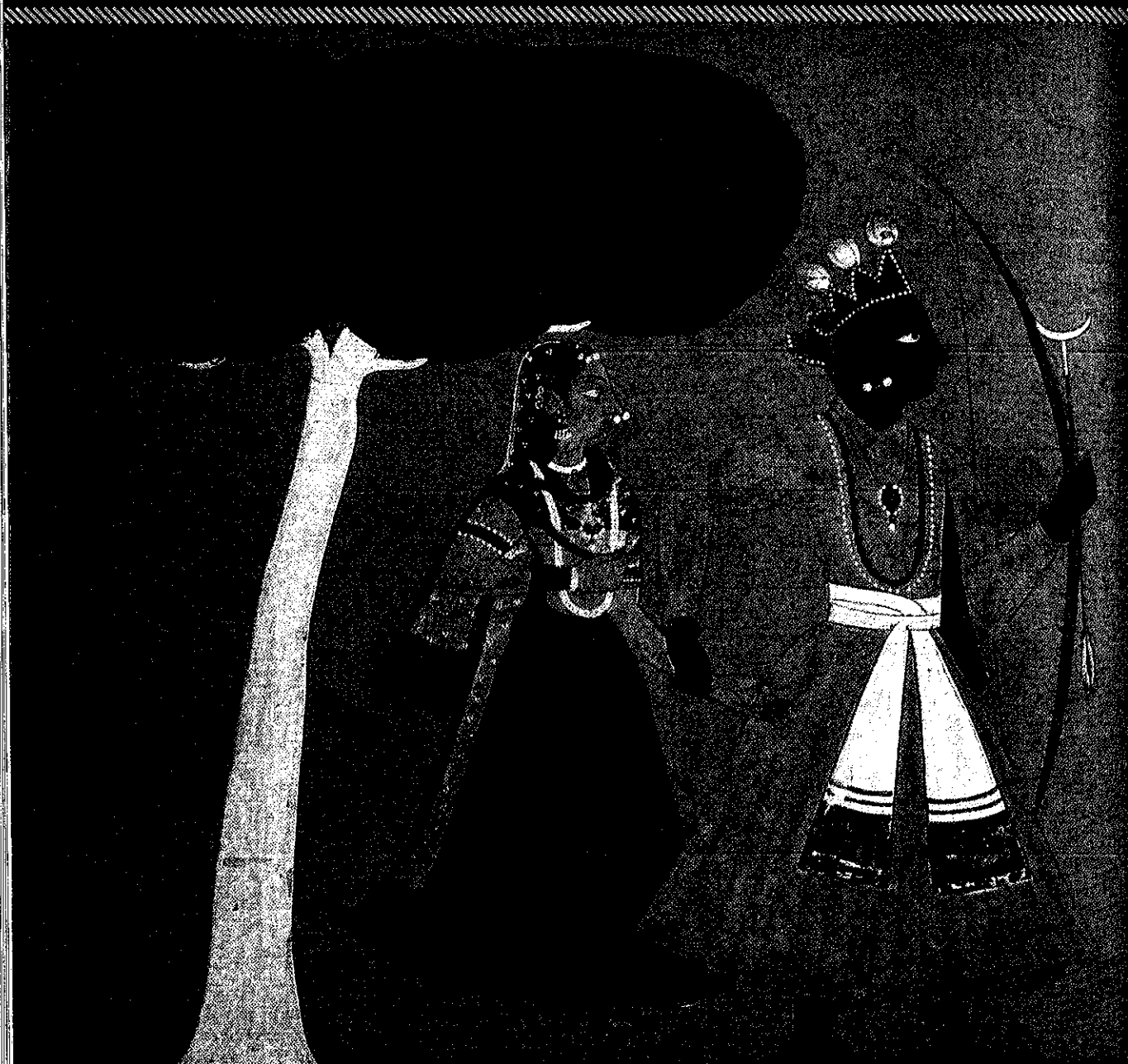


Rama's Initiation

from the Ramayana

R. K. Narayan

Rama and Sita, 1740. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



1108 Themes in Literature: Heroes and Dreamers

Steeped in the Hindu religion of India, the *Ramayana* is the story of Prince Rama (rā' mə), son of King Dasaratha (dä sä rä' tä). With the guidance of several Hindu sages, or wise men, Rama confronts and overcomes many obstacles, including a test of strength to win his wife Sita. Just as he is about to inherit his throne, he is banished and spends fourteen years in exile before returning to his kingdom. Through the challenges he meets, he reaches a spiritual and moral state so perfect that many associate him with Krishna, the incarnation, or embodiment, of the Hindu god Vishnu (vēsh' nōō).

