

LITGRAM LEARNING SERIES

UPAGUPTA

A poem study guide

Rabindranath Tagore | Class 9 English and independent readers

SUMMARY / THEMES / CHARACTERS / EXAM QUESTIONS

Follow the monk's two meetings with Vasavadatta, understand the poem's key ideas, and practise clear answers grounded in the text.

At a glance

Element	What to remember
Form	A short narrative poem: a story told through vivid scenes and a decisive meeting.
Setting	Mathura: first on a stormy August night; later during a spring flower festival.
Main figures	Upagupta, a Buddhist ascetic; Vasavadatta, a dancer; the townspeople.
Core idea	Compassion becomes visible when the monk meets Vasavadatta in suffering and need.

A useful way to read it

Watch how the setting, the characters' positions, and the meaning of the line about the right time change between the two meetings. The poem's ending gives the reader a concrete act of care, not a speech about virtue.

Study tip

In an exam answer, make a claim, point to a detail from the poem, then explain what that detail shows. Keep plot facts separate from your interpretation.

READ THE POEM

The story in two meetings

Quick summary

Upagupta, a young ascetic, sleeps by Mathura's city wall during a dark, stormy night. Vasavadatta, a richly dressed dancer, wakes him and invites him to her home. He gently refuses, saying he will come when the time is right. Later, while the city celebrates a spring flower festival, Upagupta finds her ill, covered with sores, and cast outside the town. He sits beside her, supports her head, gives her water, and applies balm. When she asks who he is, he tells her that the time has come and that he is there.

The change between these scenes turns the poem into a study of timing, compassion, and how quickly social admiration can become rejection.

Scene map

	First meeting	Later meeting
Time and place	Stormy August night, beside the city wall.	Spring flower festival, near the city boundary.
Vasavadatta	A dancer dressed in jewels; she offers the monk shelter.	Ill and abandoned; she is pushed outside the city.
Upagupta	He refuses the invitation without contempt.	He stays, supports her, gives water, and applies balm.
Meaning	The promise of a later visit is left open.	The promised visit becomes practical care.

Character guide

Figure	Role and evidence	Careful interpretation
Upagupta	An ascetic who first declines an invitation, then cares for a sick woman.	Detachment does not mean indifference; his actions show compassion.
Vasavadatta	A dancer first shown with beauty and status, later ill and rejected.	Her changing treatment exposes the instability of status and appearance.
Townspople	They celebrate outside the city, while the ill woman is cast out.	Their conduct highlights conditional acceptance; the poem does not explain every person's motive.

Timeline note

The English text moves from an August storm to a spring festival. It does not give an exact number of months or say that exactly one year passes. Use the wording in your assigned textbook if it supplies a more specific timeline.

INTERPRET

Themes and poetic choices

Theme	How the poem develops it
Compassion in action	The poem measures compassion through Upagupta's response to suffering: he approaches, supports, gives water, and applies balm.
Impermanence	Vasavadatta's change in fortune shows that beauty, health, and public admiration do not last.
Right timing	The promised visit takes on a new meaning when help is truly needed. Timing leads to service, not reward.
Social rejection	The woman once admired is driven away when she becomes ill. The contrast questions respect based only on appearance or status.

How the writing works

Choice	Effect on the reader
Contrast	The stormy first night and the flower-filled spring scene set two different emotional worlds beside each other.
Sensory imagery	Darkness, lightning, anklets, blossoms, moonlight, and the sick woman's sores make each scene concrete.
Reversal	Vasavadatta first offers a home; later Upagupta offers care. The reversal makes social and physical change visible.
Dialogue	The repeated idea of the right time links the two encounters and gives the ending its force.

Exam-ready paragraph

Tagore presents compassion as timely action in 'Upagupta'. At first, Vasavadatta is admired for her beauty and offers the monk shelter, but he says he will visit when the time is right. Later, when she is ill and abandoned outside Mathura, he sits beside her, gives her water, supports her head, and applies balm. The repeated promise now means care in a moment of real need. The contrast between the two meetings also shows how quickly health and social respect can change. Through Upagupta's actions, the poem suggests that spiritual discipline should deepen concern for other people.

This paragraph is a model, not a script to memorise. Add a textual detail and explain it in your own words.

PRACTISE

Questions and model answers

1. Why does Upagupta refuse Vasavadatta's invitation?

He says he will visit when the time is right. The poem does not present the refusal as disgust or punishment; it sets up the later meeting, when Vasavadatta needs care.

2. What is different about the two meetings?

The first happens on a stormy night: Vasavadatta is dressed for the world of beauty and offers shelter. The later meeting occurs during a spring festival: she is ill and abandoned, and Upagupta becomes the caregiver.

3. How does the poem show compassion?

Upagupta does not stop at feeling pity. He sits beside Vasavadatta, supports her, moistens her lips, and applies balm. The concrete actions make compassion the poem's central moral force.

4. What does Vasavadatta's change in fortune suggest?

Her change from admired dancer to rejected patient shows that beauty, health, and status are temporary. The poem also asks readers to notice how people's treatment of her changes with her circumstances.

5. Why is the flower festival important?

The city's celebration of blossoms and spring contrasts with Vasavadatta's illness and exclusion. This contrast makes the scene more striking and supports the theme of change.

6. What is the significance of the 'right time'?

The phrase connects the two encounters. In the later scene, Upagupta's visit becomes a response to suffering. The poem suggests that wise compassion involves noticing when help is needed and acting then.

A strong answer pattern

Claim: state your answer. Evidence: name a scene, image, or action. Explanation: connect the detail to a theme.

Example: 'The flower festival matters because the city celebrates renewal while Vasavadatta is excluded, sharpening the poem's contrast between public joy and individual suffering.'

REMEMBER

Quick revision and self-test

Choose the best answer

1. Where does Upagupta sleep at the beginning?

A. In Vasavadatta's house B. By Mathura's city wall C. In the royal garden

2. What does Vasavadatta offer at the first meeting?

A. Shelter in her home B. A place at the festival C. A medicine for the monk

3. What changes most clearly in the later scene?

A. Upagupta becomes a king B. The town leaves Mathura C. Vasavadatta needs care and Upagupta gives it

4. Which theme is best supported by the social contrast?

A. Status and beauty can change B. Wealth guarantees safety C. Festivals end suffering

5. Which detail best shows compassion as action?

A. The full moon above the town B. Upagupta gives water and applies balm C. The citizens go to the woods

Answer key

1. B | 2. A | 3. C | 4. A | 5. B

Key words

Word	Meaning here
Ascetic	A person who follows a disciplined spiritual life.
Austerely	In a plain or restrained way; without display.
Rampart	A defensive wall around a town or fort.
Pestilence	A severe infectious disease; the poem describes sores and uses this word for Vasavadatta's illness.
Impermanence	The condition of being temporary or liable to change.

Remember

Upagupta is detached from worldly reward, but he is not indifferent to suffering. Vasavadatta's inner spiritual change is not stated directly; focus your answer on the actions and contrasts the poem actually shows.

Sources and further reading

Primary text: Rabindranath Tagore, *Fruit-Gathering*, section XXXVII, translated from Bengali to English by the author; Macmillan, 1916. [Read the text at Project Gutenberg.](#)

Text reference: University of Toronto, *Fruit-gathering* XXXVI, citing the 1916 Macmillan edition, pages 50-52. [Open the Toronto poem record.](#)

This LitGram guide provides original summaries, explanations, and practice questions. It does not reproduce the complete poem. Follow the wording and edition prescribed by your school when quoting the text.