

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CLASSIC AND MODERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Course Description

American Autobiography traces the evolving sense of self, community, and nationhood in a nation characterized by convergences and encounters, including geographical, cultural, psychological, and philosophical.

About the Professor

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Classic and Modern Autobiography: A Course for Readers and Writers

Autobiography is one of the most popular kinds of writing. Readers go to it seeking true stories that provide inspiration, entertainment, and insight into their own lives. It also seems easy to write. What could be easier than telling one's own story? We do it every day.

But it is not easy. The word autobiography is made up of the Greek words *auto*, "self"; *bios*, "life"; and *graphos*, "writing"; and each can be very problematic. What is the self? Is it public or private? Constant or changing? Noble and altruistic, or mean and cruel? Likewise, what is a life? Is it a career, a "professional life," or is it something shaped and dominated by one or more great events – an "adventurous life," a "love life," a "life in art," a "spiritual life"? The writer of an autobiography is also limited. He or she doesn't personally know the beginning and end of his or her life and cannot possibly tell everything. Like any writer, the autobiographer must be selective and hopes to tell an compelling, engaging story. What will be the tone and style? Who will be the audience?

The difficulty and complexity of these questions make autobiography all the more interesting, however. They have faced all autobiographers, and seeing how they have been answered or dealt with makes the reading of autobiography, both classic and modern, all the more rewarding. Although the word "autobiography" was coined only around 1800, the genre is actually much older. The book that is generally recognized as the first great western autobiography is *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. St. Augustine (354-430) was born in North Africa, and the *Confessions* are the story of his sins, his searching for truth, and his conversion to Christianity. It is also his way of praising the power and wisdom of the Christian God who watched over and saved him, and so it is addressed to Him. Written in Latin, the international language of the time, it became the model for countless Christian life stories and even for many other stories of searching, discovery, and conversion.

The Florentine goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini (1500-71) told a very different story. Although nominally a Christian, he did not tell of his sins and conversion. He bragged of his great achievements, actions, and the people he knew and worked with. "All men of whatsoever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence," he began the book, "ought, if they are persons of truth and honesty, to describe their life with their own hand." It is thus a rich description of life in sixteenth-century Florence, Rome, and other cities and also an image of a new kind of self – the proud and worldly Renaissance man.

The third classic autobiography we will sample in this course is *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, published after his death in 1778. Rousseau too confesses his sins, but in an entirely different manner from Augustine. "I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator," he began. "I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself." He is not ashamed of his many bad actions, selfishness, and irresponsibility, believing them simply facts of nature or the fault of others. Therefore his *Confessions* can be called the first of all the modern "tell all" autobiographies by actors, criminals, addicts, and disgraced politicians. But his greater goal of presenting and defending "the natural man" makes Rousseau philosophically more profound. He has had many imitators but no equal.

A work with even more imitators is *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Franklin's story of leaving Boston and arriving almost penniless in Philadelphia, to work his way up as a printer and then inventor, scientist, civic do-gooder and improver, and skillful diplomat is the archetype of American success stories. Thus it

has had millions of admirers, but also some detractors, who dislike Franklin's moral smugness. Sins, to Franklin, are merely "errata." But where Rousseau, his very different contemporary, attempted to strip away all veils and present "a man in all the truth of nature" Franklin poses himself and puts on masks. When he began his "memoirs," as he called them, in 1771, he addressed them, "Dear Son," and wrote as if to a boy or young man, although in fact William Franklin was about 40 years old and royal governor of Pennsylvania. There are also very significant differences between the Franklin of the three parts of his story: the first written in England, before the Revolution; the second outside Paris in 1784, where he had sometimes played at being the Rousseauistic natural man as philosopher; and the third in 1788 in Philadelphia, where he was again an earnest American projector of good works.

In the Nineteenth Century autobiography became much more common and still more diverse. It was in many ways the ideal medium for a century that championed individualism, freedom, revolution, the love of nature, new theories of education, miraculous inventions, wide-spread travel, and great exploration and discovery, both physical and mental. The list of major nineteenth-century autobiographers is so long that it is very difficult to make a selection. We have, therefore, suggested many other titles to accompany each work. But the ones chosen here are broadly representative.