This excerpt tells of adventures from Rama's childhood that occur before his fourteen-year banishment. Even as boys, he and his brother Lakshmana (läks mä'nä) show extraordinary strength and skill.

The new assembly hall, Dasaratha's latest pride, was crowded all day with visiting dignitaries, royal emissaries, and citizens coming in with representations or appeals for justice. The King was always accessible, and fulfilled his duties as the ruler of Kosala without grudging the hours spent in public service.

◀ **Critical Viewing**
What details in this painting indicate that Rama is an epic hero?
[Analyze]

Rama's Initiation from the Ramayana 1109

Reading Skill

Analyze Cultural

Context What background information on page 1107 helps explain the king's treatment of the sage?

Vocabulary

renounced (ri nounst') v. to have given up formally

decrepitude (dē krep' ə tōd') n. feebleness; condition of being worn out by age or illness

Literary Analysis

Epic and Epic

Hero What typical epic conflict does the sage describe here?

On a certain afternoon, messengers at the gate came running in to announce, "Sage Viswamithra" [vish wă' mē trā]. When the message was relayed to the King, he got up and hurried forward to receive the visitor. Viswamithra, once a king, a conqueror, and a dreaded name until he renounced his kingly role and chose to become a sage (which he accomplished through severe austerities¹), combined in himself the sage's eminence and the king's authority and was quick tempered and positive. Dasaratha led him to a proper seat and said, "This is a day of glory for us; your gracious presence is most welcome. You must have come from afar. Would you first rest?"

"No need," the sage replied simply. He had complete mastery over his bodily needs through inner discipline and austerities, and was above the effects of heat, cold, hunger, fatigue, and even decrepitude. The King later asked politely, "Is there anything I can do?" Viswamithra looked steadily at the King and answered, "Yes. I am here to ask of you a favor. I wish to perform, before the next full moon, a *yagna*² at Sidhasrama [sēd hās rā' mā]. Doubtless you know where it is?"

"I have passed that sacred ground beyond the Ganges many times."

The sage interrupted. "But there are creatures hovering about waiting to disturb every holy undertaking there, who must be overcome in the same manner as one has to conquer the five-fold evils³ within before one can realize holiness. Those evil creatures are endowed with immeasurable powers of destruction. But it is our duty to pursue our aims undeterred. The *yagna* I propose to perform will strengthen the beneficial forces of this world, and please the gods above."

"It is my duty to protect your sublime⁴ effort. Tell me when, and I will be there."

The sage said, "No need to disturb your august self. Send your son Rama with me, and he will help me. He can."

"Rama!" cried the King, surprised, "When I am here to serve you."

Viswamithra's temper was already stirring. "I know your greatness," he said, cutting the King short. "But I want Rama to go with me. If you are not willing, you may say so."

