

Literature Institute

Study Guide

LIT 524 **Autobiography**

UNIT/ WEEKS AUTHOR	WORK	INTRODUCTION
I	Early Autobiography (to 1500 AD)	
	Autobiography	<p>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.</p> <p>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 a compelling, engaging story. What will be the tone and style? Who will be the audience?</p> <p>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.</p>
1-2	Medieval Autobiography Spiritual Autobiography	
Augustine	<i>The Confessions</i>	<p>The book that is generally recognized as the first great western autobiography is St. Augustine’s <i>The Confessions of St. Augustine</i>. 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.</p>
	<i>Essays</i>	<p>E1. Compare Augustine’s story of stealing pears with the story in Genesis of Adam and Eve eating the apple.</p> <p>E2. Compare Monica and the Biblical Mary.</p> <p>E3. How would the Confessions be different if it were not addressed to God</p>

but to, say, the Manicheans, Monica, or readers in general?

II

Early Modern Autobiography (1500-1800 A.D.)

3-4

Renaissance
Autobiography

Cellini

***The
Autobiography of
Benvenuto Cellini***

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.

Essays

E1. 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.

E2. 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?

E3. Contrast Castiglione's ideal of sprezzatura and Cellini's braggadocio.

5-6

Enlightenment
Autobiography

Franklin

***The
Autobiography of
Benjamin Franklin***

A work with even more imitators is Benjamin **Franklin's** *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.

Essays

E1. Compare Franklin's self with Cellini's or Rousseau's.

E2. Elizabeth Ashbridge and Franklin were contemporaries, but their lives were very different. Contrast her reasons for writing an autobiography and his.

E3. Try to define Franklin's "self." Is it public or private? Rational or irrational?

Rousseau

***The Confessions
of Jean Jacques
Rousseau***

The third classic autobiography we will sample in this course is Jean-Jacques **Rousseau's** *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.

Essays

E1. Compare Rousseau’s and Cellini’s egos.

E2. Rousseau’s Confessions are sometimes described as self-psycho-analysis. Does he really arrive at the truth about himself or simply self-pity and self-deception?

III

Modern Autobiography (1800 A.D. to Present)

7-8

19th-Century
Autobiography

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.

Thoreau

Walden

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.

Essays

E1. How does Thoreau learn from nature, the past, and action?

E2. *Walden* is about only two years in Thoreau’s life. Is it autobiography?

E3. 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.

Slave Narratives

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.

Douglass

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Of the slave accounts, Frederick **Douglass’s *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.

Essays

E1. Show how and why learning to read and write was so important to Douglass.

E2. 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?

Prison Narrative

Dostoevsky ***House of the Dead*** 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.

Essays

E1. *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 Dostoevsky'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?

E2. How is the author changed by the prison experience?

De Quincey ***Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*** 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.

Essays

E1. 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?

E2. Is addiction a prison? Does it limit the development of a self?

Mill ***The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*** Just as remarkable, although in very different ways, is John Stuart **Mill's *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.
	<i>Essays</i>	<p>E1. Thomas Carlyle called Mill's <i>Autobiography</i> "the autobiography of a steam engine." What do you think he meant by this, and is it a fair description?</p> <p>E2. Why did Wordsworth's <i>Intimations Ode</i> have such an impact on Mill?</p> <p>E3. Broadly speaking, the <i>Autobiography</i> attempts to reconcile reason and emotion, thought and feeling. Is the structure of the conversion narrative, like Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>, the best vehicle for this?</p>
9-10	20 th -Century Autobiography	
Adams	<i>The Education of Henry Adams</i>	Henry Adams' <i>The Education of Henry Adams</i> 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 <i>Education</i> an amazing account of Adams' world.
	<i>Essays</i>	<p>E1. Why does Adams write in the 3rd person? What is the effect?</p> <p>E2. How is Adams' education different from John Stuart Mill's? Which book do you like better? Why?</p> <p>E3. Is the "Henry Adams" character wiser or less wise than the author? How and what end does the author manipulate him?</p>
	Women's Autobiography	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 <i>Letters of Life</i> (1866).
Gilman	<i>The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman</i>	Charlotte Perkins Gilman's <i>The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman</i> (1925) is a 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 " <i>Living</i> " have been an inspiration to many contemporary women, who rediscovered it in the 1990s.
	<i>Essays</i>	<p>E1. Compare Gilman's account of her depression after the birth of her child with the account in her novel, <i>The Yellow Wallpaper</i>.</p> <p>E2. One of the reasons people like some autobiographies is that they find them inspirational. How is Gilman's <i>Living</i> an inspiration to women today?</p>
	Ethnic Autobiography	

