

Gandhi Short Guide

Gandhi by Olivia Coolidge

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Gandhi Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

A spiritual leader of India, Gandhi followed a way of life completely unfamiliar to young Americans. Even some of his fellow Indians had trouble understanding his beliefs and actions, yet he changed the lives of millions of people in his own nation and in others. Gandhi's ideas influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work for equal rights for black Americans. Coolidge's biography helps young people understand why Gandhi's followers called him "Mahatma," or "great soul," and analyzes both the motivations and tactics behind his pursuit of freedom and brotherhood for all.

About the Author

Born in London, England, on October 16, 1908, Olivia Ensor Coolidge grew up in Buckinghamshire, where she was educated at the Wycombe Abbey School. She later attended Somerville College, Oxford, and received bachelor's and master's degrees. She has taught the classics and English in Great Britain, Continental Europe, and America, and has served on the board of trustees of Mills College of Education in New York. A naturalized U.S. citizen, she is married and has four children.

Coolidge began writing as a child. After World War II, she started publishing books for young readers. Most of her work addresses political and historical themes or retells classical mythology.

She has chronicled the lives of Abraham Lincoln, Tom Paine, Winston Churchill, and Gandhi. She has also written about modern political developments, including the rise of communism in Russia and the early years of the American women's rights movement. Coolidge's only fictional work, *Come by Here*, recounts the difficulties of a young orphan black girl growing up in early twentieth-century Baltimore.

Setting

Coolidge's biography follows Gandhi from the small seaport town of Porbandar, where he was born in 1869, to London and South Africa of the early twentieth century, and through the eras of the two world wars. During much of this time, India was still a colony of Great Britain. The book ends with Gandhi's assassination in 1948 as India adjusts to gradual liberation from its colonial past and to tension between its two major religious groups, Moslems and Hindus.

In the portion of the book delineating Gandhi's early life, the author sets the stage for his political and spiritual ideals, showing how they develop from his experiences. She covers Gandhi's years in South Africa, where he personally experiences racial prejudice and decides to fight back with nonviolent resistance. Coolidge not only gives the facts about his life but places Gandhi's achievements in historical context.

Gandhi's work is contrasted with that of other leaders who fight for India's liberation in more conventional ways.



Social Sensitivity

Coolidge's biography will disappoint those who expect a glorification of Gandhi's philosophy of passive resistance or a recounting of a saintly life.

Coolidge explains the basis for Gandhi's distinctive movement of satyagraha, but she devotes little space to the development or intricacies of his philosophy.

She admires Gandhi's principles yet discusses her serious reservations about the practical application of nonviolence in a violent world. The biography addresses the plight of the untouchables and the rigidity of the caste system, as well as the unequal position of women as exemplified by the long-standing Indian tradition of suttee, whereby a woman was killed following her husband's death. While touching upon the social inequalities that roused Gandhi to action, the text centers on a political analysis of India's fight for independence and of the turbulent relationship between Muslims and Hindus that led to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan.

Literary Qualities

Like all credible biographies, Gandhi is dedicated to presenting a balanced portrait of its subject. Many biographies emphasize personalities and do not adequately analyze the world in which the subject operated. Coolidge, however, acknowledges that Gandhi was a unique and fascinating man, but concentrates on the growth of his movement in the context of contemporary political events, particularly India's struggle for independence from Britain and for harmony among diverse religious groups. Of course, Coolidge does not altogether neglect Gandhi the man: anecdotes shed light on his complex personality, and succinct yet colorful descriptions of his friends and foes liven the text.



Themes and Characters

Gandhi is born into India's trader caste (hereditary social class). His conservative father works as an official for the British government, first as chief minister of the small town of Porbandar and later as chief minister of Rajkot State, while his mother performs the traditional duties of a Hindu wife. Although Gandhi describes himself as very timid and easily frightened, even as a teen-ager he tries to be strong and more courageous, aspiring to live a heroic life.

The time Gandhi spends studying in England proves vital to his philosophy.

He reads a sacred Hindu text, the Bhagavad-Gita, that emphasizes the importance of finding and executing one's duty in life, no matter what the cost.

Furthermore, although he remains a Hindu, Gandhi attends British churches and is influenced by Christianity's message of equality and love for the poor.

The turning point in Gandhi's life occurs in South Africa, where non-whites are not allowed to travel first-class, when a railroad official refuses to honor his ticket. Once Gandhi experiences the third-class status of Indians in South Africa, he dedicates himself to working for equality. Here, Gandhi serves his first jail term in an effort to achieve racial equality and organizes others to protest, developing his doctrine of satyagraha or "soul force," nonviolent resistance to achieve political and social equality.

Coolidge devotes the remainder of the book to Gandhi's attempts to win Indian independence, raise the standard of living for the poor, and achieve equality for every caste and both sexes. One of the biography's larger themes is whether nonviolent protest against political and social injustice is a practical means of achieving change in an often violent world. In several episodes, violence erupts in the course of nonviolent demonstrations, such as the bloodshed in Amritsar that follows the general strike (or hartal) Gandhi has called to protest the Rowlett Act. A similarly violent incident occurs in the village of Chauri Chaura when a peaceful nationalist procession turns into a fierce battle between demonstrators and police.