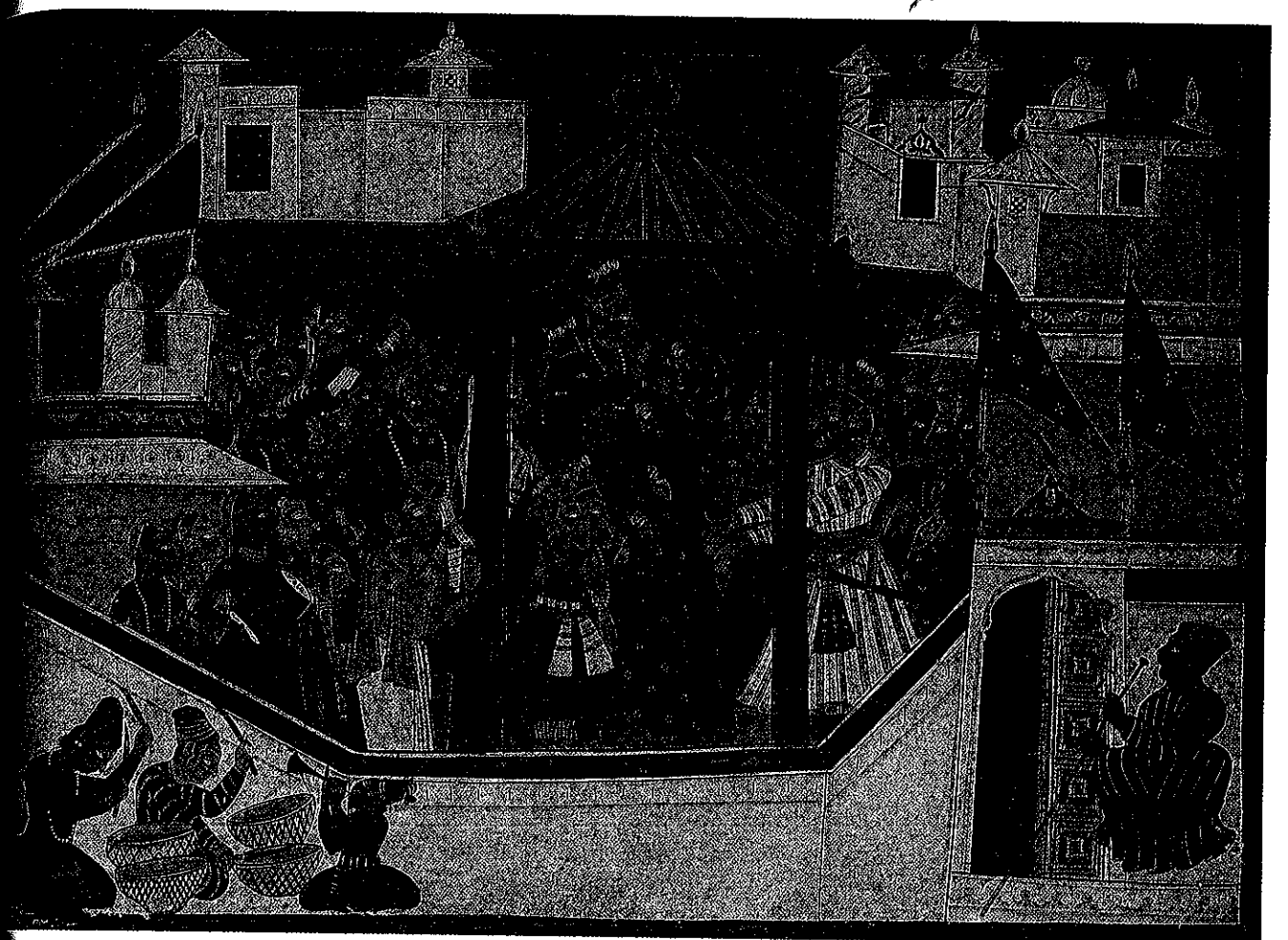
The air became suddenly tense. The assembly, the ministers and officials, watched in solemn silence. The King looked miserable. "Rama is still a child, still learning the arts and practicing the use of arms." His sentences never seemed to conclude, but trailed away

1. **austerities** (ō ster' ə tēz) n. acts or habits of self-denial.

2. **yagna** (yāg nā') n. Sanskrit term for sacrifice.

3. **five-fold evils** In Hindu belief, the five evils are lust, anger, miserliness, egoism, and envy.

4. **sublime** (sə blīm') adj. noble; grand.



as he tried to explain. "He is a boy, a child, he is too young and tender to contend with demons."

"But I know Rama," was all that Viswamithra said in reply.

"I can send you an army, or myself lead an army to guard your performance. What can a stripling⁵ like Rama do against those terrible forces . . . ? I will help you just as I helped Indra⁶ once when he was harassed and deprived of his kingdom."

Viswamithra ignored his speech and rose to leave. "If you cannot send Rama, I need none else." He started to move down the passage.

The King was too stricken to move. When Viswamithra had gone half way, he realized that the visitor was leaving unceremoniously and was not even shown the courtesy of being escorted to the door. Vasishtha [vā sē' shtā], the King's priest and

5. **stripling** (strip' līŋ) n. young boy passing into manhood.

6. **Indra** (in' drə) Hindu god associated with rain and thunderbolts.

Literary Analysis Epic and Epic Hero

In what way is Rama singled out as an epic hero?

✓ Reading Check

What does Viswamithra ask of the king?

Vocabulary

secular (sek' yə lər) *adj.*
of worldly, as opposed
to religious, matters

guide, whispered to Dasaratha, "Follow him and call him back," and hurried forward even before the King could grasp what he was saying. He almost ran as Viswamithra had reached the end of the hall and, blocking his way, said, "The King is coming; please don't go. He did not mean . . ."