Hurston	<i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i>	Zora Neale Hurston's <i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> (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.
	<i>Essays</i>	<p>E1. Describe some of the ways in which Hurston is and is not definable by race.</p> <p>E2. 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.</p>
Baldwin	<i>Notes of a Native Son</i>	The last book in this section to be read is James Baldwin's <i>Notes of a Native Son</i> (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.
	Essay	<p>E1. How does Baldwin differentiate himself from other black American writers and why?</p> <p>E2. Why does Baldwin write essays and not a single, book-length autobiography?</p> <p>E3. Compare Baldwin and Frederick Douglass or Richard Wright.</p>

IV Non-Western Autobiography

Non-Western Autobiography

Autobiography was originally a European kind of writing. Although generally understood to have begun with the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, a North African, it later developed and flourished within the Euro-American traditions of religious conversion, of Renaissance individualism and adventure, and of romantic introspection, down to the many modern stories of everything from slavery, imprisonment and escape to self-help and success. The older civilizations and traditional cultures of Asia, Africa, and pre-Columbian America had many other kinds of literature – oral and written – which, while often celebrating the achievements and teachings of their heroes and religious leaders, still did not include the self-discovery and self-celebration that are basic to autobiography.

What the Indian historian K.C. Yadav said of India might have been said of many other countries and cultures:

Autobiographical writing in India is basically a product of modern times. In the olden times a general notion had persisted amongst Indians that self-portraiture was *ashistata* (bad manners). The popularity of this belief probably accounts for the complacent indifference to the composition of auto-biographical writings during the medieval period when some of the rulers, under the influence of the Central Asian tradition, encouraged this form of writing.

But this is no longer so. As Yadav went on to say, during the nineteenth century, a number of Indians, though mainly "the elite" who had been "influenced by Western ideas, tried their hand at [writing autobiography]." That too applies to many other countries, because as we will see in this course, significant, engaging and powerful autobiographies have now been written by men and women from China, Indonesia, Africa, and South America, as well as India. Autobiography today is no longer just a European and North American kind of writing.

Under what influences from the West have these non-Western attitudes changed? Was it only the elite who wrote? Or have there been other autobiographers who were not elite? Why did they write and for whom?

These are the questions to keep in mind while reading the books in this course. Coming from India, China, Japan, Africa, and South America, our non-Western authors represent many different cultures and backgrounds and tell many different stories. But the authors also have some things in common.

Perhaps the most important is that all of these non-Western countries and continents were at some time colonized or conquered by Western nations. India was colonized by the British; Sukarno's Indonesia by the Dutch; Chile, Peru, and Guatemala by the Spanish; and large parts of China and Africa invaded and colonized by these and various other European and American powers. All these authors were therefore at one time colonial people, "colonials," as the Euro-Americans called them. This is not strictly true in the case of the two Japanese authors, because Japan was not conquered until after World War II. But European and American influences were strong before then and both Osugai Sakae (1885-1923), a Japanese anarchist, and Kappa Senoh, author of the autobiographical novel *A Boy Called H*, felt it.

