journey": The Five Pandavas Ascend Mount Meru

Hearing of the Yadava's destruction, Yudhishthira forsakes his throne and makes Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson, king. Yudhishthira, his four brothers, Draupadi, and his dog walk north on their way to Mount Meru, the entranceway to Indra's heaven. First Draupadi, then Sahadeva, then Nakula, then Arjuna, and finally Bhima, all fall dead. Indra appears in his chariot to escort Yudhishthira to heaven, but demands that he leave

his dog behind. Yudhishthira refuses to abandon the devoted animal. Instantly the dog transforms into Dharma, god of righteousness, praises his son, and the former king ascends to heaven.

Swargarohana-Parva, "Book of the Ascent to Heaven": The Five Brothers and Draupadi Arrive in Heaven

Yudhishthira finds Duryodhana in heaven. He is there because he obeyed the *dharma* of the warrior and died on the battlefield. Yudhishthira asks to see his brothers and wife and is informed that they are in hell, serving penance for their sins. Soon cleansed, they join Yudhishthira. At this point Janamejaya's ceremony of the snake sacrifice ends, thus closing Vaisampayana's narrative. Soon after, Sauti finishes his retelling of the *Mahabharata.*

Characters

Abhimanyu

Arjuna's son by Subhadra, Abhimanyu is killed in the great war by Duhsasana after his chariot is cut off from the main Pandava force by King Jayadratha. He fathers one son, Parikshit, by his wife Uttarah.

Adhiratha

A charioteer from the kingdom of Anga, Adhiratha adopts and raises Kama after finding him floating in the Ganges river.

Amba

The eldest princess of Banaras, Amba is abducted by Bhishma along with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika to serve as wives for Vichitravirya. She refuses, and instead flees west to be with her true love, the King of Salwa. She later throws herself into a flaming pyre in order to be reincarnated as Sikhandin.

Ambalika

The second of Vichitravirya's wives, Ambalika is impregnated by the poet Vyasa. Frightened by Vyasa's appearance, she turns pale, and gives birth to a pale-skinned son whom she names Pandu, meaning "white," "pale," or "pale yellow."

Ambika

Though married to Vichitravirya, Ambika's son Dhritarashtra is fathered by the poet Vyasa. She reacts to Vyasa's frightful appearance by closing her eyes, and her son Dhritarashtra is born blind.

Arjuna

Son of Kunti by the god Indra, Arjuna is, next to Kama, the greatest warrior in the poem and one of the five heroes of the *Mahabharata.* Trained by the military expert Drona from a young age, this Pandava prince is skilled in archery, able to string and release dozens of arrows with deadly accuracy in mere seconds. A gallant warrior, Arjuna is called Vijaya, or "victor" andDhanamjaya, or "winner of wealth." Although an unconquerable fighter at the start of the great battle, Arjuna experiences an intense feeling of self-doubt and loses his resolution to fight when he sees his kinsmen lined up

against him. His courage is restored by Krishna, who sings to him the *Bhagavad Gita,* or the "Song of the Lord." With these words the divine Krishna convinces Arjuna that death is merely an illusion, that souls are immortal and return, reincarnated, to the earth after a period in heaven.

Arjuna's exploits include his journey to Indra's heaven—where his father, the king of the gods, advises him—and his discovery of magical weapons to aid the Pandavas in the war against the Kauravas. He also draws King Drupada's bow at Draupadi's *svayamvara,* or ceremony of self-choice, winning her as wife for himself and his brothers. He defends the town of Matsya from the attacking forces of Duryodhana, and slays Kama during the climactic moment of the great war. Near the end of the poem, he ascends to heaven with his brothers and wife, after a brief time of spiritual cleansing in hell.

Astika

The learned son of a *Naga* and a hermit, Astika asks King Janamejaya to stop the snake sacrifice on behalf of his people.

Aswatthaman

Son of Drona, Aswatthaman is a mighty warrior who fights with the Kaurava army. After the death of his father during the war, Aswatthaman gives way to an almost uncontrollable anger and thirst for revenge. He employs the magical weapon of Narayana, which is capable of killing the entire Pandava army. Krishna counteracts its force, however, by telling the Pandavas to drop their weapons and turn their thoughts from war, rendering them immune to its power. After the Narayana fails, Aswatthaman is demoralized and believes the Kauravas will lose. Following their defeat, he unleashes an incredible weapon, taught to him by his father. Called the Brahmasira, it even has the power to destroy the world. Stopped by Arjuna with the help of Krishna, Aswatthaman nevertheless cannot fully control the weapon and launches it into the womb of Uttarah, killing her unborn son Abhimanyu (though Krishna later restores the child's life). Aswatthaman was born with a blue jewel affixed to the middle of his forehead, which he relinquishes to Arjuna after his final defeat.

The Aswins

Twin gods known as "the harbingers of dawn," the Aswins father Nakula and Sahadeva by Madri, Pandu's second wife.

Balarama

Krishna's brother, Balarama teaches the art of mace warfare to both Bhima and Duryodhana. He is appalled when Bhima fights unfairly by striking Duryodhana below

the navel with his mace. At his death a huge snake with a thousand heads comes out of his mouth.

Bharata

A legendary king called Chakravarti or "Universal Emperor," Bharata gives his name to the people that are the subject of the *Mahabharata.*

Bhima

Son of Kunti by Vayu and one of the five Pandava princes, Bhima possesses incredible strength. He is a rash, impulsive warrior who often fights with a huge mace, standing in sharp contrast to his elder brother, Yudhishthira, who embodies nobility, patience, and wise judgment. Among his epithets are "Bhimaparakrama," or "he who has a terrible valor." Representing unchecked power, Bhima is the source of incredible carnage throughout the *Mahabharata* He kills countless *Rakshasas,Kava:a.va.* soldiers, even armored elephants. His violence often has a higher purpose, however. He consistently defends the honor of his wife, Draupadi, although his measures are typically extreme. Bhima crushes Kichaka to death when the general pursues his wife. He vows revenge against Duhsasana for his affront to Draupadi by publicly disrobing her. Some interpretations of Bhima's character find that he goes too far when he kills Duhsasana and drinks his blood as he swore to; however, other commentators note that in so doing, Bhima was avenging a terrible wrong and fulfilling a vow he had sworn to carry out. Bhima exemplifies heedless but well-intentioned action, and after expiating his sins in hell, he ascends to heaven.

Bhishma

Although Bhishma fathers no children of his own, he is more than any other figure in the *Mahabharata* the patriarch of the Bharata people. His name means "awe-inspiring," and this son of Santanu and the goddess Ganga is an emblem of the wise warrior. Renouncing his right to the throne, he agrees to remain celibate so that his father might marry Satyavati. Instead of ruling, Bhishma seeks to strengthen his race through wise action. In exchange for giving up his future rights to kingship, Santanu grants him a blessing, that he will never die until he so chooses. During the great war, Bhishma is selected by Duryodhana as the first general of the Kaurava army. His skill as a military commander is unparalleled, and he leads his forces to many early victories. Bhishma, however, will not fight Sikhandin, who was born a woman but later changed sex. After nine days of battle the Pandavas learn this fact and send Sikhandin against Bhishma. Bhishma is not immediately killed by Sikhandin. After the hostilities have ended, Bhishma speaks to King Yudhishthira, counseling him on ethics, law, morality, kingship, and philosophy. After he has finished, his soul departs for heaven.

Chitrangada

Santanu's eldest son by Satyavati, Chitrangada dies in battle before marrying or producing a son.

Chitrarafha

Chitraratha is king of die Gandharvas, powerful supernatural creatures who are the heavenly musicians. A friend of Arjuna, he imprisons Duryodhana and his entourage in an iron net until Arjuna arrives and frees them.

Chitrasena

See Chitraratha

Danvir-Karna

See Kama

Dharma

God of justice, truth, and righteousness, Dharma fathers Yudhishthira and tests his son's worthiness on several occasions in the *Mahabharata.* Dharma disguises his true identity while on earth, taking the form of a crane or a dog. It is in the form of a dog that he accompanies his son Yudhishthira on his final journey before his death; Yudhishthira proves his righteousness one last time through his kindness to his animal companion over the difficult journey.

Dhrishtadyumna

Dhrishtadyumna is the son of King Drupada, brother of Draupadi, and the general of the Pandava army. Born with armor and a sword from a fire Drupada built for the god Shiva, Dhrishtadyumna fights valiantly in the great war, but shamefully slays Drona while his opponent kneels, unarmed. This act is one of revenge for his father's death, but is considered cowardly according to the dharma of war. As a form of poetic justice, Dhrishtadyumna is likewise killed unheroically, as he sleeps in his tent, by Aswatthaman.

Dhrttarashtra

King of Kurujangala for most of the *Mahabharata,* Dhritarashtra's name means "he who supports the kingdom." This is somewhat ironic, however, considering that he lacks the

will to stop the great war, though by his own admission he possesses the strength to do so. Dhritarashtra is the eldest grandson of Santanu. Blind from birth, he ascends to the throne after the abdication of his younger brother Pandu. He marries Gandhari, who bears him one hundred sons, the Kauravas, who are the antagonists of the poem and represent the forces of evil and chaos. Dhritarashtra's primary failing is not malice, however, it is, appropriately, blindness—his inability to see clearly the events that are unfolding and to stop them. Dhritarashtra does exhibit kindness on occasion, though it sometimes has detrimental effects. He offers aid to Draupadi after the game of dice in which Yudhishthira loses her, as well as his kingdom, his brothers, and himself. She asks that her husbands be set free, and he grants this wish. Unfortunately, this action opens the way for the future revenge of the Pandavas. Following the war, Dhritarashtra laments the destruction of his sons and steps down from his throne.

Draupadi

Daughter of King Drupada of Panchala, Draupadi marries all five of the Pandava princes. Born of a fire that Drupada built in honor of Shiva, Draupadi is brave, pure, noble, and beautiful. Her strength of character is equal to that of her five husbands, and from her comes the most resolute feminine perspective in the *Mahabharata.* Because of her great beauty, Draupadi is frequently abused or abducted by men who desire her. Thus, she must constantly be protected by her husbands from such individuals as King Jayadratha, General Kichaka, and Prince Duhsasana. Despite these continual assaults on her character and person, however, Draupadi maintains her poise, balance, and dignity throughout the poem.

Drona

A Brahman and military man, Drona teaches the Bharata princes the art of warfare. His star pupil is Arjuna, whom he teaches—along with his own son, Aswatthaman—the most deadly techniques of war. His name means "bucket." According to the story of his birth, Drona was conceived when his father saw a heavenly *Apsara* and his seed fell into a bowl of water. A respected figure in the Kuru court, Drona acts as an advisor to Dhritarashtra and serves as general of the Kaurava army after the elimination of Bhishma. A formidable warrior and commander who obeys the rules and codes of martial conflict, Drona slays King Drupada during the great battle. When he hears the untruth that his son is dead he throws down his weapons in anguish and is slain by the king's son, Dhrishtadyumna.

Drupada

Drupada is king of Panchala. Motivated by revenge for Drona's attack on, and occupation of, his kingdom, Drupada fights on behalf of the Pandavas during the great war. In a dream King Drupada hears Shiva tell him that he will be given a son and a daughter, born of fire. He builds this fire in honor of the god, and from the flames step

Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi. During the war, Drupada is slain by Drona, but his death is avenged by his son.

Duhsala

Duhsala is the sole daughter of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari.

Duhsasana

The second son of Dhritarashtra, Duhsasana forcefully attempts to publicly disrobe Draupadi after she is lost to the Kauravas in a game of dice. Cunning, evil, and fearless in battle, Duhsasana often taunts his opponents. His remarks and actions earn him the disdain of the Pandavas, especially Bhima, who vows to avenge his insult to Draupadi by drinking his blood. When Duhsasana attacks Bhima during the great war, Bhima fulfills this promise and slays the Kaurava prince.

Ganesha

Son of the gods Shiva and Devi, Ganesha is the elephant-headed god of writers and merchants. He appears, summoned by the great god Brahma, to record Vyasa's poem, the *Mahabharata..*

Duryodhana

Eldest son of Dhntarashtra, Prince Duryodhana plays the role of chief antagonist in the *Mahabharata.* His name means "difficult to conquer," and his intelligence, determination, strength, and military skill make him a worthy opponent, equal to any of the five Pandavas. A wicked, powerful man, Duryodhana often scorns good advice. Ruled by ambition, his primary motivation is a lust for power, leading to his absolute refusal to split the kingdom of Kurujangala with his cousin Yudhishthira, and prompting the great war that is the subject of the poem.