A wry smile played on Viswamithra's face as he said without any trace of bitterness, "Why are you or anyone agitated? I came here for a purpose; it has failed: no reason to prolong my stay."

"Oh, eminent one, you were yourself a king once."

"What has that to do with us now?" asked Viswamithra, rather irked, since he hated all reference to his secular past and wanted always to be known as a Brahma Rishi.⁷

Vasishtha answered mildly, "Only to remind you of an ordinary man's feelings, especially a man like Dasaratha who had been childless and had to pray hard for an issue . . ."

"Well, it may be so, great one; I still say that I came on a mission and wish to leave, since it has failed."

"It has not failed," said Vasishtha, and just then the King came up to join them in the passage; the assembly was on its feet.

Dasaratha made a deep obeisance and said, "Come back to your seat, Your Holiness."

"For what purpose, Your Majesty?" Viswamithra asked.

"Easier to talk seated . . ."

"I don't believe in any talk," said Viswamithra; but Vasishtha pleaded with him until he returned to his seat.

When they were all seated again, Vasishtha addressed the King: "There must be a divine purpose working through this seer, who may know but will not explain. It is a privilege that Rama's help should be sought. Do not bar his way. Let him go with the sage."

"When, oh when?" the King asked anxiously.

"Now," said Viswamithra. The King looked woebegone and desperate, and the sage relented enough to utter a word of comfort. "You cannot count on the physical proximity of someone you love, all the time. A seed that sprouts at the foot of its parent tree remains stunted until it is transplanted. Rama will be in my care, and he will be quite well. But ultimately, he will leave me too. Every human being, when the time comes, has to depart and seek his fulfillment in his own way."

"Sidhasrama is far away . . .?" began the King.

"I'll ease his path for him, no need for a chariot to take us there," said Viswamithra, reading his mind.

7. **Brahma Rishi** (brä' mā rī' shē) enlightened wise person.

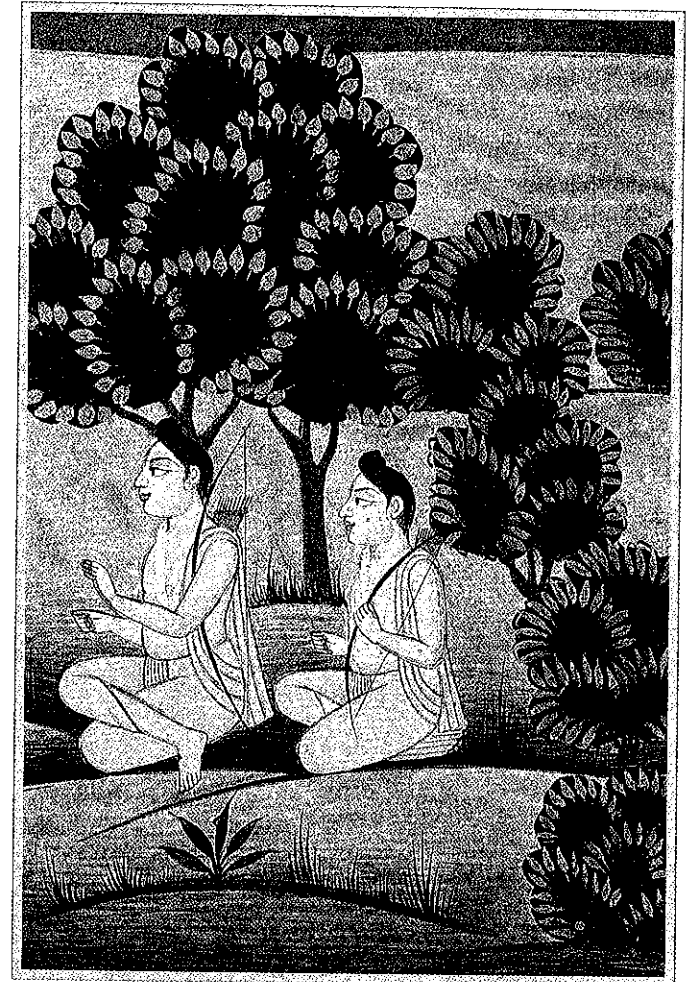
"Rama has never been separated from his brother Lakshmana. May he also go with him?" pleaded the King, and he looked relieved when he heard Viswamithra say, "Yes, I will look after both, though their mission will be to look after me. Let them get ready to follow me; let them select their favorite weapons and prepare to leave."

