

Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice Short Guide

Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice by Cornelia Lynde Meigs

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Contents

Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice is an inspiring collection of anecdotes emphasizing the private side of one of America's best known reformers.

The life of Jane Addams, the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, illustrates the importance of one individual's efforts to improve the living conditions of many people. In Meigs's biography, Addams becomes a vivid example of the influence that can be achieved through courage, perseverance, personal integrity, and respect for others regardless of social status. Not only is this book an interesting historical narrative, but it carefully reminds the reader of unsuitable urban living and working conditions in the past as it traces the development of social attitudes that are now taken for granted.

About the Author

Cornelia Lynde Meigs, the daughter of Montgomery and Grace Lynde Meigs, was born on December 6, 1884, in Rock Island, Illinois. As a member of a large family, she learned to tell stories by listening to her father and an older sister, then retelling the stories to the only family member younger than she.

Most of Meigs's childhood was spent in Keokuk, Iowa, where her father was in charge of engineering projects on the Mississippi River. The family spent the summers in New England, the original home of Meigs's parents' families.

In 1907 Meigs graduated from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, and from 1912 to 1913 taught English at St.

Katharine's School in Davenport, Iowa.

In 1932 she returned to Bryn Mawr to teach, remaining there until 1950. Her career as a scholar culminated with the publication of her *Critical History of Children's Literature* (1953). From 1942 to 1945, she also worked for the U.S.

War Department.

Meigs received a number of awards, beginning with the Drama League Prize in 1915. In 1927 she won the Beacon Hill Bookshelf Prize for *The Trade Wind*, and in 1938 her short story "Fox and Geese" was the Child Life prize story.

Three of her novels—*The Windy Hill*, *Clearing Weather*, and *Swift Rivers*—were named Newbery Honor Books.

Two other novels, *The Covered Bridge* and *Call of the Mountain*, were selected for Horn Book magazine's Fanfare List.

In 1934 Meigs was awarded the Newbery Medal for her biography of Louisa May Alcott, *Invincible Louisa*. In 1967 she received an honorary doctor of humanities degree from Piano University, Texas, and in 1971, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Jane Addams Award.

Meigs owned a Vermont farm, "Green Pastures," and Vermont was the setting for several of her books, including *The Covered Bridge* and *Call of the Mountain*.

She died on September 10, 1973, in Harford County, Maryland.

Setting

Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice begins with the arrival of Jane's parents in Rockford, Illinois, and describes Jane's childhood at Cedarville, Illinois, and education at Rockford Female Seminary. Most of the action takes place in Chicago, between the time Addams opened the settlement community called Hull House on September 14, 1889, and her death on May 21, 1935. The narrative emphasizes Addams's work with the poor of the Halsted Street neighborhood.



Social Sensitivity

Meigs describes Jane Addams as a woman ahead of her time, someone whose ideas were controversial throughout most of her own lifetime but began to gain acceptance during the 1930s and had been vindicated by 1970. She points out Addams's influence on Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration and on modern social theory. Meigs discusses several of the controversies involving Addams but presents Addams as a victim of public hysteria, greedy businessmen, corrupt politicians, and a malicious press. In short, Meigs idealizes Addams and so minimizes her role in creating opposition. Nevertheless, the biography itself is unlikely to be controversial now.

The few of Addams's opponents it mentions by name are not discussed in detail and most are presented as victims of pride or misguided ideas. Moreover, most of the issues considered controversial at the turn of the century arouse little emotion today.

Clearly Meigs admires Addams, comparing her attitudes with those of her father's friend, Abraham Lincoln. Meigs shares Addams's belief in the importance of a "useful" life, one spent providing social services that people need and want. Further, like Addams, Meigs stresses the worth and dignity of each individual, repeatedly emphasizing the idea that those the settlement served were "clients" rather than recipients of charity. According to Meigs, Hull House gradually developed to serve the people of the neighborhood and only incidentally became a force in social reform and in the training of social workers.