Highly opportunistic, Duryodhana seizes a chance for conquest whenever possible. He attacks King Virata's kingdom when he hears that General Kichaka has been killed—though his plans are thwarted by Arjuna, When the tide of battle turns, Duryodhana flees rather than fight and perhaps die with honor. Duryodhana is sometimes called "suryodhana," or "good fighter." While he frequently employs deception to defeat his enemies, in his final battle with Bhima, Duryodhana fights fairly and it is the Pandava prince who cheats by striking him in the thighs. Although driven by malice and pride, Duryodhana behaves generously on occasion—but usually with an ulterior motive. For example, Duryodhana disregards Kama's apparently low birth and lack of rank to make him king of Anga—but this is primarily so that Kama will he in his debt.

Gandhari

Queen and wife of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari is the former princess of Gandhara. When she learns that her future husband is blind, she blindfolds herself and never removes the veil from her eyes. Her pregnancy by Dhritarashtra lasts for two years. She expels a ball of flesh from her womb. Vyasa orders that the ball be separated into one hundred and one portions, and each piece placed in a jar. Eventually Duryodhana, Duhsasana, ninety-eight more sons, and one daughter emerge from the jars. During the great battle, Gandhari observes that victory will be on the side of dharma, meaning that the Pandavas will win the war.

Ganga

Known as the goddess of the nver, Ganga is the divine manifestation of the Ganges nver, which flows through north-central and eastern India, emptying into the Indian Ocean. In heaven, eight Vasu gods (attendants of Indra) are cursed to be born on earth. They request that Ganga be their mother, and she agrees. King Santanu falls in love with Ganga while she is on earth and asks her to be his queen. She accepts on the condition that he promise never to ask who she is or to question her actions. He does this for seven years. Each year for seven years she bears a son (each with a cursed Vasu soul) and drowns him in the Ganges. On the eighth year, after the birth of the final child, Santanu stops her from killing the boy. Ganga then reveals her identity and leaves Santanu with his son, Bhishma.

Ghatotkacha

Ghatotkacha is a powerful demon bom to Bhima and Hidimba. His name means "pot-headed" because his head was said to be shaped like a water pot. Although he never leaves the forest where he was born, Ghatotkacha takes part in the great war on the side of the Pandavas. Initially causing great destruction and striking fear in the hearts of the entire Kaurava army, Ghatotkacha's attacks are stopped by Kama, who Mils him with a magical dart.

Hanuman

Endowed with incredible strength and the ability to speak, Hanuman is a magical monkey who plays a significant part in the epic poem, the *Ramayana.* He also appears briefly in the *Mahabharata:* Bhima encounters Hanuman on his travels through the Kamyaka forest. Hanuman imparts some of his vast wisdom to the Pandava prince.

Hidimba

Hidimba is a *Rakshasa,* or forest-demon.

Hidimba-asur

Hidimba-asur is a *Rakshasa,* or forest demon. She and her brothers ambush the five Pandavas and their wife Draupadi. Eventually she and Bhima fall in love and have a son, Ghatotkacha.

Indra

The king of the gods and of thunder and rain, Indra rules in heaven. He fathers the hero Arjuna. Later Indra assists his son by disguising himself as a Brahman and requesting Kama's natural armor as a boon, thus rendering Kama no longer invincible in war. Indra also transports Arjuna to heaven for twelve years, and advises him on a variety of matters.

Janamejaya

Great-grandson of Arjuna, King Janamejaya rules Kurujangala as the story opens. In order to avenge the death of his father, Parikshit, at the hands of a *Naga* (snake-man), Janamejaya holds a snake sacrifice, during which the *Mahabharata* is recited by Vaisampayana.

Jayadratha

The king of Sindhu, Jayadratha carries off Draupadi while the five Pandavas are away hunting in the Kamyaka forest. Though Arjuna, Bhima, and Yudhishthira track him down, they spare his life. During the war, however, Jayadratha once again invokes Arjuna's wrath by outmaneuvering his son, Abhimanyu, indirectly causing the young warrior's death. Bold and resourceful, Jayadratha represents one of the Pandavas most troublesome foes. He is motivated by a desire for personal gain, rather than hatred or vengeance.

Kali

Kali is the god of misfortune. In the famous tale of King Nala, Kali inhabits Nala's body in an attempt to thwart the king's love for Damayanti and gain the beautiful princess for himself.

Karna

Karna, "the archer-king," is son of Surya, god of the sun, and Kunti. A magnificent warrior, Karna is born with natural armor attached to his skin, making him nearly invincible in battle. Because she is unmarried when she gives birth to him, Kunti sends him adrift on a river, hoping that he will be found by worthy parents. He is adopted and

raised by Adhiratha, a charioteer, and travels to the imperial capital of Hastinapura when he grows up. Duryodhana, who has been looking for a warrior skilled enough to defeat his enemy Arjuna, makes Karna king of Anga. Thus, Karna fights on the side of the Kauravas against his own half-brothers, the Pandavas, in the great war.

Karna is a tragic figure in the *Mahabharata.* He remains true to his *dharma,* or sacred duty as a warrior, even when it causes him great personal sorrow to do so. Once he swears to fight his brothers, he never rescinds his vow. He also deeply regrets the fact that his mother will not acknowledge him publically as another of her sons. When the god Indra, Arjuna's father, requests his armor, Karna gives it to him, even though he knows this will put him at a great disadvantage on the battlefield. In return for this sacrifice, Karna asks for a weapon of incredible power, a magical dart that will assure the destruction of any enemy, but may be used only once. The Pandavas force the use of this weapon against early, so that it will no longer be a threat to the Pandavas. Without his armor or secret weapon, Karna cannot overpower Arjuna when the two meet in battle, and Arjuna defeats him

Kichaka

Virata's general, Kichaka sees Draupadi disguised as a serving maid and attempts to win her for his wife. Though Draupadi refuses him and attempts to warn him of the vengeance of her husbands, Kichaka is resolute in his passions and refuses to give up. Unlike Jayadratha, who in a similar situation sees his life spared by the restraint of Yudhishthira, Kichaka faces Bhima and is killed for his presumptuousness. Pompous and vain, Kichaka is nevertheless a respected general whose death prompts Duryodhana to launch an invasion of Virata's kingdom.

Kripa

Found on a doorstep as a child by a Kuru soldier, Kripa rises to a position of immense respect in the court of Dhritarashtra. He serves as war tutor of the Bharata princes and advisor to the king.JSis name means "compassion," and though he follows the dharma of the warrior, Kripa practices restraint in his decisions and remains alive (one of only three Kauravas to do so) at the end of the war.

Kripacharya

See Kripa

Kripi

Kripa's twin sister. Found as a child with her brother by a Kuru soldier, Kripi later marries Drona.

Krishna

The earthly manifestation of the Hindu god Vishnu (the Preserver), Krishna is chief of the Yadavas, a race hailing from the ancient city of Dwaraka in western India. A physical incarnation, or avatar, of the god in mortal form, Krishna is the binding force and spiritual center of the *Mahabharata.* His name means "dark," and Krishna is usually represented as having dark blue skin. Though mortal in the poem, he is able to reveal his divine form to those around him. Possessing the wisdom of the all-pervasive Vishnu who is said to "repose in truth, truth in him," Krishna is infallible. During the great war, however, he refuses to fight on either side. Instead he offers himself, unarmed, or ten thousand of his Yadava warriors. Arjuna chooses the former, while Duryodhana happily takes the latter.

Krishna is sometimes called Krishna Vyasa Dvaipayana and credited with composing the *Mahabharata,* yet in the poem he is Arjuna's friend and charioteer, a character separate from the poet and seer Vyasa. As Arjuna's companion, Krishna is present throughout the work, though he makes his divine presence known most effectively when he sings the Song of the Lord, the *Bhagavad Gita.* Krishna's song serves to dispel Arjuna's doubts about the war. Krishna imparts his wisdom to the warrior and destroys his fear, informing him that death is an illusion, a moment of passage between one existence and the next. Krishna tells Arjuna that he must fight with detachment, without desire, according to the dictates of *dharma,* his sacred duty. Krishna dies long after the end of the great war. Accidentally shot in the foot (the only place where he is not invulnerable) by a deer hunter, he dies unheroically.

Kritavarman

A Yadava warrior, Kritavarman fights for the Kauravas under Krishna's orders. He is one of the three surviving members of the defeated Kaurava army.

Kunti

Kunti is the first wife of King Pandu. Known for her hospitality, Kunti welcomes the hermit Durvasas into her palace. In return the ascetic rewards her with a powerful mantra that allows her to summon any god to sire a son with her. Prior to her marriage with Pandu, she tests the spell by calling Surya, god of the sun, who impregnates her with her son Kama. Being without a husband, she blesses the child and sends him adrift on a river. Later, after her marriage and discovery that Pandu cannot have children of his own, she calls down the gods Dharma, Vayu, and Indra. Each of them father a son with her. These three—Yudhishthira, Bhima, and Arjuna—are the heroes of the *Mahabharata.*

Kuru

A legendary king, Kuru gives his name to the Bharata people.

Madri

Second wife of Pandu and daughter of the king of Madras, Madri uses Kunti's mantra to summon the fleet-footed gods, the Aswins. From them she bears the fourth and five Pandava brothers, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva.

Markandeya

A sage, or *rishi,* Markandeya recites the tale of "Savitri" to comfort Yudhishthira after the abduction of Draupadi by King Jayadratha. *{See* Savitri.)

Nakula

Twin brother of Sahadeva. The twins are the sons of Pandu's second wife Madri by the Aswins, gods called the "harbingers of dawn." A mighty warrior, fleet of foot, Nakula accompanies his brothers throughout the *Mahabharata,* although both twins play a secondary role to the sons of Kunti: Yudhishthira, Bhima, and Arjuna.

Nala

King Nala is the protagonist of "Nala and Damayanti," a tale told to Yudhishthira by Vrihadaswa According to the story, the god Kali, jealous of King Nala and his love for Damayanti, possesses the king's body. Kali then forces him to lose his kingdom in a game of dice and to desert his love, Eventually, Nala breaks free from Kali's hold on him and recovers both his throne and Damayanti. This tale parallels that of Yudhishthira's situation, and its happy ending foreshadows the similar resolution of the epic plot.

Pandu

Grandson of Santanu and primogenitor in name of the Pandavas, Pandu is crowned king of Kurujangala because his elder brother, Dhritarashtra, was born blind. His name means "white, "yellowwhite," or "pale," denoting the nature of his physical complexion, Pandu is sexually insatible until he is told that his next act of physical love with his wives, Kunti and Madri, will certainly kill him. He is nevertheless regarded as the father of Arjuna, Yudhishthira, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva—all of whom are born from unions between his wives and various gods. After the birth of his five sons, Pandu gives in to temptation, carnally embraces his wife Madri, and dies in her arms.

Parikshit

Son of Abhimanyu and Uttarah, and grandson of Arjuna, Parikshit succeeds Yudhishthira as king of Kurujangala following the former's abdication and departure for the holy Mount Meru. After ruling peacefully for sixty years, Parikshit, in a fit of rage over his unsuccessful hunting, shoots an innocent *Naga.* The snake-man then curses the king to die in one week. Despite efforts to alter his fate, Parikshit is poisoned and killed by the *Naga* prince Takshaka.

Parikshita

See Parikshit

Sahadeva

Twin brother of Nakula. The twins are the sons of Pandu's second wife Madri by the As wins, gods called the "harbingers of dawn." A mighty warrior, fleet of foot, Sahadeva accompanies his brothers throughout the *Mahabharata,* although both twins play a secondary role to the sons of Kunti: Yudhishthira, Bhima, and Arjuna.

Sakuni

Uncle of the Kaurava princes, Sakuni cheats at dice to help them win Yudhishthira's kingdom of Indraprastha. He later falls in the great battle, slain by Nakula and Sahadeva. A sly and largely evil figure, Sakuni serves as a contrast to such men as Kripa and Vidura, who represent wisdom, restraint, and forthrightness.

While his generalship is superb, Salya is slain by the inspired warcraft of Yudhishthira.