Dasaratha, with the look of one delivering hostages into the hand of an enemy, turned to his minister and said, "Fetch my sons."

Following the footsteps of their master like his shadows, Rama and Lakshmana went past the limits of the city and reached the Sarayu River, which bounded the capital on the north. When night fell, they rested at a wooded grove and at dawn crossed the river. When the sun came over the mountain peak, they reached a pleasant grove over which hung, like a canopy, fragrant smoke from numerous sacrificial fires. Viswamithra explained to Rama, "This is where God Shiva⁸ meditated once upon a time and reduced to ashes the god of love when he attempted to spoil his meditation. From time immemorial saints praying to Shiva come here to perform their sacrifices, and the pall of smoke you notice is from their sacrificial fires."

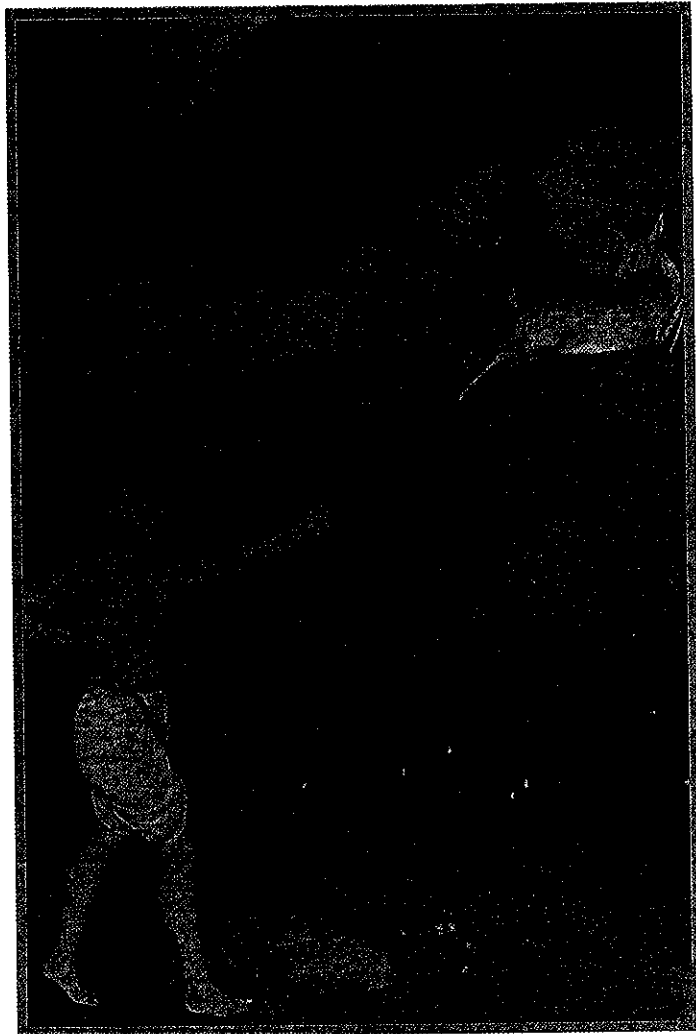
A group of hermits emerged from their seclusion, received Viswamithra, and invited him and his two disciples to stay with them for the night. Viswamithra resumed his journey at dawn and reached a desert region at midday. The mere expression "desert" hardly conveys the absolute aridity of this land. Under a relentless sun, all vegetation had dried and turned to dust, stone and rock crumbled into powdery sand, which lay in vast dunes, stretching away to the horizon. Here every inch was scorched and dry and hot beyond imagination. The ground was cracked and split, exposing enormous fissures everywhere. The distinction between dawn, noon, and evening did not exist here, as the sun seemed to stay overhead and burn the earth without moving. Bleached bones

8. **Shiva** (shē' ve) Hindu god of destruction and reproduction; along with Vishnu and Brahma, one of the three most important gods in Hinduism.



Reading Skill
Analyze Cultural Context What background information helps explain details in this paragraph?

☒ **Reading Check**
Whom does the king send to accompany Rama and Viswamithra?



