Upagupta

Poem summary PDF and revision sheet · Rabindranath Tagore, Fruit-Gathering XXXVI (1916) · Karnataka Class 9 English and school readers

LitGram

In one line: the monk Upagupta refuses a proud dancing girl's invitation on a stormy night, promising to come "when the time is ripe", and keeps his promise months later by nursing her when she lies sick and abandoned outside Mathura.

Form: prose poem in two scenes. Bengali original: "Abhisar" (The Tryst). The girl is unnamed in the poem (Vasavadatta in the legend).

The poem in five beats

1. **Storm (August night):** Upagupta asleep on the dust by the city wall of Mathura; lamps out, doors shut, stars hidden.
2. **The invitation:** the dancing girl, "starred with jewels", "drunk with the wine of her youth", steps on him and invites him home.
3. **The promise:** "Woman, go on your way; when the time is ripe I will come to you." Lightning; she trembles.
4. **Spring night:** blossom, flutes, festival of flowers, full moon, koels. She lies by the rampart, "struck with the black pestilence", driven out.
5. **Promise kept:** head on his knees, water, balm. "Who are you, merciful one?" "The time, at last, has come to visit you, and I am here."

Themes and devices

Theme / device	Example
Compassion and service	He nurses the woman everyone abandoned
Beauty and youth do not last	jewels and youth become sores
Metaphor	"starred with jewels"; "drunk with the wine of her youth"
Personification	"the black night showed its teeth"; "The storm growled"
Contrast	storm / spring; her offer / his service

Word meanings

Word	Meaning	Word	Meaning
disciple	follower	koel	Indian cuckoo
murky	dark, gloomy	plaint	sad cry
mantle	cloak	rampart	city wall
austerely	plainly, strictly	pestilence	deadly infectious disease
ascetic	one who gives up comforts	balm	soothing ointment

Common mistakes

- The girl is not named in the poem; Vasavadatta is from the legend.
- The disease is "the black pestilence", not smallpox.
- Scene 1 is in August (rainy season).
- Upagupta's eyes are "forgiving": he is not disgusted with her.
- Quote his two sentences exactly.

Memory trick: "Storm, Promise, Spring, Plague, Promise kept".

Practice answers

1. **Where was Upagupta sleeping?** On the dust by the city wall of Mathura; a monk gives up comfort.
2. **Why did she invite him?** She saw his young, handsome face and thought the earth no fit bed for him.
3. **"When the time is ripe"?** When she truly needed him: sick, alone, driven out.
4. **What happened to her?** Black pestilence, sores, driven from the town.
5. **Message?** Beauty fades; true love is compassion and service.