Sanjaya

Dhritarashtra's charioteer, Sanjaya reports the events of the great war to his king after Vyasa blesses him with heavenly sight and magical protection in battle.

Santanu

King of Kurujangala, Santanu is grandfather of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. The patriarch of the Bharatas, he falls in love with Ganga and then Satyavati, producing sons by both; though of them only Bhishma takes part in the main action of the poem. Santanu leaves his throne to Pandu in his old age and retires to the forest to die.

Satyaki

A Yadava who fights for the Pandavas, Satyaki is one of seven warriors from the Pandava army— the others being the five brothers and Krishna—to survive the great battle.

Satyavati

Wife of Santanu, Satyavati was born of royalty, but lived her early life as a fisherwoman who sometimes ferried travelers across the Yamuna river. According to legend,'her father was King Uparichara of Chedi. One day while dreaming of his queen, his seed fell on a leaf. Carried by a hawk, the leaf eventually fell in the river and was swallowed by a fish. Inside the fish's belly the girl grew until she was rescued by a fisherman who adopted her. Though beautiful, she smelled of fish until Parashara, a minstrel, happened upon her. Convincing her to make love to him, Parashara removed the odor of fish and replaced it with that of flowers. Later, Satyavati gave birth to the poet Vyasa, the ostensible author of the *Mahabharata.* Still later, King Santanu sees Satyavati and, captivated by her beauty and scent, he makes her his queen. He promises her that their son will be the future king of Kurujangala.

Salya

King of the Madras, Salya fights with the Kauravas and leads their army after Kama's death.

Sauti

The name Sauti means "bard" or "storyteller." Sauti quotes Vaisampayana's recitation of the *Mahabharata* to a group of sages, or *rishis,* at the opening of the poem.

Savitri

Savitri is the main character of a tale of the same name recounted by Markandeya to Yudhishthira. After falling in love with and marrying Satyavan, Savitri learns that her husband has only one year to live. As the time of his death approaches, she waits by his side and sees Yama, the god of death arrive to take Satyavan's soul. He catches the soul in his noose and begins to walk off. Savitri follows the god and begs him to restore her husband's life. He refuses, offering to grant any other wish, but she is steadfast. Finally, Yama suggests that he return Satyavan's soul in exchange for half of Savitri's remaining days. She agrees and the two live together happily for 400 years.

Susarman

King of Trigarta (The Land of the Three Castles), Susarman leads an attack on Arjuna to lure him away from Yudhishthira during the great war. Though valiant, he and his kinsmen are slaughtered by the mighty Pandava bowman.

Takshaka

Prince of the *Nagas,* a race of snake-men, Takshaka kills King Parikshit to avenge the murder of an innocent *Naga.* He takes the form of a small copper beetle in order to achieve entry to Parikshit's guarded dwelling and commit the act.

Vrvasi

A beautiful heavenly dancer called an *Apsara,* Urvasi curses Arjuna to live for one year as a eunuch after he rejects her offers of love.

Shakuni

See Sakuni

Shiva

Called "the Destroyer," Shiva is a deity of stature equal to Vishnu, the Preserver, and Brahma, the Creator. In the course of the *Mahabharata,* Shiva provides a powerful weapon to Arjuna for his use in the war against the Kauravas.

Sikhandin

A warrior in the Pandava army, Sikhandin is responsible for Bhishma's death in battle. His soul was reincarnated from that of the princess Amba and Sikhandin was originally born a woman. He later exchanges sexes with a *Rakshasa* in order to fight in the great war.

Subhadra

Krishna's sister, Subhadra marries Arjuna and bears him the son Abhimanyu.

Surya

God of the sun, Surya fathers Kama and warns his son that Indra will ask for his natural armor. In exchange, the sun god tells him that he must demand a mighty weapon of war, which Kama does.

Uttara

King Virata's son, Uttara—along with Arjuna— repels Duryodhana's invasion of Matsya. Later, Uttara and Virata's forces fight for the Pandavas in the great war.

Uttarah

King Virata's daughter, Uttarah marries Abhimanyu and gives birth to Parikshit.

Vaisampayana

Sage and disciple of Vyasa, Vaisampayana recites the *Mahabharata* at the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya.

Vaka

The *Rakshasa* called Vaka terrorizes the town of Ekachakra by eating a cartload of food and one human sacrifice each year until Bhima slays the demon.

Vayu

God of the wind, Vayu fathers the mighty Pandava prince Bhima.

Vichitravirya

Second son of King Santanu, Vichitravirya has two wives, Ambika and Ambalika—secured for him by Bhishma. He dies of consumption at a young age, however, before producing an heir. Vichitravirya's ironic name means "colorful virility."

Vidura

Sage and uncle-advisor of both the Pandavas and the Kauranas. Vidura is the son of Vyasa and Shudra, a slave girl. He is representative of honor and wisdom in the poem. Duty-bound to serve his king and country, his first allegience is to the Dhritrashtra and his sons.

Virata

King of Matsya, Virata admits the disguised Pandavas and Draupadi into his court during their thirteenth year of exile. After they defend his kingdom from the attacking forces of Duryodhana, Virata offers his daughter Uttarah and support in the great battle with the Kauravas.

Vrihadaswa

A *rishi,* or sage, Vrihadaswa tells the tale of Nala and Damayanti to Yudhishthira. *(See* Nala.)

Vyasa

The poet attributed with composing the *Mahabharata,* Vyasa's name means "arranger" or "compiler"—thus appropriate to his role in creating the encyclopedic poem. Vyasa also appears in the work as the son of Satyavati from a union prior to her marriage with King Santanu. His father was the *rishi* Parashara, and like him Vyasa is a powerful sage and seer. His powers include the abihtyto prophesy the future—he knows, for example that Queen Gandhari will bear one hundred sons—as well as greater magics. He also grants Dhritarashtra's charioteer, Sanjaya, with the ability to see all the events of the great battle, day and night, and with divine protection so that he might report the war to his king. In addition to his role as a man of knowledge, Vyasa fathers the kings Pandu and Dhritarashtra by the former wives of his half-brother, Vichitravirya. Vyasa's frightening appearance, his "ugliness, grim visage, foul body, terrible odor," as Joseph Campbell quotes in his *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology,* 1962, upsets the two women, Ambika and Ambalika, The first closes her eyes and produces the blind Dhritarashtra, the second turns pale, producing the light-skinned Pandu.

Yama

The god of the dead, Yama appears in Markandeya's tale of Savitri. *(See* Savitri.)

Yudhishthira

Son of Pandu's first wife Kunti by Dharma (the god of justice), Yudhishthira is the oldest of the five Pandava brother and destined to be king of Kurujangala. Noble and aloof, he is the foremost example of the Hindu warrior who follows the precepts of *dharma,* or sacred duty. Seldom perturbed, Yudhishthira is courageous, strong, prudent, and patient. His name means "firm in battle," a quality which he displays near the end of the great war, as he forsakes his otherwise tranquil exterior and savagely attacks the Kaurava general, Salya. He also demonstrates his courage and propriety by dropping

his weapons and armor prior to the battle, and asking the permission of Bhishma, Drona, and Kripa to fight them.

Yudhishthira's most notable trait, apart from his detachment, are his taste for gambling and inability to refuse a challenge. (This last is related to his code of conduct as a warrior, and therefore is not regarded as a flaw). Duryodhana and Sakuni exploit these qualities of Yudhishthira's character by inviting him to take part in a game of dice. Yudhishthira agrees and, due to their cheating, loses first his kingdom of Indraprastha, then—because he will not stop gambling even though he is losing—goes on to lose his brothers, their shared wife Draupadi, and himself, thus setting the stage for the great battle.

After the war, Yudhishthira, now king, feels a great responsibility for the near total destruction of his people. He performs a horse sacrifice to absolve the sins of all those who took part in the hostilities. After many years of rule he abdicates his throne to Arjuna's grandson, Parikshit, and sets out northward towards Mount Meru, "the world mountain," with his brothers and Draupadi. On the way all but Yudhishthira fall dead. He survives the journey to the mountain, never forsaking his faithful dog— Dharma in disguise. Later he is joined by his companions in heaven.

Yuyutsu

Son of Dhritarashtra and a slave girl, Yuyutsu defects from the Kaurava to the Pandava army moments before the great battle begins.

Themes

Dharma: Responsibility and Sacred Duty

Despite its size and complexity, the *Mahabharata* explores one over-arching theme predominantly, the observance of one's sacred duty, called dharma. All other thematic issues in the work relate to the question of dharma obeyed or ignored. The characters who satisfy the dictates of dharma are eventually rewarded, while those who consciously refuse to obey their dharma are inevitably punished. According to Hindu law, each individual has a special place in society and must behave in strict accordance to the requirements of that position, called caste. In the *Mahabharata,* all the important characters belong to the Kshatnya or warrior caste. Individuals such as Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, and Duryodhana must obey the dharma of warriors. They must be courageous, honorable, and respectful of their opponents. They must never take unfair advantage; for example, attacking an unarmed or unprepared enemy. Duryodhana, for example, fights fairly against Bhima, who wrongly strikes him "below the belt" in their combat. At the end of the narrative, we see that Duryodhana, despite his often evil and unkind actions, gains admittance to heaven because he always adhered to the code or dharma of the warrior.

More than any other figure in the *Mahabharata,* Yudhishthira represents the proper observance of dharma. This is underscored at the end of the narrative, when he will not abandon the faithful dog who accompanied him on his final journey. It is revealed to the reader that this dog is the god Dharma in disguise, testing his son's worthiness one last time. Thus symbolically Yudhishthira is shown refusing to forsake his dharma and therefore demonstrating that he is deserving to enter into heaven at his death. Likewise, most of his actions throughout the poem are those of a man committed to engaging in right behavior as a king and a warrior. When he does fail to live up to these high ideals—as, for example, when he continues gambling until he has lost his wealth and kingdom as well as his wife and his own and his brothers' freedom—he suffers greatly and pays a high price.

In additional to depictions of the importance of dharma embodied in specific characters, the *Mahabharata* contains passages that teach specific lessons about social and spiritual responsibility. Bhishma's speeches to Yudhishthira focus on the dharma of good leadership and effective ruling. Ultimately, the *Mahabharata* observes that existence and happiness depend less on courage and destiny than on an understanding and acceptance of the rules and responsibilities of dharma.

Virtue and Truth

The concepts of virtue and truth are closely related to that of dharma. The *Mahabharata* includes the story of a great, epoch-spanning and empire-establishing war, and so often stresses the virtues of bravery, honesty, and nobility that form the basis of Kshatriya

dharma, the code of warriors in ancient India. The narrative also shows many instances of individuals violating various codes of conduct. Sakuni, for instance, cheats in order to defeat his guests, thus violating codes meant to govern rules of hospitality and of fairness. This event stands as a telltale sign to original hearers and readers of this epic that Sakuni and his family are destined to be defeated in the coming war.

Truth and truthfulness are also prominent in the *Mahabharata.* Krishna, an incarnation of the god of truth Vishnu, reveals many important truths to the moral characters. Most importantly, he sings the *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna before the great battle begins, revealing to the reluctant fighter the essential truths about the illusory nature of death and the cyclical nature of life. By itself the *Bhagavad Gita* is a sacred Hindu test; in the plot of the *Mahabharata* it has both sacred and secular functions, serving to fill Arjuna with the confidence and conviction of divine truth so that he may pursue his dharma. His destiny is to fight for the Pandavas and to defeat the Kauravas.

Order and Disorder, Good and Evil

On a symbolic level, the *Mahabharata* tells an ancient story of a mythic, primal conflict between opposing forces of light and darkness. Pandu, the pale, and his sons the Pandavas, represent order and goodness in opposition to the blind Dhritarashtra, his son Duryodhana, and the Kauravas, who represent darkness and disorder. As an allegory, then, the poems shows the classic conflict between the forces of good and evil. In the end, of course, the forces of good triumph, aided by the god Vishnu, who comes to earth as Krishna to ensure the ultimate triumph of good. But in the process of winning, the Pandavas themselves are nearly destroyed. They also find themselves using deception and dishonorable tactics to defeat their opponents. This fact has often been seen as an indication that assessments of absolute good and absolute evil are difficult to make; further, that sometimes a rightful end can only be reached through unrighteous means.

In the *Mahabharata,* the desired and rightful end is for a lasting peace. Yet to attain this goal, the Pandavas and Kauravas must engage in the great war. Many are killed horribly on both sides. The people suffer and their nation is impoverished as the two groups fight. The symbolic goal, however, is the defeat of evil and the restoration of order.