▲ **Critical Viewing**
Based on this painting, what traits does Rama possess? [Infer]

Vocabulary
exuberance (eg zōō 'bər əns) *n.* good health and high spirits

Thataka's Story

The woman I speak of was the daughter of Suketha [sōō kă tā] a *yaksha*,¹⁰ a demigod of great valor, might, and purity. She was beautiful and full of wild energy. When she grew up she was married to a chieftain named Sunda. Two sons were born to them—Mareecha [mä' rē chä] and Subahu [sä bä' hōō]—who were endowed with enormous supernatural powers in addition to physical strength; and in their conceit and exuberance they laid waste their surroundings. Their father, delighted at their pranks and infected by their mood, joined in their activities. He pulled out ancient trees by their roots and flung them about, and he slaughtered all

9. **mantras** (män' trəz) *n.* sacred syllables or hymns chanted in prayer.
10. **yaksha** Sanskrit term for a good nature spirit.

lay where animals had perished, including those of monstrous serpents with jaws open in deadly thirst; into these enormous jaws had rushed (says the poet) elephants desperately seeking shade, all dead and fossilized, the serpent and the elephant alike. Heat haze rose and singed the very heavens. While traversing this ground, Viswamithra noticed the bewilderment and distress on the faces of the young men, and transmitted to them mentally two mantras⁹ (called "Bala" and "Adi-Bala"). When they meditated on and recited these incantations, the arid atmosphere was transformed for the rest of their passage and they felt as if they were wading through a cool stream with a southern summer breeze blowing in their faces. Rama, ever curious to know the country he was passing through, asked, "Why is this land so terrible? Why does it seem accursed?"

"You will learn the answer if you listen to this story—of a woman fierce, ruthless, eating and digesting all living creatures, possessing the strength of a thousand mad elephants." •

creatures that came his way. This depredation came to the notice of the great savant¹¹ Agasthya [ä gus tē yä] (the diminutive¹² saint who once, when certain demoniac beings hid themselves at the bottom of the sea and Indra appealed for his help to track them, had sipped off the waters of the ocean). Agasthya had his hermitage in this forest, and when he noticed the destruction around, he cursed the perpetrator of this deed and Sunda fell dead. When his wife learned of his death, she and her sons stormed in, roaring revenge on the saint. He met their challenge by cursing them. "Since you are destroyers of life, may you become *asuras*¹³ and dwell in the nether worlds." (Till now they had been demigods. Now they were degraded to demonhood.) The three at once underwent a transformation; their features and stature became forbidding, and their natures changed to match. The sons left to seek the company of superdemons. The mother was left alone and lives on here, breathing fire and wishing everything ill. Nothing flourishes here; only heat and sand remain. She is a scorcher. She carries a trident with spikes; a cobra entwined on her arm is her armlet. The name of this fearsome creature is Thataka [tä tä' kä]. Just as the presence of a little *loba* (meanness) dries up and disfigures a whole human personality, so does the presence of this monster turn into desert a region which was once fertile. In her restlessness she constantly harasses the hermits at their prayers; she gobbles up anything that moves and sends it down her entrails.

Touching the bow slung on his shoulder, Rama asked, "Where is she to be found?"

Before Viswamithra could answer, she arrived, the ground rocking under her feet and a storm preceding her. She loomed over them with her eyes spitting fire, her fangs bared, her lips parted revealing a cavernous mouth; and her brows twitching in rage. She raised her trident and roared, "In this my kingdom, I have crushed out the minutest womb of life and you have been sent down so that I may not remain hungry."

Rama hesitated; for all her evil, she was still a woman. How could he kill her? Reading his thoughts, Viswamithra said, "You shall not consider her a woman at all. Such a monster must receive no consideration. Her strength, ruthlessness, appearance, rule her out of that category. Formerly God Vishnu himself killed Kyathi [kyä' tē], the wife of Brigu [brē' gōō], who harbored the *asuras* fleeing his wrath, when she refused to yield them. Mandorai, [mänd rä' ē] a woman bent upon destroying all the worlds, was vanquished by

11. **savant** (se vänt') *n.* learned person.
12. **diminutive** (de min' yōō tiv) *adj.* much smaller than ordinary or average.
13. **asuras** (ä sōō' räz) in Hindu belief, group of demons at war with gods and human beings.

Literary Analysis
Epic and Epic Hero
Why is Thataka a suitable opponent for an epic hero?

Reading Skill
Analyze Cultural Context What do the details in this paragraph suggest about the place of women in Hindu culture?

☒ **Reading Check**
Why does nothing grow in the land where Thataka lives?