Thomas De Quincey's *Memoirs of an English Opium Eater* (1822) is an autobiography that makes no attempt to tell the whole story of the author's life. Though it describes a little of his early years, its focus is on just one defining subject. He started taking opium / laudanum to relieve pain and nervousness, which was then a common practice, but took larger and larger doses, until he began to have elaborate and fantastic dreams and became addicted. After eight years, he recognized the danger to his life, and began to reduce his doses, finally conquering the habit. It is a powerful story that is still relevant to modern stories of addiction and recovery, and like many of them, a story which for better or worse became the metaphor for the life. Although De Quincey was a successful magazine writer who wrote many other books and essays, including *Autobiographic Sketches* (1834-53), it is the *Confessions* that brought him fame and the opium experience for which he is mainly remembered.

Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is the classic of nineteenth-century nature writing. But the disciplined observation of nature, along with his reading and his experiments in economy and dedication to self-sufficiency led to the development of a more profound self and a renewed, richer life. He lived in his cabin at Walden Pond barely more than two years, condensing them into one for the purpose of the book. He also wrote many more kinds of autobiography: his multi-volume *Journal*, personal essays, letters, and travel books. But *Walden* is the book that best defines him, because in its experiences and in the painstaking process of the writing itself, he can be said to have virtually named and invented himself. In "The American Scholar" his mentor Emerson declared that the new, original American must learn from nature, the past, and action. Thoreau fulfilled and exceeded that Transcendental program.

Just as remarkable, although in very different ways, is *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*, published in 1873, after his death. Mill's father was James Mill, the famous British Utilitarian, who started to teach him Greek and Latin and arithmetic at a very early age. ("I have no remembrance of the time when I began to learn Greek. I have been told that it was when I was three years old.") This most rigorous of "home schooling," as we would call it, made the young Mill fiercely disciplined and a prodigious young editor and writer, devoted to political and economic reform. He wrote his first "argumentative essay" in 1822, when he was just sixteen. But he soon burned out, realizing that even if all the reforms he wanted succeeded, he would still not be happy. From this despair he was rescued by discovering

Wordsworth's poetry, which awakened his senses and love of nature, and by his love of Harriet Taylor. Although known today as the great exponent of Liberal Individualism and an early advocate of the rights of women, Mill's autobiography is his greatest book. Writing as his own historian, he also wrote a condensed intellectual history of the Nineteenth Century.

But the 19th Century was also a century of slavery, oppression, and the imprisonment of its revolutionaries. One result in America was the rise of the slave narrative, an ex-slave's account of slavery, its cruelty and effects, and his or her escape. There were hundreds of such narratives, some dictated to abolitionists, some written by ex-slaves themselves, and ranging from magazine articles to books. Of these, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) is the most famous. It is a vivid, compelling account not only of a slave's experience but of the psychological consequences to him and other slaves and to white men and women. In telling how he overcame these, he includes how he learned to read and write, which became essential to his escape and to his later self-development as an anti-slavery writer and speaker. Autobiography for Douglass was both story of liberation and act of liberation.

The partner of the slave narrative is the prison narrative, of which Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead* (1861-2) is a provocative example. In 1849, age twenty-eight, Dostoevsky was condemned to death for participating in a liberal discussion group which was suspected to be revolutionary. The death sentence, he later learned, had been intended simply to scare him and other revolutionaries, and he was sent instead to hard labor in Siberia. The book is the fictionalized account of Dostoevsky's experience, written as the memoir of an upper-class gentleman, like himself, who must survive not only the harshness of prison conditions but also the suspicions of the other prisoners, who are mostly peasants. The result is a realistic account of an utterly different world, both to the narrator and to modern readers, and a story of the narrator's means of survival and surprising transformation. It bears interesting similarities of Herman Melville's fictionalized versions of his captivity by Marquessan natives in *Typee* and by French colonial authorities in *Omoo*. It also looks ahead to the autobiographical writing of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and many other prison authors.