Hinduism - The Flesh versus the Spirit

Perhaps the most important transcendent or spiritual theme of the *Mahabharata* is primarily embodied in the *Bhagavad Gita,* and entails the basic teachings of Hinduism. In particular, this section of the poem transmits information about reincarnation and the possibility of ascension into heaven. As Krishna explains in his song to Arjuna, death is not the end of life. Human souls are immortal and are reincarnated through a process called samsara, or transmigration. Further, according to the concept of karma, those who have lived their lives in proper accordance with their dharma will be rewarded in

each subsequent life. The final step in the life cycle is that of nirvana: both karma and samsara are transcended. The soul that attains nirvana moves beyond desire and individual consciousness to a pure, enlightened state, freed from the cycle of reincarnation. To accept this endless cycle of purification is to see that physical life and death on earth are only a small part of the true cycle of human existence.

Style

Narrative Technique—Frame Stories

The complex structure of the *Mahabharata* exists in part due to its shape as a series of stones and narratives nested one within another. It opens with the first of two frame stories, which act as introductions, leading the reader toward the heart of the poem, the epic story of the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The reader first encounters the tale of Sauti, a bard or storyteller, who recounts what he has heard of the *Mahabharata* to several listeners in the forest. Sauti quotes the sage Vaisampayana, who has learned the poem from his master, Vyasa, the author of the work. Vaisampayana's tale thus comprises the second frame story. He recites most of the *Mahabharata* at the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya. Within the main plot of the poem several more sages, or *rishis,* such as Markandeya and Vrihadaswa, recount legends, folktales, or popular stories that illustrate a moral or theme somehow relevant to the main plot. Occasionally Sauti surfaces within the narrative to make an observation, as does Vaisampayana, but these intrusions are generally brief. Overall, this structure allows for the many breaks in narrative flow and chronology, repeated accounts of events from different points of view, and lengthy digressions that mark this massive poem.

Sanskrit Literature and Versification

The *Mahabharata* represents one of the finest examples of classical Sanskrit poetry. Like Latin, classical Sanskrit is no longer a living, spoken language though a modern form of the language is a curricular requirement in many schools. The language of the work also differs somewhat from the Vedic tongue, a precursor of Sanskrit in which several holy texts of Hinduism, including the sacred *Vedas* and the *Upanishads,* were written. The subject of much scholarly study and several translations, the *Mahabharata,* while often referred to as an epic, is more specifically a *purana,* or "ancient tale" in verse. Originally written as one extended poem, the work eventually grew as more scenes, stories, and other material—including writings on ethics, law, philosophy, history, and religion—were added. The basic unit of the poem is the epic *sloka,* two verse lines with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. Other meters are also employed throughout, all of which adhere to the strict and formal rules of poetics that typify classical Sanskrit verse.

Language and Style

Several stylistic elements of the *Mahabharata* indicate that the poem was once repeated verbally as part of an oral tradition rather than written down. These include: repeated words and phrases, the use of cliches, and some stereotypical descriptions, such as those found in the many battle scenes in the poem. Overall, however, the

language of the work is said to be simple and restrained. In many cases the narrative downplays the more grisly elements of war. Yet much of the *Mahabharata*'s imagery is also vivid and highly evocative. Metaphors and similes—comparisons designed to describe one thing by invoking another—are common in the text, and are especially used to portray the superhuman qualities and feats of the poem's heroes. Exaggeration is also used in typical mythic fashion to underscore the grandeur and scope of the events being described. Arjuna, for example, can unleash dozens of arrows in a second, and during the war these the arrows launched by all the combatants can block out the sun.

Much of the story is delivered in dialogue— conversation—or individual speeches. Sometimes a character's thoughts are rendered in soliloquy, as if spoken even though no one else is present. Additionally, the poet employs the classic epic device of foreshadowing, by mentioning or alluding to future events before they occur. Thus, Gandhari observes that the Pandavas will win the war, because *dharma* is on their side, long before the battle has ended. Finally, many characters are depicted with epithets, symbolic names that describe some significant or interesting characteristic, or have allegorical names. Duryodhana's name, for instance, means "hard to conquer."

Historical Context

Indus Valley Civilization

Archealogical evidence has uncovered a somewhat mysterious Bronze Age culture that existed along the Indus river in what is today Pakistan, a nation situated to the immediate west of modern India. Contemporary with the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations, the Indus Valley culture thrived between about 2500 and 1500 BC. Largely agricultural, the Indus peoples seem to have had a relatively complex society and advanced material culture. They lived in mud-brick dwellings, produced art and pottery, lived under a loosely democratic form of government, and offered women a equitable status in relation to that of men. Other aspects of their social organization remain a mystery to archaeologists, though they worshipped and sacrificed to many gods, including Indra and Agni, both of whom appear in the *Mahabharata.* Their belief system also seems to have been an early form of the Vedic religion. Its precepts were later organized and written down by the Aryans as the *Vedas,* the early sacred texts of the Hindu religion.

Aryan Culture

By around 1500 BC the warlike Aryans (a northern tribe whose name means "noble" in Sanskrit) had begun to invade the Indus valley, subjugating and later assimilating many of the indigenous peoples they found there. With their skills in iron metallurgy, the Aryans brought the Indian subcontinent under their rule and created a highly advanced civilization along the valleys of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, the geographical location of the *Mahabharata.* In contrast to the Indus peoples, the Aryans were militaristic, with a strongly patriarchal, or male-dominated, society. Their culture was organized along a strict hierarchy that eventually developed into the caste system—a social design in which priests and warriors occupied positions of authority and power. By the 5th century BC, the Aryan civilization in India had become an advanced feudal aristocracy, made up of several constituent states. Kingship and court life had grown increasingly important. Meanwhile, stable institutions, professional occupations, a trade economy, and a rich tradition of Sanskrit literature had developed.

The Caste System

The rigid system of social hierarchy developed by the Aryans was based on hereditary class divisions called castes. Justified by religious and cultural means, the caste system has become a recognizable part of Hindu culture that survives today, though in a very different form. Within the Aryan system, individuals were classified into *fow varnas,* or "classes." At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmans or priests. Though lacking political power, the Brahmans had created the system, and therefore placed themselves in positions of respect above the rest of society. They performed sacrifices and other

religious ceremonies, and relied on the generosity of the lower castes for their economic survival. They were also teachers, instructing younger members of the Kshatriya or warrior class in particular, as Drona and Kripacharya do in the *Mahabharata.* Brahmans often appear in the *Mahabharata* as hermits or ascetics, individuals who have sacrificed material wealth and human desires in order to attain religious enlightenment. The Brahmans were typically the source of great awe and respect in classical Indian civilization. Below the Brahmans in the caste system were the Kshatriyas, or warriors. These individuals made up the ruling class of Aryan society. Including kings, princes, and the remainder of the social aristocracy, nearly all of the significant individuals in the *Mahabharata* are members of the Kshatriya caste. Beneath the warriors were the Vaisyas, merchants, farmers and other non-aristocratic individuals. Still further below the Vaisyas were the Sudhras. Laborers and servants to the higher classes, the Sudhras also included slaves. Outside the system were the Untouchables. These individuals were considered without caste. This group included social exiles, religious outcasts, and Dravidians (the aboriginal inhabitants of India), The caste system required that individuals never marry outside their caste. Likewise, many occupations were unavailable to members of a particular caste. Sometimes the restrictions of caste could be overcome, however. Prince Duryodhana, for example, makes Kama—whom he believes is the son of a charioteer—the King of Anga. In the context of the story, however, this is intended to demonstrate the temporal power of the prince rather than the possibility of moving to a higher caste, which did not in fact exist. Individuals were caste-bound throughout their lives—although a good person could look forward to being reborn as a member of a higher caste.

Hinduism

Out of the tradition of the Vedic religion that flourished in the Indus river valley came the major world religion called Hinduism. The term "hindu" comes from the word "sindu," or river—specifically the Indus river. Those who practiced the religion, which today is prominent in India, parts of Africa and southeast Asia, and other parts of the world, worship a large number, or pantheon, of gods. Among the most popular are Shiva and Vishnu, both of whom appear in the *Mahabharata*—Vishnu as an earthly manifestation of Krishna. The sacred texts of Hinduism include the four *Vedas* and the *Upanishads,* a collection of ancient wisdom and ethical writings. Among the other great Hindu texts are several non-sacred, or secular works. These include the *eighteenpuranas* or "ancient tales," the most important of which are the *Mahabharata,* specifically the section of Krishna's speech to Arjuna knows as the *Bhagavad Gita,* and the *Ramayana.* Dramatized in these works are the key ideas of Hinduism. To begin with, the religion teaches a cyclic conception of the universe. Over vast periods of time the universe is created and destroyed, endlessly. Likewise, human life flows in cycles. The human soul, according to Hindu doctrine, is immortal and might experience countless lifetimes on earth. This process is called *samsara,* which means reincarnation or transmigration of the soul. The form that the soul will take in succeeding lifetimes is ruled by the dictates of *karma. Karma,* sometimes characterized as "the fatality of the act" is, simply put, the workings of a cosmic law of retribution. According to *karma,* good actions in this lifetime will be rewarded in the next, and evil deeds will be punished. Those who are

predominately good might be reincarnated into a higher caste, those who are evil might be born into a lower one, or even as a lower form of life, such as an animal. Heaven, in this system, still exists but only as a temporary stage where souls wait before being reborn. Eventually an end to the cycles of death and rebirth might be achieved, however, if one can attain *moksa,* or release from worldly desires and learn to no longer differentiate between the individual soul *(atmari)* and the universal soul *(Brahman).*

Critical Overview

Although not exclusively a religious work, the *Mahabharata* is considered by many to be the fifth of the *Vedas*—the other four are sacred texts of Hinduism designed to teach proper moral and ethical conduct. It has a prominent position in Indian literature and enjoys great religious and cultural significance for many Hindus. Critical interpretations of the work, particularly from European and American commentators, have varied. Philo M. Buck, in *The Golden Thread* (1931), called it "chiefly a celebration of war ... its ideal, the princely warrior, and emperor." Other commentators suggest that the work is not so one-sided. They point out that the work contains expressions of regret for the violence and destruction of armed conflict. Further, some critics point out that while the great battle is the climax of the *Mahabharata,* it is only a small part of a vast, multipart narrative. For its Indian audience, the sacred text the *Bhagavad Gita,* sung by Krishna to Arjuna before the war, holds much greater significance that the details of the battle itself. In fact, the war is generally interpreted more as a metaphysical struggle between good and evil than as the actual physical encounter of two armies.

Synthetic versus Analytic

The two main lines of critical thought concerning the *Mahabharata* have focused on whether this massive poem is artistically unified and coherent or riddled with inconsistencies that invalidate any possible coherence. The first group is known as the synthetic camp. Common among Indian scholars, the synthetic stance contends that the *Mahabharata* is thematically unified and presents a clear statement on the effects of proper adherence to the rules of personal and sacred duty *(dharma),* and the negative results of abusing dharmic responsibilities. Many non-Indian critics, however, approach the poem analytically, examining its constituent parts without perceiving any such unity. This is termed the analytic approach. Moriz Winternitz, in *A History of Indian Literature* (1926), for example, calls the *Mahabharata '* 'not one poetic production at all, but rather a whole literature." He also describes the work a "monstrosity," full of repeated and slightly changed material. Winternitz and other analytic critics argue that because of its growth over the years and the addition of sometime irrelevant tales, legends, local myths, and didactic (or lesson-teaching) material, the *Mahabharata* is self-contradictory rather than unified.

Formal Criticism

Stylistic criticism of the *Mahabharata* largely reflects the division between synthetic and analytic critics. The analytics have concentrated on what they see as flaws in the poem, including inconsistencies in the text, its loose structure, and occasional repetitiveness. According to the synthetics, however, many of these traits can be explained by the fact that the *Mahabharata* existed for centuries as part of an oral tradition. Not written down, but repeated by poets and sages for the entertainment and spiritual enlightenment of their listeners, the poem inevitably changed greatly over time. As new scenes and stories were added or retold, they were sometimes altered slightly by different speakers.

In addition, oral literature commonly relies on stock phrases that appear over and over again. The synthetics argue that overall the simplicity and purity of the Sanskrit language shines through in the *Mahabharata.* They praise the work for its poetic beauty.

