

Study of Prose: Autobiography

=====

A Background of Autobiography

An **autobiography** (Greek, *autos* self + *bios* life + *graphein* to write) is a written account of the life of a person written by that person. In other words, it is the story that a person wrote about himself. It is an account of a person's life written or otherwise recorded by that person. More specifically, autobiography as a literary genre signifies a retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the author's own life. While autobiography on the one hand claims to be non-fictional (factual) in that it proposes to tell the story of a 'real' person, it is inevitably constructive, or imaginative, in nature. It is a 1st-person subsequent narration told from the point of view of the present. Comprehensive and continuous retrospection, based on memory, makes up its governing structural.

Its origins ultimately date back to antiquity with Augustine's *Confessions* ([398–98] 1961). It is considered as a prominent ancient landmark in the genre of autobiography.

Autobiography is a peculiar genre, which purports to be both literature and history but is not entirely one or the other. As James Olney has observed, once upon a time autobiography was "a kind of stepchild of history and literature, with neither of those disciplines granting it full recognition". The marginalization of the genre began to end with the appearance of Georges Gusdorf's seminal 1956 essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," and scholarly interest in the subject has scarcely abated since. Most of the impetus behind the field of autobiography studies has emanated from literary critics. Few students of autobiography have been interested in what the genre can reveal to us about a knowable past. Conversely, although historians have continuously utilized memoirs as historical source material, they have done so without the benefit of a coherent theoretical framework, treating autobiography as if it were just another primary source.

The word "**autobiography**" in English literature was first used by William Taylor in 1797 in the English periodical the Monthly Review, when he suggested the word as a hybrid, but condemned it as "pedantic". However, its next recorded use was in its present sense, by Robert Southey in 1809. Nonetheless, autobiography as a form goes back to Antiquity. Biographers generally rely on a wide variety of documents and viewpoints, whereas autobiography may be based entirely on the writer's memory. Closely associated with autobiography (and sometimes hard to distinguish from it) is the memoir form.

In ancient times such works were typically entitled apologia, purporting to be self-justification rather than self-documentation. John Henry Newman's autobiography (first published in 1864) is entitled Apologia Pro Vita Sua in reference to this tradition.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus introduces his autobiography (*Josephi Vita*, c. 99) with self-praise, which is followed by a justification of his actions as a Jewish rebel commander of Galilee.

Augustine (354–430) applied the title Confessions to his autobiographical work, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau used the same title in the 18th century, initiating the chain of confessional and sometimes racy and highly self-critical, autobiographies of the Romantic era and beyond.

The earliest known autobiography in English is the early 15th-century [*Book of Margery Kempe*](#), describing among other things [Kempe's](#) pilgrimage to the [Holy Land](#) and visit to [Rome](#). The book remained in manuscript and was not published until 1936.

Notable English autobiographies of the 17th century include those of [Lord Herbert of Cherbury](#) (1643, published 1764) and [John Bunyan](#) (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 1666).

Characteristics of autobiography

- Autobiography is the story that a person wrote about himself.
- It is an account of the person's life written or otherwise recorded by that person.
- While autobiography is non-fictional but tells the story of a 'real' person.
- It is inevitably constructive, or imaginative, in nature.
- It is a 1st-person subsequent narration told from the point of view of the present.
- Autobiographical works are by nature subjective. The inability—or unwillingness—of the author to accurately recall memories has in certain cases resulted in misleading or incorrect information.
- Autobiography is a peculiar genre, which purports to be both literature and history but is not entirely one or the other.
- Some sociologists and psychologists have noted that autobiography offers the author the ability to recreate history. However, historians say that these autobiographies are unreliable as historical evidences.

Well-known Literary Autobiographies

Notable 18th-century autobiographies in English include those of [Edward Gibbon](#) and [Benjamin Franklin](#). Following the trend of [Romanticism](#) a more intimate form of autobiography, exploring the subject's emotions, came into fashion. For example is [William Hazlitt's](#) *Liber Amoris* (1823), a painful examination of the writer's love-life.

With the rise of education, cheap newspapers and cheap printing, modern concepts of fame and celebrity began to develop. It became the expectation that those in the public eye should write about themselves. Writers such as [Charles Dickens](#) and [Anthony Trollope](#), but also politicians (e.g. [Henry Brooks Adams](#)), philosophers (e.g. [John Stuart Mill](#)), churchmen such as [Cardinal Newman](#), and entertainers such as [P. T. Barnum](#) introduced autobiographical elements in their works. Increasingly, in accordance with romantic taste, these accounts also began to deal, amongst other topics, with aspects of childhood and upbringing.

In the modern time, following autobiographies became famous:

Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler, *An Autobiography* by Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi, *Wings of Fire* by APJ Abdul Kalam, *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, *Dreams from My Father* by Barrack Obama, *Samidha* in Marathi by Sadhana Amte and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

Autobiography as a literary form has become an increasingly popular and widely accessible form today. [A Fortunate Life](#) by [Albert Facey](#) (1979) has become an Australian literary classic. With the critical and

commercial success in the United States of such memoirs as [*Angela's Ashes*](#) and [*The Color of Water*](#), more and more people have been encouraged to try their hand at this genre.

The term "*fictional autobiography*" signifies novels about a fictional character written as though the character were writing their own autobiography, meaning that the character is the first-person narrator and that the novel addresses both internal and external experiences of the character. [Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*](#) is an early example. [Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*](#) is another such classic, and [J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*](#) is a well-known modern example of fictional autobiography. [Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*](#) is yet another example of fictional autobiography, as noted on the front page of the original version. The term may also apply to works of fiction purporting to be autobiographies of real characters, e.g., [Robert Nye's *Memoirs of Lord Byron*](#).

Memoirs

A memoir is slightly different in character from an autobiography. While an autobiography typically focuses on the "life and times" of the writer, a memoir has a narrower, more intimate focus on his or her own memories, feelings and emotions. Memoirs have often been written by politicians or military leaders as a way to record and publish an account of their public exploits.

One early example is that of [Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*](#), also known as *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*. In the work, Caesar describes the battles that took place during the nine years that he spent fighting local armies in the [Gallic Wars](#). His second memoir, [Commentarii de Bello Civili](#) (or *Commentary on the Civil War*) is an account of the events that took place between 49 and 48 BC in [the civil war](#) against [Gnaeus Pompeius](#) and the [Senate](#).
