

# Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon Short Guide

## Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon by Dhan Gopal Mukerji

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## Overview

Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon is an adventure tale that indirectly urges the reader to confront the destruction of war, the sources of human and animal suffering, and the dangers of commercialism. These issues surface naturally through the interaction of the characters. Although the story is simply written, the vocabulary is challenging, and Mukerji presents his book from varying perspectives. The story has three narrators: an Indian boy who raises and cares for pigeons; Ghond, a holy man who is a shrewd observer of nature; and Gay-Neck, a prized, quick-witted pigeon.

The young boy tells about the birth of Gay-Neck and describes how the pigeon grows up, learns to fly, and develops his talent for finding his way home, no matter how far he strays. The holy man teaches the boy about the habits of birds and beasts, the reactions of these creatures to humans, and the names of plants. He instills in the young boy a respect for nature and describes how nature is important for individual growth. The boy asks many questions about birds and animals, which the holy man patiently answers. Together they undertake a pilgrimage to visit the lamas, or priests, of the Himalayas.

Ghond believes that individuals are strengthened by periods of time in the wild, when they are able to recover skills of observation that atrophy in city and village life, and that they must seek out solitude to heal their troubled spirits.

The pigeon's viewpoint, when he later describes carrying messages for the Indian soldiers, is fascinating and introduces concerns very different from those of the human narrators.

## About the Author

Dhan Gopal Mukerji was born July 6, 1890, the last of eight children in a village near Calcutta. Many of his jungle tales come from his childhood in this village, and his thorough knowledge of Indian philosophy and Hindu religious practices comes from his being a member of a Brahmin family. Although he attended Indian schools, he attributes much of his education to his mother, who told him many of the stories that he later collected in *Hindu Fables: For Little Children*.

In 1904 Mukerji served as a Hindu priest for a year. That experience showed him that there were other ways more suitable for him to live. In 1909 at the age nineteen he went to Japan to study engineering. He then moved to the United States and attended the University of California at Berkeley from 1910 to 1913 and Stanford University in 1914. He remained in America for the rest of his life, marrying Ethel Ray Dugan, a teacher, in 1918, with whom he had one child. Mukerji lectured and authored books for adults and children.

In addition, he often told stories to the children at his son's school.

Throughout his life Mukerji felt that a writer of children's books should expound a certain moral stance. One of his difficulties in writing was finding a voice suitable for expressing the stories of India to young Americans. He sought a folk voice, richer in metaphor and less direct than the American vernacular.

His poetic prose is a result of these efforts, and it won him the Newbery Award in 1927 for *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*. Tragically, Mukerji committed suicide in New York in 1936.

## Setting

The action of this story moves from the teeming streets of Calcutta, to the dark world of the jungle, to the stark beauty of the Himalayan Mountains, and to the fields of France at the time of World War I. The reader learns of street life in Calcutta, the daily habits and customs of the people, and how every young boy raises pigeons on the roof of his house and trains them for sport. With the introduction of Ghond, the reader is carried into the jungle, where the birds and animals provide a new education for the young boy. The reader is exposed to the harsh realities of war in France, where the Indian soldiers are fighting for the British army. Finally, the characters return to the sanctuary of the Himalayan Mountains, where they find wisdom and spiritual healing.



## Social Sensitivity

Perhaps India's reputation as a culture permeated by religion is not completely deserved. Still, there is a vast difference between American beliefs and the religious attitudes of this country where the recognized religious heritage is so ancient and complex. The reader is confronted with the many cultural differences of India and their effects on the people. For example, at one point it is explained that Hindus cremate their dead, while Muslims bury them. As a result, there are Muslim cemeteries to commemorate their participation in the war, but for the Hindus there are no such memorials. Mukerji explains that for the Hindus "no place is marked or burdened with their memory."

# Literary Qualities

Gay-Neck is an adventure story told as a series of interconnected episodes. The reader must put all the episodes together in order to understand the complexities of the characters and their individual growth. Mukerji's prose is uncluttered, yet richly descriptive. The book begs to be read aloud and discussed. Readers will benefit from comparing incidents in their own lives to incidents in the book.



## Themes and Characters

The main character of the book is the boy who owns Gay-Neck and lives in Calcutta as a member of the upper caste. This boy is the loving caretaker of Gay-Neck, and he patiently trains the bird to fly long distances and return home. The boy's friend, Radja, a sixteen year-old Brahmin priest, accompanies him on his adventures but plays a secondary role. Ghond, the old holy man and a teacher of jungle lore, is the main guide in the story, helping the boy interpret events and learn more about pigeons, nature, life, and the spirit.

Ghond is not without human weakness, however, and this becomes clear when he must struggle to overcome the fear that has paralyzed him.

Gay-Neck is trained to carry messages for the army, and he relates his adventures in the war zone with descriptive flair. For example, he describes being taken to the front and charged with carrying an important message, but the weather has turned bad: It was very cold. I felt as if I were living in a kingdom of ice. It rained all the time. The ground was so foul that every time you stepped on it your feet got caught in mud like quicksand, and your feet felt so cold, as if you had stepped on a corpse.

As he flies over the battlefield far below, he describes the flight of rockets and the bursting of shells. He flies into what he thinks is a thick fog only to discover that it is a poison gas that threatens to blind him. He survives only to be attacked by a "machine-eagle," an airplane. His companion bird is shot from the sky, but Gay-Neck gets through with his message to "save the day." But as he remarks, because of the thunder of guns and rising smoke, "there was no day in sight."