Myth and Symbolism

Mythological interpretations have occupied a significant portion of modern criticism of the *Mahabharata.* Reflections on good and evil in the work, however, have been superseded by more complex readings armed at discovering the meaning of the poem in relation to the cultural conditions found in India during the era between the Aryan conquest of the Indian subcontinent and prior to the advent of Buddhism there. Thus, the simple conflict between the powers of light and darkness is significant, but only part of the mythological picture of the poem. Other critics have examined the nature of the Hindu gods as literary figures and in comparison to . western mythological systems, such as those of the ancient Greeks or medieval Scandinavians. Georges Dumezil, for instance, has employed as system of comparative mythology to describe similarities between the destruction of the great battle in the *Mahabharata* and the Norse myth of *Ragnorak,* or the end of the world. Joseph Campbell has outlined the poem's relation to other mythological systems and evaluated the symbolic conflict between truth and ignorance in the work. In addition to these comparative approaches, most scholars agree that the *Mahabharata* is primarily a collection and synthesis of hundreds of years of Hindu thought and spirituality.

Literary Influence

The importance of the *Mahabharata* (and its companion piece, the *Ramayana*) is almost unparalleled by that of any other literary work in India and elsewhere in Asia where Hinduism predominates. Likewise, as the highest form of the *purana,* or "ancient tale," it is considered a work of art of the first magnitude, as well as an enlightening treatise on ethics, morality, and human behavior. In other parts of the world, in particular Europe and America, its influence has been much more diffuse. Some of its constituent stories, such as those of Nala and Savitri, are known, but the narrative as a whole has been somewhat neglected. Prose translations and abridgments of the poem, including the readable rendition of the poem in English by William Buck, have increased its accessibility to other cultures than that of its origin. Many commentators see the *Mahabharata* as a valuable historical and sociological document concerning Indian life in the period around 1000 BC. Thus, the poem has helped scholars to trace the impact of Aryan culture—with its social hierarchy and new philosophical ideas—on the indigenous peoples of the Indus river valley three thousand years ago, and to outline the development of Hindu thought in the centuries since.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, McCready discusses the role o/dharma, *sacred duty, on the characters in the poem, focusing primarily on the five Pandavas and also on Bhishma.*

The *Mahabharata* holds a place of special veneration in Indian society. An ancient tale, thousands of years old, it inspires poets, writers, and artists across the globe. Its creator is unknown, except as the mythic figure of Vyasa, a poet and seer who appears in the verses he is supposed to have written. Likely the poem was authored by countless writers who grafted its many tales and moral stories onto the skeleton of this epic tale of the five Pandavas, five brothers. Foremost among these brothers is Yudhishthira, the eldest. He was born to be a king. A pillar of morality, intelligence, restraint, and confidence, he possesses a small weakness, his love of fortune. He is a gambler at heart, or else he longs to test his luck at the throw of the dice in order to escape from the walls of sacred duty that surround him. Yudhishthira is the model Hindu hero. He encapsulates the tenets of this great religion, and is so well-versed in them that they have become part of his soul—a soul that is immortal, destined to eternal joy in Indra's heaven. Still, Yudhishthira has a price to pay. He must lead his brothers in battle. He must fight the great war of the Bharatas, the *Mahabharata.*

Fortunately this Hindu king has his four brothers and their shared wife to accompany him. Bhima, a mighty warrior indeed with the strength of a dozen men or more, is a man of passions, yet faithful and steadfast. Bhima may be easily moved to revenge, but he always has a good justification for his actions. But when his rage is enflamed it is not easily quenched. He has a thirst for blood, a substance he spills more often than any other man, good or evil, in the poem. Arjuna, Yudhishthira's next brother, ultimately proves himself a warrior without equal. He possesses a skill with a bow so great that his foes tremble in his presence. Yet there exists a match for Arjuna, a mysterious soul named Kama. Karna is a brother of Yudhishthira and Arjuna, though they do not know it.

Karna suffers from the fact that his mother will not acknowledge him as her son and the half-brother of the Pandavas. Without such public acknowledgment, Karna has no choice but to honor his obligation to fight the Pandavas on the side of the Kauravas when asked to do so by the prince Duryodhana.

The twins Nakula and Sahadeva appear as reflections of their oldest brother. Without saying or doing as much as either Arjuna or Bhima, they exemplify the same restraint and quiet power that will one day restore Yudhishthira to the throne. And, finally, the wife of all five brothers, Draupadi. She is woman personified. Strong, noble, and beautiful, she matches each of her husbands in intelligence, will, and respect for the sacredness of right action. She knows the ways of *dharma.*

For *dharma,* one's sacred duty, is truly the subject of the *Mahabharata.* Called a monstrosity by some critics because of its sheer size, the national epic of India nevertheless has a consistency of vision. Employing the numerous voices of varied storytellers, sages, priests, demons, and heroes, the poem describes the Hindu ideal of

sacred duty. Similar ideas can be found in western philosophy. Plato's conception of the ideal state in *The Republic* placed each individual in his or her specific place in society, each with duties and responsibilities that assure happiness for everyone. The Greek philosopher also elaborated an idea of the transmigration of the soul, reincarnation or samsara. The ancient Indians knew of the existence of the Greeks, and quite possibly Plato and his predecessors received their ideas from the east without bothering to give credit for these acquisitions—as philosophers rarely do. The Indians, however, much more than the Greeks, seem to have had their vision fixed on preparations for the next world. Happiness in this life is an important good, but the *Mahabharata* calls to mind more important struggles of cosmic significance. The poem details an imbalance between the forces of chaos and order. Thus, the mighty god Vishnu, the Preserver, has once again appeared.

Hindu legend includes nine manifestations of Vishnu on earth, eight of which have occured by the time in which the *Mahabharata* is set (the incarnation as Krishna is in fact the eighth; the ninth has not yet appeared). Many of these are contained in the ancient stories, or *puranas,* attributed to the prolific poet Vyasa. In each instance the god has appeared to restore the careful balance of harmony and dissonance in the world. The *Mahabharata* represents the eighth and final visit of Vishnu. He takes the form of Krishna. Chief of the Yadavas, Krishna hails from western India, but is well known along the Ganges river in Kurujangala where the dispute between the Kauravas and the Pandavas takes place and escalates into a great cleansing war. Krishna represents wisdom and the true path of *dharma.* Therefore he does not engage in battle himself, but he makes his presence known. He drives Arjuna's chariot, and spurs the Pandava prince to fight, even though he will slaughter his kinsmen: Duryodhana, Karna, and many others. Krishna speaks the sacred words of Hindu law, reciting the *Bhagavad Gita,* a work known worldwide as the central text of Hindu doctrine. Scholars, likewise, have noted his affinities with Jesus Christ from the western religious tradition. He epitomizes truth, giving it a human form, and provides the *Mahabharata* with a spiritual center.

Still, the *Mahabharata* is a poem about human suffering and war. It requires a link between the spiritual and the worldly. It needs an individual that focuses the qualities of human sacrifice, follows the most difficult path of *dharma,* and explains the proper way to achieve success in this world and the next. This man is Bhishma. The celibate warrior, Bhishma renounces his birthright to the throne of Kurujangala in order that his father might satisfy his desire for a woman. He cannot die, except by his own choosing, and therefore is above the world of the flesh and indifferent to many of the baser motivations of human beings. He represents the observance of *dharma* on an almost superhuman level, without fear for his neglect of worldly pleasures. His spreads his wisdom even after he should be dead. Lying on a bed of arrows each of which pierces his body, Bhishma recites the ancient knowledge of rulership to Yudhishthira, thereby preparing the Pandava to be king. The irony, of course, is that the Bhishma might have made a greater king than any of the other men who sit on the throne of Kurujangala during the course of the poem. And, had he presided over Kurujangala in place of the weak-willed Dhritarashtra, the great war might never have been fought. All of this because his father wanted another woman

Bhishma's total renunciation of desire and near flawlessness make him more a symbol than a real person. Tradition, however, requires internal struggle of the epic hero. Thus, Bhishma cannot provide the heroic center of the work. Vyasa reserved this role for Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, and Draupadi—a hero split into six important, if unequal, sections. As commentators have noted, these individuals represent the human in all of its capacities: thought, action, wisdom, mind, body, emotion, and will. Each of these characters contains these aspects of human nature mixed in different proportions. Bhima represents violent power and strength, Arjuna symbolizes skill and grace. Yet Bhima's strength sometimes becomes savagery, as when he drinks Duhsasana's blood. Likewise Arjuna doubts himself when called to fight his kinsmen in the great war. Yudhishthira, who combines the superb qualities of his brothers with wisdom and restraint, also suffers from very real defects. When gambling with Sakuni and

Duryodhana he loses everything that he owns. He even stakes his wife after he has already lost himself. The remainder of the *Mahabharata* can be interpreted as Yudhishthira's effort to regain what he has squandered, a process that results in incredible destruction. Yudhishthira has obeyed his *dharma* as a warrior in accepting the challenge of Duryodhana, but betrays the *dharma* of a king by allowing his kingdom to be lost in a game of dice. What truly has been lost is order, sacrificed to the randomness of dice rolls. Yudhishthira has forsaken the wisdom of order so that he might engage in a game of chance. In so doing he—a symbol of order—unleashes great chaos into the world. As Yudhishthira, the epic center of this immense poem, learns of his mistakes and conquers them, the wisdom of the *Mahabharata* unfolds.

Source: Sean McCready, for *Epics for Students,* Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Mookerjee describes the Mahabharata *as a record of the cultural life of India to the close of the Vedic-Aryan age, circa 1500-500 B. C, focusing specifically on the spiritual concept of dharma.*

The *Mahabharata* is a *jayagrantha,* as is said in the *mangalacarana* (salutation to God before undertaking any task) as well as in the *Adi Parva. Jaya* is a technical term for the whole of the eighteen *Purana(s), Ramayana, Visnudharmasa$tra(s), Sivadharmasastra{s),* and the *Mahabharata* (the "fifth Veda") composed by Vedavyasa Krsnadvaipayana. Vais'ampayana, a disciple of Vedavyasa, recited the one hundred thousand verses of the *Mahabharata* at Taksasfla (now Taxila in Rawalpindi district, Pakistan) in the presence of King Janmejaya, great grandson of Arjuna. Without the episodic and didactic diversions, the story of the *Mahabharata* extends to twenty-four thousand verses. A shortened form comprising one hundred and fifty verses was also written. Sauti Ugrasrava, a bard by profession, retold it in Naimisaranya (now Nimsar in Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh) before the ascetics there who wanted to hear this "great history and great *sastra"* in one book. Vedavyasa says that the *Mahabharata* "principally" records the rise of the Kuru dynasty, Gandhan's righteousness, Vidura's wisdom, and KuntTs patience, Krsna's glory, the Pandava(s)' adherence to Truth, and Duryodhana and his companions' ill treatment toward them. It was composed around an epic war that destroyed the Kuru dynasty.

[The] *Mahabharata* is a document of the life and ideas of the people of India up to the turn of an epoch.