Western colonization and cultural colonization were, therefore, the means by which Western influence entered these countries. For with the armies and administrators came missionaries, schools, colleges, a legal system, and books and publishers, and it must have been through them that people became aware of Western autobiographical writing. Nirad Chaudhuri writes in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* that he "cannot remember any time when I learned, just as I cannot remember the time when I did not know, the names of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Napoleon, Shakespeare, and Raphael." Later he became equally familiar with "Milton, Burke, Warren Hastings" and a long list of other famous English, European, and American "personalities." Next he became familiar with their lives and writings, leading surely, although he does not say, to familiarity with their biographies and autobiographies.

Hajime Senoh, "the boy called H," received his Western education initially from American movies, which he loved so much that he sneaked into theaters that he was forbidden to enter, and from songs like "Dinah," "My Blue Heaven," "Old Black Joe," "Home on the Range," and "Aloha Oe" that continued to be sung even during the War, until finally banned by the government. The son of a tailor, H was definitely not of the elite, and he does not mention any American autobiographers, but he nevertheless eventually became aware of the autobiographical novel as a form in which to tell the story of his early life.

Being drawn to European and American culture did not necessarily mean being drawn to Euro-American colonization, however. Most of these writers opposed it. But the forms of their opposition vary enormously, from Gandhi's and Nelson Mandela's campaigns of non-violent resistance to Pandurang Khankhoje's participation in the founding of the Ghadar Party, which was dedicated to a military overthrow of the British Raj. All of these resistance leaders have fascinating stories to tell. Gandhi's and Mandela's books have been best-sellers. But their stories are as different as their personalities and as the nature of the regimes they opposed. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum of power, are Phyllis Ntantala, author of *A*

Life's Mosaic, and Camara Laye, author of *The Dark Child*, who did not lead in the conflicts of cultures but were caught in them. In Chile, Peru, and Guatemala, where Spanish occupation ended over a century ago and contemporary colonization has taken the form of exploitation by outside corporations and wealthy land-owners, opposition has also taken different forms, resulting in stories like Pablo Neruda's, Maria Elena Moyano's, and Rigoberta Menchu's.

Part of what is so intriguing about these autobiographies, therefore, is the fact that the writers have, paradoxically, taken a kind of writing that was unique to their colonizers and turned it to their needs as colonials and opponents of colonization. Simply said, they have turned their opponents' weapons against them. And yet it is not as simple as that, because they have also been personally changed by their struggles, changed history, and in the process changed autobiography itself – its content, its form, and its audience. And now we, whether from the Western world or Non-Western world, can all learn from it and enjoy it.

11

Indian
Autobiography

Gandhi

***Autobiography:
The Story of My
Experiments with
Truth***

Gandhi's Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth is the most famous Indian autobiography, worldwide, both because he was clearly the most famous Indian of his time and because his philosophy of Satyagraha, "firmness in truth" or "truth force," was so powerful in the attainment of Indian independence and so widely admired and adapted to other struggles around the world, notably by Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Martin Luther King in the United States.

But famous as it is, Gandhi's autobiography is sometimes difficult to read. He began it in 1925. By then, as Erik Erikson wrote in *Gandhi's Truth*, he had "led the first national civil disobedience in history," had gone to jail, and been released before the expiration of the sentence because of having acute appendicitis. Feeling the need to reflect on his experiences, he accepted an offer from his Indian publisher (Navajivan) to write an autobiography. What he chose to do was write short chapters which became in effect little sermons to himself and his readers.

Thus it is not merely a conventional story of the author's life and work. Instead, as said in the title and explained in the "Introduction," it is a story of "experiments with truth." This places it in both the Western traditions of autobiography as a confession (deriving from St. Augustine) and Eastern traditions of life as a quest for enlightenment, transcendence and perfection. "Truth," therefore, has many meanings. It begins with such basic things as obeying his father and mother, then keeping to the Hindu practice of not eating meat, and later keeping vows, such as the one made to obtain his mother's permission to go to England, "not to touch wine, woman and meat." In diet, as in personal cleanliness and brahmacharya (chastity), truth includes purity. Later, as we follow his attention to dress, we realize that truth also has pragmatic dimensions, where he wishes to avoid and transcend racial stereotypes, and political ones, where his choice of khadi (homespun Indian cotton) is an act of protest against imported English cloth.

