

# Adam of the Road Short Guide

## Adam of the Road by Elizabeth Gray Vining

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## Overview

Adam of the Road recreates the people and places of thirteenth-century England in vivid detail. The novel evokes a sense of the continuity of history, of its flow from one time to another. As Gray said in her Newbery acceptance speech, "...a sense of history helps us to understand the present and plan the future, and that on the worth and dignity of the individual human being our civilization with its conception of freedom is based."

Medieval England unfolds through the lives of characters who populate the abbey, the castle, the inn, the farmhouse, the university, and, especially, the open road. The wide variety of characters includes minstrels, preachers, peddlers, millers, plowmen, merchants, innkeepers, knights, and noblemen.

Following the adventures of a boy, his dog, and his father on the byways and highways, Adam of the Road shows the inhabitants of medieval England to be real people with many of the same problems as people of today, experiencing the same human desires for individuality, for happiness, and for freedom.

## About the Author

Elizabeth Janet Gray was born on October 6, 1902, in Philadelphia, to a Scottish father and a Quaker mother whose family had preceded William Penn to America. From both sides came a rich tradition of song and story, and Gray's writings reflect a devotion to history. She attended the Germantown Friends School and began her literary career with a story published in the *Young Churchman*. She earned two dollars for the work.

Entering Bryn Mawr College before she was seventeen, Gray completed college by the age of twenty and spent a year tutoring, writing short stories, and receiving rejection slips. She obtained a degree in library science from the Drexel Institute, but soon realized that her life's work lay in writing books.

In 1929 Gray married Morgan Vining, an administrator at the University of North Carolina, and she combined housekeeping with writing and teaching. Meggy Macintosh and Jane Hope came from her years in North Carolina, which ended with her husband's death in an automobile accident in 1933. After a brief stay in Washington, D.C., Gray returned to Philadelphia to live with her mother and her older sister. Many of her best known titles were published in the next ten years, including the Newbery Award-winning *Adam of the Road*. In 1934 Gray returned to the Quaker faith of her mother's family, joining the Society of Friends. She says that religion provided new strength and meaning for her life at a time when she desperately needed both.

During World War II, she joined the staff of the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia and spent nearly two years writing reports and articles. In 1946 the emperor of Japan sought an American Christian woman to teach English to the crown prince. Gray was appointed tutor to Crown Prince Akihito, and she lived in Japan until 1950. After her return to the U.S., Gray became a popular public speaker and resumed her writing career, recounting her time in Japan in *Windows for the Crown Prince* (1952), published under the name Elizabeth Gray Vining. Although written for adults, younger readers may also enjoy the book's insights into Japanese culture.

Gray has been awarded fourteen honorary degrees from various universities.

In addition, she has won many honors, including the New York Herald Tribune Festival award in 1945 for *Sandy*, the Third Order of the Sacred Crown from Japan in 1950, and the Women's National Books Association Skinner Award in 1954. Gray also served for many years on the board of trustees for Bryn Mawr.

She currently lives in Pennsylvania.

# Setting

The novel follows Adam's travels through England from June 1294 until April 1295. The journey begins as Adam and his father leave St. Alban's Abbey, where Adam has been attending school, and set out for Sir Edmund de Lisle's house outside London. Adam's travels take him from London to Winchester, back to London again, and on to Oxford.

The open road leads to abbeys and inns, to fairs and marketplaces, and through fields and forests.

Historically accurate, the novel's finely wrought details appeal to all five sensory perceptions and bring medieval England to life as the reader follows Adam's long, slow journey on foot. St. Giles Fair bustles with confusion and gaiety. A description of a farm includes details about crops, animals, work, and food.

The portrayal of Oxford, from its towers and spires to life at the university, even includes a student discussion of Roger Bacon, a thirteenth-century friar, scientist, and philosopher.

Seasonal changes in weather and landscape also play an important role.

In the summer, bees are busy in the thyme and a fragrant breeze blows over the hot and dusty road. Fall brings rain, cold, and fog. The days close in early, leaving long evenings for minstrel tales by a warm fireside. Winter finds Adam walking along a muddy, rutted road bordered by swollen brooks and windswept fields. The story begins and ends in spring with the voice of the cuckoo, the budding of primroses, and the sparkle of early sunshine.

## Social Sensitivity

Gray renders an honest portrait of medieval thought and opinion. Although basic human emotions may not have changed much since the Middle Ages, social attitudes have developed considerably. The changes in social outlook are particularly apparent when one considers the perspectives toward women and class conflict portrayed in *Adam of the Road*. One subplot involves the dilemma of a nobleman's daughter who is forced to marry a wealthy and powerful old knight, even though she prefers a handsome young squire who loves her. One character comments, "She's only a girl.

She's got to do what she is told." Adam expresses some dismay about the situation, but no conclusions are drawn.

Another episode reveals the disparity between the rights and the privileges of the rich and the poor. One character questions the justice of the king owning miles of land and forbidding the hungry to shoot the deer that populate his forest, while another replies that hunger does not justify stealing. Again, Gray simply presents the situation without passing explicit judgment.

## Literary Qualities

Adam of the Road exemplifies good historical fiction. Gray's talent as a storyteller lies in her ability to recreate this period of English history and give it life and color. Her hundreds of carefully chosen details express perfectly the atmosphere and flavor of thirteenth-century Britain. Although her attention to authenticity is evident, she smoothly incorporates her research into the story.