The Education of Henry Adams is another great intellectual autobiography, but at once more pessimistic than John Stuart Mill's and more enigmatic and artful. By writing it in the third-person, Adams is able to cast himself in many different roles: an "eighteenth-century man," a naïve student, "the private secretary" (to his father, while ambassador in England during the Civil War), a "student of power" and "pilgrim to World's Fairs," a seeker of order, a worshipper of the Virgin – to name just some. Though he ultimately calls himself "a failure" (in an America that worships "success"), these roles enable him to make the *Education* an amazing account of Adams' world.

The feminist movements of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries produced many women's autobiographies. Previously it had been considered immodest for women to write and publish books about themselves, and so their autobiographies had been mainly spiritual narratives or travel narratives and letters. The first full-length autobiography by an American woman writer did not appear until Lydia Sigourney's very genteel *Letters of Life* (1866). *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1925) is a much more daring book. Gilman had a respectable New England ancestry – her great-grandfather was the distinguished Congregational minister Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe – but her own father had deserted her mother, leaving her and her mother and a brother destitute. Her mother tried to harden her against similar rejections, and Charlotte had, she says, an "uncuddled childhood." Instead she had one of hard work, self-denial, and physical exercise. A

crisis came after her marriage and the birth of her first child, when she suffered from what doctors called “nervous prostration” and was advised to “live as domestic a life as possible.” She only got worse, and her eventual rebellion led to her becoming a new kind of woman, whose life and “*Living*” have been an inspiration to many contemporary women, who rediscovered it in the 1990s.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) is a brilliant use of autobiography to present and account for one’s own personal uniqueness, one’s true self. As a black American woman, she was often criticized for not thinking and acting as most of her contemporaries expected. But “you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from,” she says, “in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life. I was born in a Negro town.” That town, Eatonville, Florida, was incorporated and self-governing – her father was a three-term mayor – and she grew up with great pride in independent Negro speech, style, and culture, which she began absorbing while overhearing the stories told on the front porch of the local store. Her later work as an anthropologist, after studying with the great Franz Boas, deepened her respect for black culture, particularly as expressed in speech and stories, and the autobiography proves it in every incident and idiom.

The last book to be read is James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), his first collection of essays. What makes it so interesting and instructive today is the way Baldwin drew on his own experience in carefully selected ways in order to challenge and overthrow expectations. Such expectations, based on stereotypes that infected almost every corner of the black and white American mind, were barriers to Baldwin personally, as he showed in every essay, and to racial progress and understanding nationally, as he also showed. Such intense, provocative combining of the personal and the cultural is the essence of the great autobiographical essay.

In the middle and at the end of the course, students will be asked to write short autobiographies of their own imitating two or more of the writers above. “My Confession,” for example, might be a story like Augustine’s of stealing pears when a boy, a De Quincey-esque story of an addiction of some kind; a religious or secular conversion; or a Rousseauistic confession of a dispute and falling out with a friend. Another essay might be a story of education and self-development such as Franklin’s, Cellini’s, Mill’s, or Douglass’s. Or it could be a more ironic, failed education, like Adams’s, an education that turns out to be an un-learning. (The muckraker Lincoln Steffens called his *Education* “a life of un-learning.”) Still other archetypes – and ways of looking at autobiography – are the processes of self-creation, self-invention, and self-advertisement that occur in them. (Norman Mailer titled the book that signaled his re-invention of himself as critic, writer of non-fiction, and all-around public figure *Advertisements for Myself*.) Two more possibilities – not the last – are a version of prison narrative or of escape and self-liberation, in imitation of Douglass, Gilman, Dostoevsky, or De Quincey.

These imitations should be between 1500 and 3,000 words each. They could be trials or starts on longer autobiographies if somebody wants. But their primary purposes are as reviews of the course and demonstrations of what a student has learned about the important genres of autobiography and the inter-relationships of self, life, and story.

Syllabus

Week 1:

Text: *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book 2, Book 3, chs. 1-3, 6, 11-12; Book 8, Book 9, chs. 8-13; Book 10, chs. 8-25.

Supplementary: *The Book of Margery Kempe*; Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*.

Questions: Compare Augustine's story of stealing pears with the story in Genesis of Adam and Eve eating the apple.

Compare Monica and the Biblical Mary.

How would the *Confessions* be different if it were not addressed to God but to, say, the Manicheans, Monica, or readers in general?