Meigs also emphasizes Addams's personal integrity. For example, Addams was extremely offended when offered contributions in exchange for dropping her interest in social reform. Her reaction was a mixture of indignation and sorrow that anyone would think she might compromise her principles. She sometimes lacked tact in dealing with such cases, at least once embarrassing a Hull House supporter who had arranged a much needed contribution.

Addams's sense of integrity often led to "rebellious protest against routine conventions," such as her challenge of the "alderman system" of patronage and graft in Chicago. After she attempted, unsuccessfully, to defeat John Power, alderman for the Hull House ward, Addams realized that reforms could not come until the people were ready. She had, however, won the respect of Alderman Power, who offered to provide any help Hull House needed. Meigs emphatically points out, though, that Addams's integrity would not allow her to accept assistance from Power.

Throughout her life, as Meigs observes, Addams had a "tendency to support unpopular causes." For example, named to the Citizens' Arbitration Committee in the Pullman strike of 1893, she sided with the trade unions. The Chicago newspapers called her a "dangerous liberal," and George Pullman, an early friend of Hull House, withdrew his support, becoming a lifelong enemy.



Addams's insistence upon fair treatment for anarchists proved even more controversial. In one case, she secured legal representation for the sister of an unarmed anarchist shot by a policeman.

Again, after the assassination of President William McKinley, she was asked to check on the welfare of an anarchist newspaper editor arrested by the Chicago police. Although she obtained Mayor Carter Harrison's permission for the visit, and the editor was eventually exonerated, Addams was denounced.

One of Addams's allies in the fight to improve factory working conditions, Illinois governor John Altgeld, became one of the most hated men in the state when he pardoned three men imprisoned for participation in the Haymarket Riot of 1886. A few years later, when Altgeld died, Addams was one of only three people who dared to speak at his funeral. Again she was accused of sympathizing with anarchists, and this time Hull House lost the support of Mrs. Potter Palmer, a wealthy Chicago matron.

Addams's lifelong advocacy of pacifism also rendered her unpopular at times.

Nevertheless, her principles made her an influential political figure. Theodore Roosevelt vehemently denounced her book *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), but he also claimed that Addams was the most convincing argument in favor of women's suffrage, and at the Progressive party convention (1912), he asked her to second his nomination for president.

She remained active throughout that election campaign, and in the election of 1916, when both parties sought her support, she publicly endorsed Woodrow Wilson, considering him the peace candidate. Her consistent opposition to American involvement in World War I brought her great praise while the United States remained neutral but great vilification after America entered the war. Addams then aroused even more public resentment by raising money to help Herbert Hoover and the Relief Commission end famine in postwar Germany.



Literary Qualities

The work of an excellent storyteller, Jane Addams: Pioneer for Social Justice is a collection of vivid and detailed episodes. The people Meigs portrays come alive through their actions, and Meigs skillfully chooses incidents that both catch the reader's attention and illustrate a point about Addams's life or attitudes. But the author's style of recounting each episode in its entirety sometimes blurs the narrative's time sequence, and the story occasionally seems to move in a chain of overlapping circles. Likewise, the author's sympathy for Addams and her philosophy adds a sense of enthusiasm to the narrative, but at times Meigs seems to be trying a little too hard to persuade her readers to adopt Addams's philosophy.



Themes and Characters

In this biography, Meigs stresses the importance of living a useful life. To achieve this goal, Addams follows her own principles, which frequently conflict with conventional ideas about women's behavior. Meigs points out the courage and determination that enable Addams to meet the opposition of wellmeaning family and friends, as well as those hostile to her ideas.

Another theme is the development of personal integrity. Meigs demonstrates that, for Addams, ethical principles always take priority over her personal interests. As a young girl, Addams resists social pressure to become a church member and the wife of a missionary, and later she withstands the financial pressures exerted by Hull House supporters who want her to modify her stands on reform issues.

Meigs reminds the reader how much one determined person can do to help others. Addams's enthusiasm and respect for all individuals draw many talented people to Hull House to work and provide support; her dedication to her principles inspires them to continue their struggle and eventually to succeed.