It gives us the picture of a highly complex society compared to that of the Vedas and *Ramayana* Undoubtedly the *Mahabharata* is guided by the *Manu Smrti* (canonical laws laid down by Manu), by the common and particular duties of the four *varna(s)* (Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vais'ya, and Sudra) prescribed by it. Yet the society of the *Mahabharata* appears to be very liberal. Drona and As'vatthama were Brahmins turned Ksatriya(s). Yudhisthira tells his curse-stricken forefather Nahusat hat it has become difficult to decide the *varna* because of cross-marriages. A Brahmin must be truthful, benevolent, forgiving, honest, amiable, strictly religious, and kind. One who lacks these qualities is not a Brahmin. A Sudra having these qualities is a Brahmin. Vidura was born of a Sudra mother and neither in marriage nor in *varna* was ever given the status of Brahmin or Ksatriya or Vais'ya; and Dharmavyadha the hunter was born of Sudra parents and yet was engaged in his traditional profession. Yet Vidura was not only a most pious man, an unstained character in the gallery of characters in the *Mahabharata,* but he was held in high esteem by all—except, of course, Duryodhana, and was believed to be the God Dharma born as a man, on account of a curse given by an ascetic. And Kauslka the Brahmin took lessons in *dharma* from Dharmavyadha *(Vana Parva).*

Performing the duties of the station of life one belongs to by *trivarga (dharma, artha, kama)* and ultimately attaining worthiness by *niskama-karma* (duty for the sake of duty) or by *sa. nyasa* (renunciation) man could attain *paramagati,* that is, salvation. It was by

this faith and philosophy that the culture and society of the *Mahabharata* flourished. Through all the vicissitudes of historical events the *Mahabharata* carried this message of the good life, a life of duty as prescribed in the sacred books, and expressed a faith in human capability to achieve the greatest value in life. For over and above the differences in *varna,* profession, social placement, etc., it is the ethical being of man that stands supreme. The *Mahabharata* is not a tragic record of the futility of man's life and purpose, a record of the holocaust of a fratricidal war. At the passing of the Vedic age, it liberalized the Brahmanic religion, disciplined life and society by laying down prescriptions in the form of *rajadharma,* that is, a king's duties as well as the duties of a common householder, *moksadharma,* etc. The novelty *of Mahabharata* is that all these duties of particular stations of life have not been made ends in themselves but subordinate to a concept of *dharma* . While the Vedas became the prerogative of the Brahmins and were thus closed to the larger section of the people, the *Mahabharata* came as the fifth Veda surpassing the *Upanisad(s)* and four Vedas in scope and size and encompassing all tiieir teachings. Bringing together for the people both the archaic and the historical material, it has given every Indian his cultural and historical identity. As *dharmasastra* it has revealed to man his duties and purpose in life. The epic war that it depicts may be regarded as a saga. In ferocity, suffering, and heroism, it was unrivaled. Only ten persons, seven on the Pandava side and three on the Kaurava side survived. Magnificent heroes fought and fell on both sides. But what made all the difference was neither fate nor heroism but adherence to *dharma.* Gandhan said before the war that irrespective of advantages and disadvantages the balance of *dharma* was in favor of the Pandava(s). The *Mahabharata* is much more than a narration of an epic war. Throughout the ages it has taught a philosophy of life and practice. It has been a source of innumerable poetic creations in all ages, *(Abhijnana Sakuntalam* of Kalldasa is only one example).

In a general way *dharma* means prescriptions, the observance of which keeps human beings from falling from the station of life or from their own true selves. This is what Krsna says in the *Mahabharata.* Adherence to *dharma* protects men from evils created by men. This Sanskrit word, *dharma,caa* be derived from the root *r* with *dhana* and *mak* as prefix and suffix respectively. It also is derived from the root *dhr* with *man* as suffix. In the *Mahabharata* it has been used in both the senses. By the first, *dharma* is a means to attain *dhana,* that is, value, both material and spiritual. By the second derivation it means that which preserves creation and protects it from harm and bestows good. In a very important sense *dharma* is the law of both human and nonhuman existence, the *rta* in the *RgVeda.* The prescriptions define *dharma* in the human situation, for man's material and spiritual good. *Dharma* has two ways, one prescribes actions leading to the achievement of *artha* (the economic good) and *kama* (the hedonistic good). It is *sakamadharma,* that is, observance of *dharma* with desire for *artha* and *kama. Dharma* with *artha* and *kama* is called the *trivarga* and is prescribed for a householder. By *artha* is meant riches, might, skill, family, health, fame, and enjoyable objects. *Kama* is enjoyment itself; it is desire for pleasure. To achieve *artha* and *kama* by means other than the prescribed *dharma* is to commit a wrong—that is, sin. To acquire them in the prescribed way is good—that is, merit. *Dharma* in its other way is *niskama,* that is, without a desire of anything for one's own. *Sakamadharma* earns the performer merit to enjoy earthly and heavenly pleasures as long as the merit lasts. *Niskama dharma* brings

the performer salvation and breaks the chain of life and death. Thus it is said in the Vedas that we shall perform sacrifices *(yajha)* and drink *soma* to enjoy heaven; this is the practice of *sakamadharma.* The heavenly pleasures will wear out in time for one to reenter the cycle of life and death.

Regarding the relative merit of *dharma, artha, kama,* and *moksa,* there is a dialogue among Vidura and five Pandava(s). Yudhisthira opened the dialogue by saying that with *dharma, artha,* and *kama* is carried out our daily life. Of these three, which is superior to which? To this Vidura said that learning, asceticism and meditation *(tapasya),* forgiveness, simplicity, kindness, truthfulness, and restraint are the elements of *dharma.* Taken severally, *dharma* is the highest value. *Artha* is subservient to *dharma. Kama,* taken by itself, is inferior to the other two. Then Arjuna said that *artha* is the principal value because it is the aid to *karma,* pursuits of life like farming, trade, dairy, industry, etc. With *artha* one can achieve enjoyable objects in life, can perform the prescriptions of *dharma* in a better way. Also the motivation to acquire *artha* is very strong in man. Nakula and Sahadeva said that *dharma* and *artha* should go together. Man must adhere to *dharma* and earn *artha* without transgressing *dharma.* It will then be like nectar mixed with honey. With *dhar-ma-artha* one should go for enjoyments of life. Bhlmasena's answer was a notable one. He said *kama* or desire is the driving force of life. It is by desire for the pleasures of heaven that great sages are motivated and are engaged in religious performances, austerity, etc. It is by desire that the trader, the farmer, artists, and artisans are engaged in their respective professions. *Kama* is the essence even in all our prescribed behaviors and our efforts at earning riches, fame, etc. *Dharma* and *artha,* that is, prescripts and riches, are useless without *kama.* But it is best to pursue the *trivarga,* the "triple" value, that is, *dharma-artha-kama.* To pursue only one of them is worst, two only better. Thus, BhTmasena is advocating *sakamadharma,* though taken severally *kama* is the best of the three values. An intriguing point in this discourse is that he is looking for a driving principle in our behavior of all kinds. This principle, he says, is *kama,* desire or love for happiness and enjoyment, but at the same time he does not want to override *dharma,* that is, prescription.

Yudhsthira spoke last. *Moksa* is the highest value, he said. One should do the duties of his station of life without any self-seeking. This is practicing *dharma* with indifference to sin or merit, riches or poverty, pleasure or pain. Such is *niskama dharma,* which alone can break the cycle of life and death, supersede ment and sin, and lead to salvation in the absolute *(moksa, brahtnaprapti).* Bhlsma also told them that *moksa* is the highest value for man *(paramapurusartha).* Quoting ancient tales, he told them that both pain and pleasure are transitory, one following the other in a causal cycle driven by persisting desire. Of the two—happiness gained by effort driven by desire and happiness gained by forsaking desire—the latter is preferable because it frees man from the cycle of pleasure and pain. Bhlsma said that once King Yayati, one of the great forefathers of the Kurus, asked the sage Bodhya how he acquired the wisdom that gave him a quietude such that nothing could disturb him. Sage Bodhya replied that he learned from the tale of Pingala the prostitute that hopes of desire brought pain and frustration; from the tale of the heron that killing for one's own pleasure invited antagonism from others; from the snake that there was no compulsion about building a home and that a mendicant should live without one: from the bee that an ascetic need not bother about food for living and

that he could collect alms from the householders; from the tale of the arrow maker that if he did his job with necessary attention and devotion nothing could distract him, not even the presence of a king; from the tale of the maiden who threw away the extra bracelets because they were resounding too much that if one wanted to avoid disturbance one could get away from it by leaving the company. The teaching is that one can take to the *niskama dharma* of *sa*. *nyasa* (renunciation) and practice *yoga,* or one may take to the *niskama dharma* of a *grhi* (householder, family man) that Vidura practiced. For others, it should be *trivarga, dharma-artha-kama.* BhTsma's instructions to Yudhisthira and others covered both.

The supreme teaching of the *Mahabharata* is *dharma* in the sense of both *sakama* and *niskama dharma.* It taught King Yudhisthira how to become an ideal ruler. The fundamental point in these instructions was that a king was bound by law *(dharma,* prescriptions), and his commands were only rules of law. As a matter of *dharma,* a king must look to the welfare of his subjects, secure the kingdom from external attack, keep men to their stations of duty, decide carefully on war and peace, maintain a well-trained army and efficient police and intelligence services. If necessary, the king shall take to a scorched-earth policy in the face of an enemy attack. So long as one remains a king he should follow the *trivarga* guided by *dharma,* not by *kama* as Bhlmasena had said, like an ideal householder. Then Bhlsma talked about the personal qualities that a king should have, like earning riches without cruelty, being brave without being a braggart, etc., and the qualities that a king must not have, such as showing charity to the greedy, trusting a man of ill will, indulgence in sex, etc. The king shall also be a shrewd ruler and shall put up a show as is necessary like actors. Pretension of friendship with a strong enemy and at the same time preparing secretly for war at an opportune moment against him was a valuable piece of advice that BhTsma gave Yudhisthira as a matter of *dharma.* BhTsma also gave such advice as abjuration of anger, adherence to truth, proper distribution of wealth and earning, forgiveness, having children by one's own wife, purity of thought and action, nonviolence, simplicity, and care for the dependents—the ninefold *dharma.* During the war Krsna told Arjuna that nonviolence (not to injure others) is a great *dharma* and that telling a lie is preferable to violence. In the same place he says that there is nothing greater than truth. In this context, Krsna's reply to Sanjaya, Dhrtarastra's envoy to Yudhisthira just before the war broke out, is quite interesting.

Sanjaya, trying to dissuade Yudhisthira from war in the name of *dharma,* said that one who takes *dharma* as superior to *kama* and *artha* is great. Desire for *artha* binds one to sorrow. Therefore, Yudhisthira, the champion of *dharma,* had better live by begging than killing such men as Drona, AsVatthama, Krpa, Salya, Vikarna, Duryodhana, Kama. War is evil, desire is a blemish on the pious soul. That war has no necessary connection with virtue or vice, but that war is unmitigated evil is evident from the fact that a senseless fellow or a sinner may win wealth by war while the sensible and virtuous may lose. Why should, therefore, Yudhisthira wage a war and leave the path of *dharmal* He must not be led by ill-advising ministers. They are really his detractors in his journey to *moksa,* the highest *dharma.* To this Krsna replied that no one could abandon his station of duty. One must act, and act according to the injunctions, prescriptions *of dharma.* Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is really empty, it must guide action. The whole universe is in

activity without respite, nothing is at rest. Indra is the king of gods because he is untiring in his care and concern for them and sticks to truth and *dharma,* looking to others before looking into his own happiness. Brhaspati is the supreme guru because he practices perfect reticence and rectitude. Yudhisthira is a Ksatriya and had his duties already prescribed. Along with study of scriptures and performances of religious rites he was engaged even more with arms. A Ksatriya living a good life of a householder would attain the merit of heaven if he fell in battle. Yudhisthira, called by the duty of his station in life, was going to war. He must get back his kingdom. As for *moksa,* he would attain it ultimately by pursuit of *niskama dharma* and learning the scriptures and thereby living a holy life. No one could therefore accuse him of any deviation.

On his return Sanjaya told Dhrtarastra that Yudhisthira, a perfect follower of *dharma* and well versed in scriptures and generous as a man, only wanted to get back the part of the kingdom that Dhrtarastra had given him (although the entire Kuru kingdom legitimately belonged to him). To escape from one's station, that is, to neglect the duties that define a station of life in this creation, is a fall from one's true being. Arjuna was goaded to pick up arms again and fight by the Lord Krsna when the warrior became stricken by the thought of the Doom looming large and the thought of killing the near and dear ones. After the war Yudhisthira, in a melancholy mood, wanted to abandon his kingdom and take to a forest life. BhTsma, Vyasa, Krsna, and others consoling him in his sorrow nevertheless reminded him of his duties as a king. Krsna even told him that he, the *Dharmaraja* (Yudhisthira) was becoming too occupied with his personal sorrow and bereavements. (It reminds one of Rama's deciding to abandon his beloved queen Slta. Ramachandra could very well abdicate the throne and live with Slta like a common man, but Ramachandra the king could not leave his place of duty on account of personal love and sorrow.) Only by fulfilling the obligations of his immediate station in life can man take the next step to his journey to salvation. Till the realization of *moksadharma,* man has to act and enjoy or suffer the fruits of his own acts. Charity, religious devotion, knowledge of the Vedas, composure, compassion, nonviolence, etc., help life flourish in *dharma* and help preserve the creation Action negates action and thus man ultimately goes beyond pleasure and sorrow, friendship and enmity, sense of loss and gain, etc., and becomes indifferent to the vicissitudes of life, leading to self-realization and *moksa.* In this context one may remember what Yudhisthira himself had once told DraupadI during their hard days in the forest—that he did his duties without any expectation of return, observed charity, and performed religious rites because he should and that he did the duties of a householder by the prescriptions and by the ways shown by the virtuous. This he said when DraupadI complained, like an unbeliever in a moment of sorrow and distress, that *dharma* was not protecting one who would rather forsake her along with the brothers than deviate from the path of *dharma .* Then he told DraupadI that he himself caused the sorrow to them by his own acts. He had very well detected the fraud of Sakuni but lost his composure and was led to irrational acts by his anger, something that he should not have done.