Week 2:

Text: *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, trans. By John Addington Symonds, Book 1 Online at: www.gutenberg.org/etext/4028

Supplementary: Castiglione, *The Courtier* (1528)

Rathfon Post, online essay: <http://www.bartleby.com/60/153>

Questions: Cellini's autobiography is frequently criticized for the author's extravagant boasting. But this is also what makes it so colorful. Illustrate by examining his exploits during the siege of Rome, chs. 34-37.

Cellini keeps saying that his intention is to write about his art. Why does he digress so much? Is he really more proud of his daring-do and code of honor than of his art?

Contrast Castiglione's ideal of *spretzatura* and Cellini's *braggadocio*.

Week 3:

Text: *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Books 1, 8, 10. Online at: <http://www.onlineliterature.com/rousseau/confessions-of-rousseau>

Supplementary: D.G. Wright, "Rousseau's Confessions: The Tragedy of Teleology," online at: <http://www.yorku.jspot/4/rousseau.html>

Questions: Compare Rousseau's and Cellini's egos.

Rousseau's *Confessions* are sometimes described as self-psych-analysis. Does he really arrive at the truth about himself or simply self-pity and self-deception?

Week 4:

Text: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Supplementary: Essays in J.A. Leo Lemay & P.M. Zall (eds.), *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, W.W. Norton & Co.

"Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge." Online at: <http://www.shawnee.cc.il.us/libbyr/lit216/ashbridge.html>

Questions: Compare Franklin's self with Cellini's or Rousseau's.

Elizabeth Ashbridge and Franklin were contemporaries, but their lives were very different. Contrast her reasons for writing an autobiography and his.

Try to define Franklin's "self." Is it public or private? Rational or irrational?

Week 5:

Text: Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Online at: <http://books.google.com/books?id=tbM0AAAAMAAJ&dq=de+quincey+confessions+of+an+opium+eater&printsec>

Supplementary: The article in Wikipedia is a good overview of the issues in the *Confessions*: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessions_of_an_English_Opium-Eater

Questions: Does De Quincey make the use of opium so attractive, despite what he says about its ill effects, that readers might be drawn into using it?

Is addiction a prison? Does it limit the development of a self?

Week 6:

Text: H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*.

Supplementary: R.W. Emerson, "The American Scholar." Online at: <http://books.google.com/books?id=njYxIsZRmqMC&dq=emerson+the+american+scholar>

Questions: How does Thoreau learn from nature, the past, and action?

Walden is about only two years in Thoreau's life. Is it autobiography?

Thoreau calls Walden Pond "the earth's eye, looking into which the viewer discovers the depth of his own nature." Describe some of the ways he uses, identifies with, and learns from the Pond.

Week 7: First Paper

Write a chapter or incident in your own autobiography in the manner of one of the autobiographers you have read in the preceding six weeks (Augustine, Cellini, Rousseau, Franklin, De Quincey, or Thoreau). It should be between 1500 and 2500 words and imitate the model closely in as many ways as possible – in style, choice of audience, sense of self, etc. Since it is from your own life, the material obviously cannot be identical. If you are describing a conversion, for example, it need not be a religious conversion like Augustine's. Indeed, you may want to parody the original. The goal is to get into the mind and manner of the writer, in this way showing how well you have read and understood him and in the process learning more about him. A second goal of this assignment is to gain appreciation of these writers' stories as archetypes – conversion narratives, stories of education and self-development, confessions of different kinds, self-advertisement, addiction, and self-analysis.

Readers who do not wish to write on this topic may instead compare two of the autobiographies assigned above.

Week 8:

Text: *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*. Online at:
<http://www.utilitarianism.com/millauto/>

Supplementary: William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"
Jack Stillinger, "Introduction," to *Mill's Autobiography and Other Writings*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston: 1969.

Questions: Thomas Carlyle called Mill's *Autobiography* "the autobiography of a steam engine." What do you think he meant by this, and is it a fair description? Why did Wordsworth's Intimations Ode have such an impact on Mill? Broadly speaking, the *Autobiography* attempts to reconcile reason and emotion, thought and feeling. Is the structure of the conversion narrative, like Augustine's *Confessions*, the best vehicle for this?