For Meigs, Addams's life illustrates the importance of respecting and attempting to understand each individual.

When Jane Addams tries to impose her ideas upon the community, she fails, but when she responds to the needs expressed by her clients, she usually succeeds.

Addams overcomes physical ailments, social conventions, and a sense of inferiority to become one of America's best-known social reformers. Appalled by the poverty she sees in cities, she decides to live among the poor in order to help them. Her courage, personal integrity, and sense of justice involve her in many unpopular causes and temporarily cost her public support, but eventually her wisdom is recognized and she is honored.

Addams's family significantly influences her career. Her father, John Huy Addams, participates in the abolitionists' Underground Railroad, and he has a reputation as the only Illinois legislator never offered a bribe. Jane deeply admires her father, attempting to imitate him not only in character but even in reading habits. Jane's mother, Sarah Weber Addams, dies when Jane is young, but Jane is always aware of her reputation for helping others. Anna Haldeman Addams, Jane's stepmother, is a more conventional nineteenth-century woman, but she encourages the development of Jane's intellectual interests and her love of beauty. George Haldeman, Jane's stepbrother, helps to stimulate her imagination and her love of nature.

Jane Addams's associates at Hull House are also important characters.

Ellen Gates Starr, her friend at Rockford Seminary, becomes the first person with whom Addams shares her idea of founding a settlement house, and Meigs acknowledges that



without Starr's enthusiasm, Addams may not have successfully established Hull House. Also important in maintaining Hull House are Mary Rozet Smith and Louise DeKoven Bowen, whose financial contributions keep the settlement open, while their public support attracts additional workers and contributors. Meigs also describes the work of individual reformers such as Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, Dr. Alice Hamilton, Dr.

Grace Meigs, and the Abbott sisters, Grace and Edith.

Well-known public figures that appear in the biography include John Altgeld, the reform governor of Illinois who consistently supports Addams's programs, and Theodore Roosevelt, who, though well-intentioned, sometimes disagrees with Addams. Meigs describes his unsuccessful presidential campaign of 1912 as being in almost complete accord with Addams's philosophy and programs. Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Eleanor Roosevelt are mentioned briefly and favorably.

Meigs also portrays Addams's opponents. John Power, a Chicago alderman and ward boss, exploits the Halsted Street residents, and Addams comes to realize that he very cleverly provides just enough of the needed services to keep the voters content. George Pullman and Mrs. Potter Palmer are early supporters of Hull House, but Addams's stands on social issues alienate them.



Topics for Discussion

1. Meigs describes Addams's early life in rural Cedarville, Illinois, and contrasts it with her adult life at Hull House in Chicago. How does the change in Addams's environment reflect the changes in American living conditions during her lifetime? Was this change easy for the country or for Addams?

What programs at Hull House reflect her own childhood interests?

2. At times the people of Chicago revere Addams, but at other times they regard her as a public enemy. Which of her actions result in each of these attitudes?

To what extent is public opinion influenced by factors beyond her control?

3. Addams's theory of social work involves living among her "clients" and expanding programs to meet their needs. Discuss subsequent activists who follow her method.

4. Addams frequently maintains her own convictions when receiving advice from people whom she respected. For example, she struggles with her conscience when Miss Anna Sills pressures her to become a church member and again when Leo Tolstoy advises that she do some useful physical work each day.

How do these struggles help prepare her for other ethical decisions she faces?

5. Addams greatly admires her father, John Huy Addams. In what ways does his example influence her to devote her life to the work at Hull House?

6. Sometimes Addams challenges the traditions of her "clients," and she is not always successful. For example, she is defeated when she tries to unseat Alderman John Power and change the system of ward politics in Chicago. Why is she unable to win this battle? What does she learn from the loss?

7. At one point, the Halsted Street community insists that Hull House is harboring the "Devil Baby." What are the various versions of the story? How does Addams explain the prevalence of these accounts? How does she provide a significant bridge between the generations, especially in immigrant families?