It may appear paradoxical that the concept of *dharma* in the *Mahabharata* teaches nonviolence yet does not consider war an evil, teaches truth along with deception, and so on. Critics of the ethics of the *Mahabharata* have called it dubious and its great character Machiavellian. For did not Sanatsujata, one of the twelve great teachers of

dharma, say that an act of sin is a necessity where one must commit it for the sake of *dharma* itself? Does it not appear then that *dharma* and sin might go together? Instances can be multiplied. The incident of Drona's killing is often pointedly referred to. After the fall of Bhlsma, Drona was made the supreme commander and threatened to destroy the Pandava army. To contain or rather eliminate him, a course of deception was devised and adopted at the insistence of Krsna. It was known beforehand that Drona could be killed only if he would involuntarily give up his arms at the loss of one dearest to him. Next to Arjuna, the dearest to this great guru was his son As'vatthama. Bhlmasena, simple-minded as he was, killed the giant elephant of the same name which King Bhagadatta rode and started shouting that Asvartthama was dead. Drona did not believe him, for he knew that his son was an invincible warrior like Arjuna. He asked Yudhisthira, the *Dharmaraja,* the champion of *dharma,* if it were true. Yudhisthira would not tell a He, but Krsna pleaded with him. Reluctantly, Yudhisthira told the lie that As'vatthama was dead. In grief Drona left arms and armor and sat down with a will to die *(prayopavesana)* a ritual suicide. Being thus vulnerable, he was killed.

One may also point to the four accusations made by Gandhari. It may be recalled that each day of the eighteen-day war when Duryodhana came to ask for the blessings of his mother he was told that victory would be on the side of *dharma.* Before the war broke out she gave her last warning that, other things being equal, the balance of *dharma* was on the side of the Pandava(s). Therefore her accusations bore weight. She said that Bhlmasena, encouraged by Krsna, hit Duryodhana below the belt to kill him and win; that Arjuna without any warning cut off the right arm of King Bhurisrava engaged in fighting Satyaki (the great Yadu warrior); that Satyaki killed the incapacitated Bhurisrava when the latter had abandoned arms and sat down with a will to die; and that Krsna was indifferent to the fate of the Kuru dynasty (Pandava(s) and sons of Dhrtarastra are all Kurus) in this self-annihilating war, even though he and he alone could stop it, if necessary, by force. Gandhaff cursed him that he would be instrumental in a similar destruction of his own people, the Yadus. Incidentally, the same accusation was made against Krsna by sage Uttanka. Yet the epic war of *Mahabharata* was said to be a war for the sake of *dharma,* and the Pandava(s) deservedly won it. How can we explain that in spite of her grief over the death of her sons and the massive destruction on both sides and the four very legitimate accusations, Gandhari had no doubt that the Pandava(s) had won a war of *dharma']*

This great concept of *dharma* delineated in the *Mahabharata* deserves indeed more careful attention than a passing remark. *Dharma* and rules of morality are different, and they may or may not go together. Violation of a moral rule does not necessarily imply a deviation from *dharma,* though there is a necessity the other way. *Dharma* commands absolute obligation, whereas the rules of morality are contingent on their situatidn of application. In a case where violation of rule is also a violation of *dharma* and calls for punishment, it is retributive in nature: the suffering clears the guilt to bring back the person to the path of *dharma.* When itis said that truth is the locus of *dharma,* this Truth does not mean the same thing as truth-telling. Bhlsma tells Yudhisthira that Truth is the highest *dharma,* and it has thirteen elements—impartiality, control of the senses, absence of avarice, forgiveness, modesty, endurance, freedom from envy, generosity, contemplation, simplicity, patience, kindness, and nonviolence. Upon these rests

dharma. Moral rales are related to merit and sin, *dharma* with *moksa,* that is, salvation. Some of the moral rules are, in fact, rules of *dharma.* As specific laws they replace the general ones in specific cases.

Krsna says that the Vedic prescriptions are the main source of *dharma.* But one may have to decide about *dharma* in a given case not covered by the Vedic injunctions. Here one must decide starting from the premise that *dharma* makes possible the rise and prosperity of the people, ameliorates sufferings, and ultimately leads to *moksa.* Bhlsma says that the injunctions of the Vedas, the *smrti* (canonical scriptures), and ways of the pious men *(sistacara*) show the path of *dharma.* In case of doubt, these three again shall be the means of right decision. For the common people, of course, the ways of the pious and virtuous men are the best. The hunter's sermon to Kauslka the Brahmin, retold to Yudhisthira by Markandeya elucidates the meaning of *sistacara* (way of the pious men). Performance of religious rites *(yajna),* charity, meditation, reading scriptures, and behavior in accordance with truth are the marks of piety. The pious abjures pleasure, anger, deceit, greed, crookedness and remain contented in the way of *dharma.* The essence of the Vedas is the element of truth; the essence of truth is control of the senses; the essence of the control of sense is the sacrifice of self-interest. All these three are eminently characteristic of pious men.

Source: Arun Kumar Mookerjee, "Dharma as the Goal: The Mahabharata," *inHindu Spirtuahty: Vedas through Vendanta,* edited by Krishna Sivaraman, Crossroad, 1989, pp. 127-47

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerptfrom an introduction to William Buck's prose retelling of the Mahabharata, *van Nooten outlines the story told in the epic work, provides some historical background to the period portrayed in this epic, and discusses the systems of morality, eschatology (a branch of theology), and philosophy that underlies and informs the action.*

The *Mahabharata* is the story of a dynastic struggle, culminating in an awesome battle between two branches of a single Indian ruling family. The account of the fight between the Kurus and the Pandavas for the fertile and wealthy land at the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers near Delhi is enhanced by peripheral stories that provide a social, moral, and cosmological background to the climactic battle.

We do not know exactly when the battle took place. The *Mahabharata* (pronounced with, the stress on the third syllable: mahabhdrata) was composed over a period of some four hundred years, between the second century B.C. and the second century A.D., and already at that time the battle was a legendary event, preserved in the folk tales and martial records of the ruling tribes. The Indian calendar places its date at 3102 B.C., the beginning of the Age of Misfortune, the Kaliyuga, but more objective evidence, though scanty and inferential, points to a date closer to 140O B.C.

At that time Aryan tribes had just begun to settle in India after their invasion from the Iranian highlands. The land from western Pakistan east to Bihar and south not farther than the Dekkhan was occupied by Aryan tribes whose names are often mentioned in records much older than the *Mahabharata.* The tribal communities varied in size and were each governed by the "prominent families" *(mahakulas)* from among which one nobleman was consecrated king. The kings quarreled and engaged in intertribal warfare as a matter of course, their conflicts were sometimes prolonged affairs, sometimes little more than cattle raids.

It is in this context that the Bharata war took place. The Kurus were an ancient tribe who had long been rulers of the area in the upper reaches of the Yamuna River. The Pandus, or Pandavas, were a newly emergent clan living in Indraprastha, some sixty miles southwest of the Kuru capital, Hastinapura. According to the *Mahabharata,* the new aristocrats were invited to the court of the ancient noble house of Kuru to engage in a gambling contest. There they were tricked first out of their kingdom and then into a promise not to retaliate for twelve years. In the thirteenth year they took refuge at the court of the Matsyas, where they allied themselves with the Kurus' eastern and southern neighbors, the Pancalas. Together in a vast host they marched up to Hastinapura, where they were met on Kuruksetra, the plain of the Kurus. Here the Kurus and their allies were defeated.

In bare outline that is the story of which the bard sings. But the composer of the *Mahabharata* has portrayed the actions of the warriors in both a heroic and a moral context, and it should be understood as a re-enactment of a cosmic moral confrontation,

not simply as an account of a battle. Unlike our Western historical philosophy, which looks for external causes—such as famine, population pressure, drought—to explain the phenomena of war and conquest, the epic bard views the events of the war as prompted by observances and violations of the laws of morality. The basic principle of cosmic or individual existence is dharma. It is the doctrine of the religious and ethical rights and duties of each individual, and refers generally to duty ordained by religion, but may also mean simply virtue, or right conduct. Every human being is expected to live according to his dharma. Violation of dharma results in disaster.

Hindu society was classed into four castes, each with its own dharma. The power of the state rested with the *Ksatriyas:* kings, princes, free warriors and their wives and daughters. Their dharma was to protect their dependents, rule justly, speak the truth, and fight wars. The priest caste was not socially organized in churches or temples, but consisted of individual *Brahmans* in control of religion. Among their other duties, they officiated at great sacrifices to maintain the order of the world and accomplish desired goals. They were also in control of education, could read and write, and taught history according to their outlook on life. The *Mahabharata* in its final form was largely the work of a Brahman composer, so we find in the peripheral stories an emphasis on the power and glory of the Brahman caste, although in the main story of the epic there is not one powerful Brahmin. The *Vaisyas,* of whom we hear little in the *Mahabharata,* were merchants, townspeople, and farmers, and constituted the mass of the people.

The three upper castes were twice-born: once from their mothers and once from their investitures with the sacred thread. The lowest caste, the *Sudras,* did menial work and served other castes. They were Aryans, however, and their women were accessible to higher-caste men: Vyasa was the offspring of a ksatriya and a sudra, and so was Vidura. Outside the caste system were the "scheduled castes," the tribal people of the mountains, such as the Kiratas, as well as the Persians and the Bactrian Greeks.

Besides their caste dharma, people had a personal dharma to observe, which varied with one's age and occupation. So we find a teacher-student dharma, a husband-wife dharma, the dharma of an ascetic, and so on. One's relation to the gods was also determined by dharma. The lawbooks specify the various kinds of dharma in detail, and this classifications and laws still govern Indian society.

The Hindu system of eschatology is often expounded in the *Mahabharata.* In brief, it is the doctrine of the cycle of rebirths *(samsara*), the doctrine of the moral law (dharma), which is more powerful than even the gods. The moral law sustains and favors those creatures that abide by it, while thwarting those that trespass. Its instrument is *karma,* the inexorable law that spans this life and the afterdeath, working from one lifetime to another, rewarding the just and making the evil suffer. In this Hindu universe those in harmony with dharma ultimately reach a state in which rebirth is not necessary any more. If, however, the forces of evil are too strong, the moral law reasserts itself and often uses forceful means to restore harmony where it has been lost. To accomplish that, often a being of a higher order, a god, who in his usual manifestation has no physical body, takes birth among the people and becomes an *avatara,* a "descent" of his own power on earth. Often the physical manifestation is not aware of his divine

antecedents, but discovers them in the course of his life on earth. Therefore an avatara has many human qualities, including some that by our own standards would be less than divine: hostility, vengefulness, and an overweening sense of self-importance. These qualities are necessary for him to confront confidently the forces of evil, the *asuras,* who have taken flesh also and appear as bitter enemies committed to a battle to the end.

The emphasis on morality in the *Mahabharata* brings with it considerations of the nature of the divine. There are many gods; the Indian pantheon is overwhelming in its diversity and vagueness. At the highest level of creation are the gods *(devas),* who are in continual conflict with the demonic forces, the asuras. Among the gods, Visnu, Siva, and Indra are especially important. Visnu is mainly manifest through his incarnation as Krisna. He is a supreme god worthy of love and devotion. Siva is also a supreme god, but represents the ascetic side of Indian religion. He dwells on a mountain, dresses in a tiger skin, and wears a characteristic emblem, the trident, still carried by Indian mendicants. The third eye in the middle of Siva's forehead scorches his enemies. Indra is in name the king of the gods, but in fact his importance had declined by the time of the *Mahabharata,* although he remained a principle god In the *Mahabharata* he is the god of rain and father of Arjuna, a Pandava.