Week 9:

Text: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Online at:
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/11.html>

Supplementary: Wikipedia entry on "Frederick Douglass." Online at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass

Questions: Show how and why learning to read and write was so important to Douglass.
Another crucial point in the *Narrative* is the fight with Covey, the slave breaker. Is it more important than Douglass' learning to read and write?

Week 10:

Text: Dostoevsky, *House of the Dead*, Penguin Classics ed., with introduction by David McDuff.

Supplementary: See the introduction by Ronald Hingley in this online edition:
<http://books.google.com/books?id=IndovhgtLhYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=house+of+the+dead+%2B+ronald+hingley>

Questions: *House of the Dead* is generally called an autobiographical novel. What are its novelistic features? If you did not have external information about it, such as knowledge of Dostoevski's life, would you think it was a novel or an autobiography? Using the *House of the Dead* as your example, would you rather read an autobiography or a novel? How is the author changed by the prison experience?

Week 11:

Text: *The Education of Henry Adams*, chs. 1-3, 19-22, 25, 32-33.
Online at: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HADAMS/eha01.html>

Supplementary: John Carlos Rowe (ed.), *New Essays on the Education of Henry Adams*. Cambridge Univ. Press. Online at:

http://books.google.com/books?id=9UT5_nsFbOgC&dq=education+of+henry+adams+review&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=Ey5_SrPIDoawMIWfgecC&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=12#v=onepage&q=&f=false

Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night*. New American Library, 1968.

Questions: Why does Adams write in the 3rd person? What is the effect?
How is Adams' education different from John Stuart Mill's? Which book do you like better? Why?
Is the "Henry Adams" character wiser or less wise than the author? How and what end does the author manipulate him?

Week 12:

Text: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of...* Harper Colophon Books, 1975.

Online:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=07UujUOZnUIC&printsec=frontcover#PPA24,M2>

Supplementary: Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*
Gilman, *The Yellow Wall Paper*. Online:

<http://gilman.thefreelibrary.com/Yellow-Wallpaper>

Questions: Compare Gilman's account of her depression after the birth of her child with the account in her novel, *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

One of the reasons people like some autobiographies is that they find them inspirational. How is Gilman's *Living* an inspiration to women today?

Week 13:

Text: Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, with intro. By Maya Angelou. Harper Perennial Edition, 1991.

Supplementary: Wikipedia entry on Hurston. Online:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora_Neale_Hurston

Maya Angelou's introduction.

Questions: Describe some of the ways in which Hurston is and is not definable by race.

Select five of Hurston's colloquial idioms such as "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick," tell what they mean, and tell why you like them.

Week 14:

Text: James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*. Dial Press.

Supplementary: Online: <http://www.enotes.com/notes-native>

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*.

Questions: How does Baldwin differentiate himself from other black American writers and why?

Why does Baldwin write essays and not a single, book-length autobiography?
Compare Baldwin and Frederick Douglass or Richard Wright.

Week 15: Final Paper

Write another chapter from your own life, following the directions from the paper for Week 7, but this time in the manner of one of the authors read since then (Mill, Douglass, Dostoevsky, Adams, Gilman, Hurston, or Baldwin).

Or: Write a comparison of two of these autobiographies.

Selected Historical and Critical Works (not listed with weekly assignments)

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of African-American Autobiography*. U. of Illinois P., 1986.

Eakin, John Paul. *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Cornell U.P., 1999.

Franklin, H. Bruce. *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*. L. Hill, 1978.

LeJeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin. Translated by Katherine Leary. U. of Minnesota P., 1989.

Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton U.P., 1972.

Olney, James (ed.) *Studies in Autobiography*. Oxford U.P., 1988. Has essays on slave narratives, De Quincey, Adams, and women's a/b.

Pascal, Roy. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Harvard U.P., 1960.

Sayre, Robert. *The Examined Self...* Princeton U.P., 1964; U. of Wisconsin P., 1988 (with new introduction). Chapters on Franklin and Adams.

Shea, Daniel B. *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*. U. of Wisconsin P., 1988.

Smith, Sidonie. *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. U. of Minnesota P., 1996.

Smith, Sidonie; and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. U. of Minnesota P., 2001. A comprehensive survey of the issues in writing and reading a/b.