Imagery is vital to Gray's style. Details of every setting—the furnishings of an inn, the costumes in a miracle play, the hues of a village street—make the events of the novel more plausible. Gray stimulates not only the reader's visual sense but all four other senses as well with her evocations of the smell of honeysuckle and old musty houses, the sounds of street peddlers and singing birds, the taste of a fattened goose and spiced wine, and the feel of cool fresh air.

Gray's metaphors and similes also incorporate language that appeals to the reader's sensory perceptions: "gray downs hunched their shoulders," "branches spilled sunshine in patterns," and Adam's emotional discomfort "scratched his soul as haircloth scratches the body." The haircloth simile also serves as an example of Gray's diligent efforts to remain true to the novel's historical setting when relating her characters' emotions.

The episodic plot structure features a series of minor conflicts and lacks a single climactic resolution. Few surprises occur, even when Adam's dog is stolen. Despite the absence of major surprises or conflicts, Gray's skillful development of characters and setting holds the reader's interest. The tapestry of England through which Adam journeys captures the imagination and lingers long after the last page of the novel is turned.



## Themes and Characters

Adam of the Road presents a wonderful assortment of medieval characters representing occupations ranging from minstrel to pilgrim, from preacher to miller, from merchant to plowman. The main character, Adam Quartermayne, is eleven years old as the story begins. He attends school at a monastery while his minstrel father searches for new ballads in France. Adam, described as tousleheaded, snub-nosed, wide-mouthed, and square-jawed, anxiously awaits his father's return. The boy is interested in everything, and telling the story from his point of view lends freshness and excitement to the narrative.

Adam is a typical boy in many ways.

He becomes engrossed in a miracle play to the point of distraction, leading him to fall off a wall and incur a concussion.

He adores his father and his dog, Nick.

When Nick disappears, Adam undertakes a courageous search, even swimming a river in an attempt to catch the man who has stolen the dog. Adam's perceptions of people sharpen throughout the book, but he does not become cynical. Instead, he discovers that most people are kind and good.

Roger Quartermayne, Adam's father, is an extraordinary minstrel. Because of his extensive knowledge of French romances and Arthurian legend, Roger is welcomed at manor houses, where he entertains and receives extravagant gifts, such as his war horse. A caring but often absent father, Roger devotes much time to his minstrelsy. His one great weakness is his love for gambling, an obsession that ruins many a minstrel.

Minor characters that contribute to the development of plot and theme include Adam's school friend Perkin and the minstrel Jankin. The son of a plowman, Perkin attends school with the aid of a parish priest who has recognized his capabilities. Later in the novel, Adam encounters Perkin at Oxford. Something of a villain, Jankin wins Roger's war horse while gambling. When the horse goes lame, Jankin blames Roger and steals Nick out of spite. Adam's search for his dog leads him through the towns of southeast England.

The theme of Adam of the Road involves the importance of the individual.

The author demonstrates that, from generation to generation, everyone makes a contribution to the pattern of life. The same basic emotions that concern people today—love and hatred, loyalty and treachery, kindness and unkindness—concern people in thirteenth-century England as well. The past is important, historical events are important, but people are the most important of all. "A road's a holy thing," Roger says to Adam. "It brings people together."





The importance of the ability to recognize one's own talents and choose an occupation constitutes an underlying theme. Adam meets people of various trades and occupations, but he chooses to become a minstrel. Although the priest tries to make a priest of him and the farmer wants him to be a farmer, Adam chooses for himself what he wants to do with his life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. The author provides an abundance of historical information in *Adam of the Road*. How important is this historical backdrop to the novel? Do you think that it enhances the plot or detracts from it? Give examples.
2. Could Adam's story have taken place in another time and place?
3. How does Nick act as a catalyst in the story? Does the part of the plot in which Jankin steals the dog seem realistic or contrived? Why or why not?
4. Many minstrel songs and stories are included in the novel. What is the purpose of their inclusion? Is it effective?
5. What techniques does Gray use to fully portray the thirteenth century?  
  
Why is her use of details that appeal to all five senses so important? Do these details sometimes serve symbolic purposes? Give examples.
6. Is the theme of *Adam of the Road* relevant to today's world?
7. Is Adam a well-developed character in the story? Does he change and mature during the course of the year? How?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the character of Adam to the character of Jim Hawkins in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Does the narrative of *Treasure Island* reflect Jim's point of view in the same way that the narrative of *Adam of the Road* reflects Adam's perspective? Explain.

2. Compare details in *Adam of the Road* with information from nonfiction about the time period. How authentic are the novel's details?

3. The changing of seasons is a common motif in literature. Gray closely chronicles the seasonal changes as they affect the physical landscape. Do these changes have symbolic importance as well? Explain.

4. Sometimes writers of historical fiction wish to convey a subjective viewpoint about historical events or attitudes. Does Gray in any way express her own opinions about the social and political conventions she depicts, or is her treatment purely objective? Consider, for example, her portrayal of attitudes toward women and class conflict.

5. If you were to write a modern version of *Adam of the Road*, where would it take place? What occupation would Adam's father have? What occupations would some of the people Adam meets have?

Would anything be the same as the original story? Would the theme remain the same?

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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996