8. Perhaps Addams's greatest skill is her ability to attract dedicated and talented people to work with her at Hull House. Who are some of these people?

What attracts them to Hull House?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Addams and her associates at Hull House actively opposed the exploitation of children in American factories, and eventually child labor laws were passed.

What were the conditions for child workers in the factories of the 1890s, and what attempts were made to change these conditions? When was child labor outlawed?

2. Addams was profoundly influenced by the establishment of the first settlement house, Toynbee Hall, in London's East End. Who was Toynbee, and who established Toynbee Hall? What is the history of that settlement house?

3. Addams met many public leaders, but the one she seems to have admired most was Governor John Altgeld of Illinois. Trace Altgeld's public career.

Why did he become unpopular?

4. Addams opposed the system of political ward bosses in Chicago, but she was unable to change it. Research more recent Chicago mayors and describe the ward system after Jane Addams's time.

You might want to compare this system with that of the Tammany Hall political bosses in New York.

5. Addams became unpopular because of her association with the anarchists tried for starting the 1886 riot at Haymarket Square. Research and describe the riot and the subsequent trials.

6. Many of Addams's associates were influential in changing social conditions in America. Describe the career of one of those associates, such as Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, Dr. Alice Hamilton, or Dr. Grace Meigs.

7. In 1912 Addams helped to write the platform of the Progressive party and supported Theodore Roosevelt's presidential bid. What were the major points of that platform? Why did Roosevelt lose?

8. Addams's book *Democracy and Social Ethics* explains her philosophy of client-centered social work. What are the major points of that philosophy?

What evidence does Addams offer to support her ideas?



For Further Reference

Addams, Jane. *Forty Years at HullHouse*. New York: Macmillan, 1935.

Issued shortly after Addams's death, this work combines into one volume the two volumes of Addams's famous autobiography: *Twenty Years at HullHouse* (1910) and *Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1929). The work contains personal reminiscences and recounts Addams's experiences involving the settlement house and social issues.

Carpenter, Humphrey and Mari Prichard. "Meigs, Cornelia Lynde." In *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. A brief biographical entry.

Davis, Allen F. *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

An "intellectual biography" that attempts to "explore the legend of Jane Addams, but also to relate the legend to the facts of her life and to show how the two became intertwined."

Jane Addams. *Famous Women of America Series*. Chicago: Society for Visual Education, 1974. The Singer Education Division produced this filmstrip, record, and teacher's manual with vocabulary exercises, review and discussion questions, and suggestions for enrichment activities.

Told from the point of view of Ellen Starr, the text presents "the transformation of Jane Addams's childhood dream into the reality of the Hull Mansion settlement house."

Judson, Clara Ingram. *City Neighbor: The Story of Jane Addams*. New York: Scribner's, 1951. An account of significant episodes in Jane Addams's life, emphasizing the development of her character and philosophy.

Lasch, Christopher, ed. *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. A chronology and collection of Addams's writings on social issues.

Levine, Daniel. *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. An account of Addams's life and career, developing the thesis that she was "an important moving force" in America's twentiethcentury social reform.

Linn, James Weber. *Jane Addams: A Biography*. 1935. Reprint. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968. Written by Addams's nephew and literary executor, this is based on Addams's personal and family records.

Related Titles

Meigs demonstrated her interest in biography with her prize-winning biography of Louisa May Alcott, *Invincible Louisa*. Meigs also wrote a critical work about Alcott for adult readers, *Louisa May Alcott and the American Family Story* (1971), and edited a collection of Alcott's short stories, *Glimpses of Louisa: A Centennial Sampling of the Best Short Stories by Louisa May Alcott*.

Meigs's books about social history include *Young Americans: How History Looked to Them While It Was in the Making* (1936) and, for adult readers, *The Violent Men: A Study of Human Relations in the First American Congress* (1949) and *The Great Design: Men and Events in the United Nations from 1945 to 1963* (1963).



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