Less powerful are the elemental gods of fire (Agni), wind (Vayu), water (Varuna), sun (Surya), and moon (Soma). Kama is the god of love. Unlike the gods in Western mythologies, the prominent Indian gods are difficult to characterize. Although they are assigned obvious functions as powers, their spheres of power and their characteristics overlap because they are ultimately all manifestations of the universal principle, Brahman, the universal soul or being to which individual souls will be reunited after the illusion of time and space has been conquered.

At a lower level, still divine but progressively less lofty, are the hosts of the Gandharvas, Apsarases, Siddhas, Yaksas, and Raksasas. The first three classes are usually benevolent to mankind. Gandharvas play heavenly music to which the nymphs, the Apsarases, dance. Indra also uses the Apsarases to seduce ambitious ascetics who, by their severe selfcastigation, have accumulated so much spiritual power that it becomes a threat to Indra's supremacy; as a result of seduction the anchorite loses his power. Yaksas are sprites, dryads, and naiads. Raksasas are malevolent demons who prowl around the sacrificial altars or in other ways disturb human beings.

Humans look at the gods as powers to be appeased or controlled, with the exception of Visnu, who is simply adored. Gods often interact with humans, marry them, give them weapons, invoke their assistance or aid them. At times gods interact with men through the intermediary of wise old men, sages whose advice was obeyed by prudent warriors who would not violate the will of the gods in order to avoid incurring the sage's curse. Upon his death, the ancient hero expects to go to Indra's heaven, where there is feasting and rejoicing.

Rivers and other landscape features are personified and function as both divine or semi-divine beings and as natural phenomena. In the *Mahabharata* gods communicate

with men, animals talk and are sometimes real animals, sometimes human beings or gods. The story often moves into an idealized land where heroic feats, deeds of valour and physical strength are regarded with awe and fear. These incidents foster a sense of marvel in the reader: we are transported into an idyllic world where illusion and reality cannot be separated.

The *Mahabharata* should be understood as a moral and philosophical tale as well as an historical one. Only in this way can we appreciate the significance of die *Bhagavadgita,* the Song of the Lord, which is part of the *Mahabharata,* but which is usually excerpted and read as an independent religious work. In India, the *Mahabharata* as a whole has been regarded for centuries as a religious work, to awesome battles and gruesome deaths as tragic yet natural events in human experience, these are just a few of the features that have found response in the hearts of millions of Asian people.

Source: B. A. van Nooten, in an introduction to *Mahabharata,* by William Buck, University of California Press, 1973, pp. xiii-xxiii.

Adaptations

The *Mahabharata* was adapted as a full-length stage play by Jean-Claude Carriere and premiered in Avignon, France in 1985. Peter Brook's English translation of Carriere's play toured in 1987-88 with an international cast Brook later directed a five-and-a-half-hour film version of the *Mahabharata,* televised worldwide in 1989; available on videocassette from The Parabola Video Library.

Topics for Further Study

Who writes history? Much of Indian history prior to the entrance of Muslims into the region in the 1 lth century exists only in literary form, as stories and tales. Examine the *Mahabharata* as a historical document. What does it tells use about the time in which it was set and the person, or persons, who wrote it? You might, for instance, compare aspects of classical India with parallel features of Europe during the middle ages. What does it mean to interpret history through a work of literature?

Religion and society: Investigate the similarities and differences between Hinduism, as it is presented in the *Mahabharata,* and Buddhism, another great world religion with its source in India. Compare the ways in which Hinduism structures society and salvation through the caste system and the critique that Buddhism offers of this system.

What is a hero? The *Mahabharata* contains many examples of the Hindu hero, especially in the character of Yudhishthira. Outline his characteristics and then compare them to the qualities of an epic hero from the western tradition, such as Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey,* or Achilles from his *Iliad.* What makes these heroes "eastern" or "western" in character? What qualities to they share? Do the same with Bhima, Arjuna, or Duryodhana.

Compare and Contrast

1000 BC (the period in which the *Mahabharata* is set): Three thousand years ago the region which is today known as India was ruled by feudal kings and princes, people upon whom figures such as Yudhishthira, Duryodhana, Virata, and Salya were based. The princes often battled one another for land, prestige, or wealth, and governed according to a system much like that of Medieval Europe.

Late twentieth century: India is made up of several states. It is a federal, secular republic, not unlike the United States of America, and in fact is the largest democracy in the world. Important figures and institutions in the Indian government include the president, prime minister, and two houses of parliament.

1000 BC: The caste system, a strict hereditary organization of social classes, defined classical Indian society. Warriors ruled and offered gifts and reverence to priests, or Brahmans. Most Indians engaged in agriculture as farmers; slavery was prevalent and these individuals served the higher social classes.

Late twentieth century: Slavery has been outlawed in India for more than a century and a half. The caste system still exists to a degree, but social mobility has become a reality. India is a still-developing country, but the growth of capitalism has been tremendous in the twentieth century. India is a modern, industrializing nation.

1000 BC: Classical Indian society was highly patriarchal, or male-dominated; women played a subordinate role in most aspects of life. Like Draupadi, Gandhari, and Kunti, they were wives and mothers first. At this time a women's value resided primarily in her ability to produce sons, her subservience to her husband, and her personal beauty.

Today: Educational opportunities and democracy have greatly increased the status of and standard of living for women in India. Although women still occupy a secondary role in many areas of society, restrictions on them are beginning to loosen. Between 1966 and 1977, and again from 1980 to 1984 a woman, Indira Gandhi, governed India as prime minister. Many avenues of employment, however, are still very difficult for women to enter.

1000 BC: The practice of polygamy, several wives for one husband, was common, especially among men of great wealth and power. Polyandry, several husbands for one wife, like that of Draupadi and the five Pandavas, was quite rare. This example in the *Mahabharata,* therefore, should not be interpreted as the norm in classical Indian society.

Late twentieth century: The practices of polygamy and polyandry are virtually unknown in modern India.

1000 BC: War between tabes or kingdoms was a common fact of everyday life. Warriors were among the most esteemed members of society.

Late twentiety century: Armed conflict involves modern India as it does the rest of the world. The reasons for these conflicts are varied, but many hostilities derive from religious differences or territorial disputes. Since the late 1940s, India and the Muslim nation of Pakistan have struggled over a disputed area of land in the Kashmir region; antagonism between the countries persists. In 1974 India surprised many of its neighbors and the world community when it tested an atomic bomb.

What Do I Read Next?

The hero of Virgil's *Aeneid,* the Trojan warrior Aeneas, departs from the Trojan War and wanders for seven years in the Mediterranean region because it has been foretold that he and what remain of his people are destined to found a great nation in Italy. He stays briefly in the North African city of Carthage, but his abruptly ended love affair with Queen Dido eventually leads to her suicide. Later, Aeneas travels to Italy where he defeats King Turnus and establishes a settlement along the Tiber River that eventually grows into the city of Rome. *Th&Aeneid* is a mythological glorification of the early Roman Empire and of Octavian, the emperor known as Augustus.

A Irish epic tale from the first century BC, *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* describes an attack by Queen Mebd of Connacht on the kingdom of Ulster in order to steal its prized Brown Bull, Part of the Ulster cycle of legends, it features the Gaelic hero Cuchulain, a youth of great strength whose body and face contort horribly as he enters a rage before each battle. Alone, Cuchulain destroys Mebd's army, defeating one warrior per day until killed by her treachery.

Achilles, the hero of Homer's epic poem the *Iliad,* refuses to fight for King Agamemnon and the invading Greeks at Troy. Without his strength the war will be lost, and so Achilles's friend Patroclus borrows his armor and shield and joins the battle, but is soon killed by the Trojan hero Hector. Overcome with grief and anger at his friend's death, Achilles and his men, the Myrmidons, join the attack, killing Hector, and bringing victory to the Greeks.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485, *The Death of Arthur)* describes the adventures of Arthur, legendary king of the Britons. Of mysterious birth, Arthur becomes king after receiving the magical sword, Excalibur, from the super-

natural figure of The Lady in the Lake. He later builds a mighty castle and attracts the greatest knights from France and the British Isles to his round table at Camelot. With the help of these warriors and the wizard Merlin, Arthur battles the evil sorceress Morgan Le Fay and his own upstart nephew, Sir Mordred.

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) examines the means by which a ruler might consolidate and expand power. Recommending the use of cunning and even treachery, Machiavelli portrays rulership as a science that place kings above ordinary ethical considerations.

The second great classical Indian epic poem is the *Ramayana.* Probably composed in about the third century BC, it details the life of Rama, the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu. Attributed to the sage Valmiki—also a character in the poem—the *Ramayana* recounts Prince Rama's exile from the kingdom of Ayodhya and his rescue of his wife Sita from the demon Ravana, With the help of Hanuman and his army of monkeys, Rama saves Sita, kills the demon, and returns to his home.

The poem "Song of Myself from nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman's 1855 collection *Leaves of Grass* celebrates the symbolic unity of all people and places.

Written during approximately the same period as the *Mahabharata,* the *Upanishads* contain philosophical meditations on the Hindu conceptions of reality, reincarnation, and Brahman—the universal soul.

The 1989 novel *The Great Indian Novel,* by Shashi Tharoor, is a funny and entertaining retelling of the basic *Mahabharata* story, drawing events and characters from twentieth-century Indian life.

Further Study

Buck, Philo M. "Kama, Karma, and Nirvana," in *The Golden Thread,* TheMacmillan Company, 1931, pp. 186-211.

Investigates the cultural and religious backgrounds of the *Mahabharata.*

Buck, William, reteller. *Mahabharata,* University of California Press, 1973,417 p.

A highly readable prose adaptation and abridgment of the epic poem Although Buck makes some minor adjustments and interpolations in the story, his translation is vivid and compelling.

Campbell, Joseph. "The Indian Golden Age," in *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology,* 1962. Reprint by Penguin Books, 1976, pp 321-70.

Discusses the nature of Vyasa, the mythical author of the *Mahabharata,* and the symbolic conflict between the forces of light and darkness in the work, Murdoch, John. *The Mahabharata: An English Abridgment with Introduction, Notes, and Review,* 1898. Reprint by Asian Educational Services, 1987,160 p.

Offers comprehensive prose outlines of both the story and secondary material within *theMahabharata.* Additionally includes background historical and cultural information, as well as critical commentary on the work

Stone, Charles. "Historical Suggestions in the Ancient Hindu Epic, the *Mahabharata," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* Vol. II, 1885. Reprint by Kraus Reprint, 1971, pp. 272-92

Overview of the historical contexts surrounding the composition of *Mahabharata.*

Sukthankar, V. S *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata,* The Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957,146 p.

Interprets the *Mahabharata* on three levels: the mundane, the ethical, and the transcendental.

Tharoor, Shashi. *The Great Indian Novel,* Arcade Publishing, 1989.

Modern retelling of the *Mahabharata* with a cast of characters and events drawn from twentieth-century Indian political and cultural life

Van Bmtenen, J. A. B. Introduction to *The Mahabharata: The Books of the Beginning, Vol. I,* edited and translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen, The University of Chicago Press, 1973, pp. xiii-xlvni.

Analyzes the narrative structure of the *Mahabharata* as an intricate, but cohesive whole
Van Nooten, Barend A. *The Mahabharata,* Twayne Publishers, Inc, 1971,153 p.

Full-length study of the *Mahabharata,* including chapters on its narrative structure, language, influence, and critical history

"The Sanskrit Epics," in *Heroic Epic and Saga*

An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics, edited by Felix J. Oinas, Indiana University Press, 1978, pp 49-75. Examines the narrative structure and language of the *Mahabharata* and another great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*

Wmternitz, Monz "The Popular Epics and the Puranas," in his *A History of Indian Literature, Vol I,* translated by S Ketkar, revised edition, 1926. Reprint by University of Calcutta, 1962, pp 273- 416

Surveys the range of stories and legends as well as non-fictional matter included in the text of the *Mahabharata.*

Wolpert, Stanley. "North Indian Conquest and Unification (ca 1000-450 BC)," in his *A New History of India,* third edition, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 37-54.

Explores the period of Indian history, culture, and philosophy reflected in the *Mahabharata*

Zaehner, R. C. Introduction to *Hinduism,* second edition, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp 1- 13

Zaehner provides an overview of Hinduism and notes its relation to the *Mahabharata*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Epics for Students (EfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, EfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by EfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

EfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Epics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Epics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Epics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from EfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from EfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Epics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Epics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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