Another important theme is Gandhi's self-criticism. When he is insulted by the British officer from whom he asked a favor, he realizes that he had put himself in "a false position" by trying "to exploit friendship." In South Africa he learns that the "true practice of law" is in uniting "parties riven asunder." In his first experiments there with ahimsa (non-violence) he learns in dealing with corrupt officials not to verbally attack them because that would be "tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. For we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and the same Creator..." Near the very end of the book he severely criticizes himself for the "Himalayan Miscalculation" in leading people into civil disobedience before they were ready.

Finally, it is important to read his Experiments carefully and to appreciate his use of Indian as well as English words. Gandhi wrote in Gujarati, the language of Gujarat in western India, north of Mumbai (former Bombay), where he was born. The English translation, by his associate Mahdavev Desai, was first published in 1927.

Chaudhuri ***The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian***

Nirad **Chaudhuri** (pronounced CHOW-dree) is perhaps the most controversial of Indian autobiographers. Born, as he says, in 1897 in Kishorganj, a small town in the section of Bengal that is now part of Bangladesh, he became a life-long admirer of English culture and eventually an opponent of Indian independence. The dedication alone of the book, "To the Memory of the British Empire in India...", was enough to make it very unpopular in India when it was published in 1951, only four years after Indian independence. The fact that it became popular in England and America only made matters worse.

Yet the opening three chapters of the *Autobiography* are a wonderfully detailed, lyrical description of Kishorganj and the two other villages which were his father's and mother's birthplaces, and the next chapter, "England," is not uncritical of the agents of the Empire. From there he goes on in the next three parts of the *Autobiography* to fondly describe his youth, the Bengali literary and cultural Renaissance during British rule, his education at British schools in Calcutta, his work for the British army, and then his life as an Indian journalist and work in the Indian National Congress. So readers should decide for themselves where his true allegiance was. As a boy he thought the English looked like monkeys and feared they would steal bananas. He later criticized them for not properly understanding or valuing India. His goal, it has been said, was to understand England as well as India and to disprove the British prejudice that Indians could not be as learned and civilized as Europeans. He aimed to beat the British at their own game. The *Autobiography*, V.S. Naipaul wrote, "May be the one great book to have come out of the Indo-English encounter. No better account of the penetration of the Indian mind by the West – and by extension, of the penetration of one culture by another – will be or now can be written."

In 1955 he made his first trip to Europe, resulting in his second book, *A Passage to England*. He followed it with many more books, and moved to Oxford in 1970, where he continued to be a very prolific writer. A second autobiography was written in 1987, and his last book, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, in 1997, only two years before his death in 1999 at age 101.

Some readers may object to his writing as too detailed and prolix, and therefore not finish the book. But it is important to read at least the part, "Book One," and readers who continue will be rewarded for their patience. The world of his childhood is fascinating, and evocations of traditional Indian villages are rare in English. He is also not afraid to be frank about race and caste and to be critical of himself. "Men do not become aware of the precise quality of their early years until late in life," he wrote just after concluding this first section of the book. By writing it, the "unknown Indian" better knew himself.

- Essays*
- E1. What does Chaudhuri mean when he describes his father and father's associates as dedicated to the polis?
 - E2. Describe Chaudhuri's education in Calcutta?
 - E3. What was the Bengali Renaissance?