Throughout the book, Mukerji stresses the importance of loyalty to duty and one's friends. He praises the strengthening virtues of solitude, the importance of the spiritual life, and the need for every individual to find meaning in life. Simple human values of sincerity, honesty, and curiosity are reflected in the relationships of the characters. Also stressed are the importance of learning about nature, the beauty that can fill a relationship between human and animal, and the intricacies of human behavior.

Above all, the reader comes to admire Gay-Neck's courageous determination to overcome every obstacle to complete his mission.





## Topics for Discussion

1. In part one, chapter 5, the mindreading lama says, "He who allows himself to be frightened lets himself be killed." Perhaps this is true also for people who are afraid not simply of wild animals and beasts but of other things such as failure, embarrassment, and shame. When are you afraid? How does that fear allow you to be killed in some way?

2. Mukerji talks a lot about fear. The lama says that in order to heal a bird of fear not only must your thoughts be pure, but also your dreams must not be marked by fear. What thoughts of yours are fearful? What things do you do because of fear? How can you change your thoughts and your deeds?

3. Look at a map of South Asia. Where is India? Where are the Himalayas?

Point to Calcutta and Darjeeling. Our friends in Gay-Neck travel as far as Sikkim—where is Sikkim? They see birds going to Ceylon—where is Ceylon and what is it now called? In part one, chapter 8, we learn about Tibeto-Burman fishermen. Where is Tibet? Burma? Discuss the terrain and weather of these places.

4. In part one, chapter 8, Gay-Neck explains that pigeon "women enjoy equal rights with men, but the female swift has always the large part of the work to do." Do women have equal rights as men in our society? Explain. There is a lot of work to be done in our society—work for which we are paid and work for which we are not. Hour for hour, women work more than men in our society. How do you see this in your life and society?

5. Ghond doesn't like cars and says, "This [city] frightens me with its . . .

how-aghari [wind chariot]—the automobile." How is traveling by automobile harmful to our environment? Studies have been done that indicate that cities would be much more pleasant and a lot less fuel would be used if people bicycled to destinations that are less than five miles away from where they live. For the people bicycling, what would be the advantages of doing this? What changes would most people have to make in how they did things?

6. Read the last paragraph of part two, chapter 3, aloud. Discuss how fear, worry, and hate work together to make situations worse. What relationships in our society are hurt by fear, worry, and hate?

7. "In solitude men gain power and poise that they must test in the multitude." What does this mean? When are you in solitude? What powers do you gain in solitude? List some things gained by periods of solitude.



8. Reread the last paragraph in the book. Often everyday courage, the courage to try new things, to greet enemies as friends, to risk failing in order to learn, is the greatest courage. Without losing your humility, list some courageous things you've done this week.

9. What birds can you recognize by sight? By call? How would you go about learning how to recognize different birds? What questions would you ask about their lives?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. While reading this book, write down all the phrases and words you don't know. Write new sentences using these phrases so that you can know what they mean and practice using them. How many of these phrases are distinctly Indian?
2. Read more about India. How far is Calcutta from Darjeeling? Are the Himalayas new or old mountains? Are they taller than the mountains in America? Who lives in the Himalayas and how do they spend their time?
3. Mukerji writes "Heights like that of Everest are symbols of the highest reality—God." People of many religions associate natural phenomena with the worship of God or gods. How is this true of religious groups in America? Give specific examples.
4. In part one, chapter 4, Mukerji compares the whirling and falling of snowclouds to the dancing of "fanatical dervishes." What is a "dervish"? Why do they dance? Ask five adults what a "whirling dervish" is. How correct are their answers? Summarize the results of your research in a report.
5. Read more about pigeons. What would you need if you wanted to keep pigeons? Are carrier pigeons still popular? Who uses them?
6. Throughout the book we learn about different kinds of birds. Begin to notice birds so that by the end of the week you have spotted five different kinds of birds.  
  
What sorts of things must you notice to identify different birds? How are the birds different from each other? Why are some of them difficult to differentiate?  
  
Do the birds you found stay in your area all through the year? What sort of nests do they build?
7. Write a paragraph about something you fear. How does your fear turn into worry and hate? How do these feelings make your life worse? Using advice found in this book, describe how can you lessen your fear, worry, and hate?
8. In part two, chapter 4, we begin to learn about war from a pigeon's perspective. Write about the difference between this perspective and a human one.
9. Read more about World War I. When did it take place? What peoples were involved? Why were Indians involved?
10. Write a report about carrier pigeons. How would you use such a pigeon if you had one of your own?
11. In part two, chapter 8, Ghond explains that he needs to be healed of fear and hate—he needs to be healed of a disease that he got by seeing war. He goes to the lamasery to be healed by prayer and meditation. Who in our society has this same disease? How

do they seek to be healed? What does the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D. C. have to do with this disease?

## For Further Reference

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Martin's, 1978. A brief sketch of Mukerji and his works.

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## Related Titles/Adaptations

Mukerji has published two other books which relate to Gay-Neck in theme. Kari the Elephant follows a boy growing up with an elephant and their adventures in the Jungle. Hari the Jungle Lad allows the reader to live vicariously in the jungle and learn the habits of the native animals. A filmstrip, entitled "Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon," was released by Miller-Brody in 1973.



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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