Throughout his life and after his death, many people honored Gandhi by calling him "Mahatma" or "Bapu" ("The Father of His Country"). For Coolidge, however, it is important to remember Gandhi as a good but imperfect human being. Capable of heroic acts of self-sacrifice, he fasts almost to the point of death and goes to prison to win freedom for others. He asserts that love and forgiveness are the most important qualities a person can possess. But in his personal relationships, Gandhi often fails to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Gandhi's relationships with his wife and children are problematic. Despite his interest in women's rights and his claim of great love for his wife Kasturba, Gandhi ends their life together as husband and wife by taking a vow of lifelong celibacy. In many ways, Kasturba plays the role of a traditional Hindu wife, staying in the background of her husband's life and submitting to his authority, even going to prison for his cause and reluctantly accepting an "untouchable"



child into their communal village. Furthermore, Gandhi experiences friction with his sons. Although he dedicates his energy to undoing the caste system, he forbids one of his sons to marry a woman of the Brahmin caste. A complete breakdown occurs in Gandhi's relationship with his son Harilal, who makes a highly publicized conversion from the Hindu faith to Islam.

Sometimes uncompromising, Gandhi tends to enter into discussions with others confident that they will adopt his own opinions, not ready himself to come to terms with ideas different from his own. Although an avowed pacifist, Gandhi occasionally erupts into anger or exhibits arrogance. He dedicates his life to liberation for all, yet takes the attention of his followers—to the most menial aspects of caring for him—quite for granted. When his niece Manubehn misplaces a special stone used to scrape the dirt off his feet during a long walking campaign to restore peace to India, he flies into a rage and sends the terrified girl into the jungle to find it. Gandhi remains strangely insensitive to her fears, insisting upon her safe return that he would have been even happier if she had met death courageously at the hand of an enemy.

Although Coolidge insists on reminding the reader that Gandhi is a human being with his own problems and character flaws to overcome, she does not dismiss his worth as a great leader and an inspiration to others. For Coolidge, Gandhi's life exemplifies the best qualities of a religious leader, statesman, economist, patriot, revolutionary, doctor, and social reformer. The author's attitude is clear in the biography's introduction: "We shall not look upon his like again. Humanity is far richer for having produced him, richer in spiritual values and in wide diversity, richer through demonstration of how great man can be and how much he can accomplish."



Topics for Discussion

1. Although Gandhi supported equal rights for women, his wife Kasturbai was a traditional and submissive Hindu wife.

Should Gandhi have tried harder to practice what he preached about the need for women's liberation?

2. When he heard that Nazi Germany threatened to invade England during World War II, Gandhi suggested that the British lay down their arms and surrender. He asserted that the British could keep their ideals even if they gave up their lands and possessions. Do you think this would have worked? What would have been the outcome of such a decision?

3. Gandhi's ideals have been admired by people throughout the world. Why are people still attracted to his life and teachings? Can they help us to solve the problems of the world today?

4. Why did Gandhi decide to give up many of the habits he acquired in England, such as wearing European dress? How did this affect his influence on Indian citizens?

5. Although an inspiration to many of his fellow Indians, Gandhi chose not to become a politician. Would he have had a greater impact on the future of India if he had chosen to lead a political party and work within the government?

6. Could Gandhi's ideas help solve the problems of your school, your family, or your neighborhood? How?

7. What was more important, the ideas that Gandhi taught or the example he set by the way he lived his own life? In Gandhi's case, can one separate the two?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research some of the problems India faces today. Compare them with the problems of Gandhi's India. Discuss progress India has made in facing these problems and solving them, the difficulties that remain from Gandhi's time, and the social, political and economic developments that have occurred since his death.
2. Two great spiritual figures of twentieth-century India have been Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a Roman Catholic nun. Compare and contrast their spiritual influence, philosophies, and programs of social action.
3. Mahatma Gandhi was a great inspiration for American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Compare the men's motivations, tactics, and influence.
4. Many national leaders have disagreed with Gandhi's nonviolent methods. Compare Gandhi's teachings and strategies for social change with those of a political figure who did not subscribe to nonviolence. What was the outcome of the other leader's tactics?
5. Discuss apartheid in South Africa today in relationship to apartheid as Gandhi experienced it. Are Gandhi's methods the right ones for dealing with the current situation in South Africa?

For Further Reference

Fischer, Louis. *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World*. New York: New American Library, 1954. The work of foreign correspondent who knew Gandhi well and visited with him from 1942 to 1946, Fischer's writings inspired the popular film *Gandhi* (1982).

Gold, Gerald, and Richard Attenborough. *Gandhi: A Pictorial Biography*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1983. The director of the film *Gandhi*, Attenborough traces Gandhi's life with over 150 photographs selected from the Indian archives. The photos are accompanied by text.

Shirer, William. *Gandhi: A Memoir*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1979.

Geared toward secondary school students with sophisticated vocabularies, this anecdotal account describes the author's experiences with Gandhi, treating the religious leader with reverence yet admitting his faults.



Related Titles/Adaptations

Olivia Coolidge has written several books on important political movements, dealing with those who struggled to change the political conditions of their times. The Statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln can serve as the source of several interesting points of comparison between the strife of America during the Civil War years and India's turmoil approaching the day of liberation from colonial rule. Reading Coolidge's biography of one of Gandhi's adversaries, Winston Churchill and the Story of Two Wars, provides another perspective on Anglo-Indian relations. Readers of Gandhi might also be interested in reading Coolidge's Tom Paine, Revolutionary; Women's Rights: The Suffrage Movement in America; and Makers of the Red Revolution.

Readers looking for a complement to Coolidge's biography will be interested in the 1982 film Gandhi, based on the writings of Louis Fischer. This 3-hour, 20-minute production won eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor.

Some of the chronology of Gandhi's life was altered for dramatic effect, but the film painstakingly chronicles the leader's life and works. Focusing largely on the spiritual side of the man, the film lacks an in-depth portrayal of Gandhi's relationships with his son and wife. The film stars Ben Kingsley, an actor who bears a striking resemblance to Gandhi.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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