Vocabulary
adversaries (ad'vər ser' ēz) *n.* opponents

esoteric (es' ə ter' ik)
adj. beyond the understanding or knowledge of most people

Indra and he earned the gratitude of humanity. These are but two instances. A woman of demoniac tendencies loses all consideration to be treated as a woman. This Thataka is more dreadful than Yama, the god of death, who takes a life only when the time is ripe. But this monster, at the very scent of a living creature, craves to kill and eat. Do not picture her as a woman at all. You must rid this world of her. It is your duty."

Rama said, "I will carry out your wish."

Thataka threw her three-pronged spear at Rama. As it came flaming, Rama strung his bow and sent an arrow which broke it into fragments. Next she raised a hail of stones under which to crush her adversaries. Rama sent up his arrows, which shielded them from the attack. Finally Rama's arrow pierced her throat and ended her career; thereby also inaugurating Rama's life's mission of destroying evil and demonry in this world. The gods assembled in the sky and expressed their joy and relief and enjoined Viswamithra, "Oh, adept and master of weapons, impart without any reserve all your knowledge and powers to this lad. He is a savior." Viswamithra obeyed this injunction and taught Rama all the esoteric techniques in weaponry. Thereafter the presiding deities of various weapons, *asthras* [ās' trāz], appeared before Rama submissively and declared, "Now we are yours: command us night or day."

Critical Thinking

- Respond:** What was your reaction to the killing of Thataka? Why?
- (a) What favor does Viswamithra ask of King Dasaratha?
(b) Hypothesize: Why does he want Rama, rather than the king, to perform the favor?
- (a) List three details describing the region through which Rama, Lakshmana, and Viswamithra pass. **(b) Analyze:** How does the land seem different to Rama and Lakshmana when they use Viswamithra's mantras? **(c) Draw Conclusions:** What does this episode suggest about the sage's power?
- (a) Summarize the outcome of Rama's first battle.
(b) Interpret: This part of the epic is called "Rama's Initiation." Into what activity or way of life is he initiated?



Can anyone be a hero?

- What role does faith have in the creation of a hero?
- Identify two people in the story who had to have faith in order for Rama to succeed, and explain why that faith was important.

After You Read

Rama's Initiation from the Ramayana



Literary Analysis: Epic and Epic Hero

- (a) What is the goal of the sage's **epic** journey? (b) What is Rama's goal in accompanying the sage? (c) Compare and contrast these goals with the goals of heroes who fight for honor or glory.
- Using a chart like the one shown, give specific examples showing which qualities of an **epic hero** Rama possesses.

Noble Birth	Warrior Virtues	Acts Honorably	Chosen by the Gods or Fate

- (a) Why does Rama hesitate before fighting Thataka? (b) Does his hesitation suit the character of an epic hero? Explain.

Reading Skill: Analyze Cultural Context

- (a) List three things that you learned about Hindu **cultural context** from the features that appear before the selection.
(b) List two things you learned about Hindu culture from the selection or from the footnotes. **(c)** For each item of context you list, briefly explain how knowing that item helps you to understand the *Ramayana*. Give specific examples.

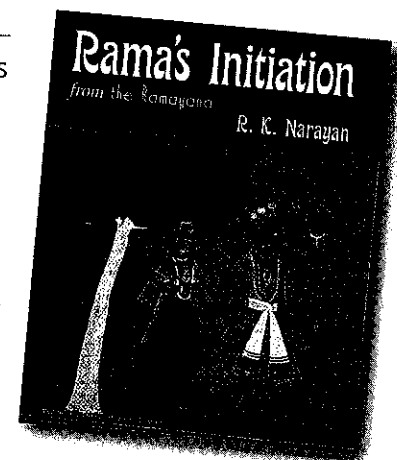
Vocabulary

Practice Write a sentence about each of the following situations by using a word from the vocabulary list for the *Ramayana* on page 1106.

- a building with peeling paint, a sagging door, and a broken fence
- a successful lawyer who is also very spiritual
- a scientist's most difficult theory
- a girl who is excited about winning a soccer game
- someone who is concerned about his opponents in an election
- a leader who leaves her political party

Word Study Use the context of the sentences and what you know about the **Latin suffix -tude** to explain your answer to each question.

- Is there a large crowd if a *multitude* of fans greet the author?
- If you like *solitude*, would you like reading in a deserted library?



Word Study

The **Latin suffix -tude** means "condition of" or "quality of."

Challenge Explain how the suffix **-tude** contributes to the meanings of these words. Consult a dictionary if necessary.

aptitude
fortitude
latitude