Khankhoje ***I Shall Never Ask for Pardon: A Memoir of Pandurang Khankhoje***

Pandurang **Khankhoje** was not a follower of Gandhi. Nor was he an admirer of the British. Quite the opposite! Born in 1886 in a village in the Central Provinces, he grew up under the influence of his paternal grandfather, Tatyajee Khankhoje, who told him stories of fighting against the British in the rebellion of 1857. Thus despite his father's wishes that he get a British education and adopt British ways, Pandurang became a revolutionary. In high school he was a follower of the militant nationalist

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the leader of the movement for Swaraj (self-rule). That led to participating in many protests and abortive acts of rebellion, ending in his fleeing India.

The rest – his education in the United States, his fighting in Persia in World War I, and his later distinguished career in Mexico until his final return to India in the 1950s – is continued in this very exciting and almost unbelievable book.

It is not a true autobiography, but a “memoir” of him written by his elder daughter, based upon memoirs he wrote late in his life; on collections of newspaper articles, letters, and scientific papers kept by his devoted wife; and on research done by his daughter. As she explains in the preface, the anti-imperial Ghadar movement that he helped found was a highly secret organization that he could not write about openly. But he was so attached to it that he wanted its history preserved, which he attempted to do in his secret memoirs. So the book is a kind of hybrid of those memoirs, which are printed in italics, and his daughter’s writing.

Essays

E1. Why does Pandurang Khankhoje appear to be less introspective than Gandhi and Chaudhuri?

E2. Was it inconsistent of him to study both agricultural science and military science?

12

Chinese
Autobiography

Pu Yi

***The Last Manchu:
The
Autobiography of
Henry Pu Yi, Last
Emperor of China***

Henry **Puyi**, born 1906, was the last Chinese Emperor, the end of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty, which dominated China from 1644-1912. After being deposed, and with the exception of two short interregnums and a brief restoration to power, in 1917, Henry was to pass his life as a plaything of China’s turbulent twentieth century history. His *The Last Manchu: The Autobiography of Henry Pu Yi, Last Emperor of China*, written in 1964, was undertaken at the request of Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution, and gives us the fullest available account of this man. Fascinating as his tale appears, its very improbability presents obstacles to the Western reader.

This autobiography presents a dramatic disconnect between the writer and the events taking place in his world, and sweeping him from one stage to another. The writer himself grew up as the coddled inheritor of a divine Monarchy, swaddled in the luxuries of the Imperial Palace, surrounded by attendant eunuchs, whom he constantly and brutally teased. Henry was forced into an arranged marriage at the age of three, fed from an early age on delicacies innumerable and swathed in costly child garments. This creature of unchosen Imperial splendor is at the same time given no love, only enforced adulation; his courtiers prostrate themselves at a glance from Henry, but he only rarely has a chance to “play.” The personality he forms, within the palace, is largely due to a few select imperial peers and to his Scottish tutor, Johnson. And this personality is the bizarre hot house flower one can only expect; a flower given to nasty tricks on his subordinates, a flower with ambiguous sexuality, a flower without friends. It is small wonder that Henry cannot cope with the larger world he finds himself thrust into after the fall of the Dynasty in 1912.

That world? First the Japanese fill the power vacuum, created by the Fall of the Manchu’s, then the forces of Chang’kai Shek contest China with the Japanese, then the Cultural Revolution takes center stage. In this last phase, Henry finds himself taken prisoner by the new ideology, forced to write a Confession of his monstrous cultural sins, and given a post working in a botanical garden in Beijing.

The tale Henry tells, at the prompting of the Communists, is of unique tone. The author writes without visible emotion, as though he was standing at a distance looking at himself as victim. You will do well to approach this work

as a blend of the fantastic with the harshest possible realities of world politics.

Essays

E1. What is Puyi's narrative tone? His attitude toward himself? Does he see his life as we see it?

E2. What do we learn about 'world history' from an autobiography? Is the small lens, of a victim like Puyi, an instructive window onto the vast events that were transforming China directly through his lifetime?

Yan Jiaqi

Toward a Democratic China: The Intellectual Autobiography of Yan Jiaqi

Physicist, fiction writer, philosopher, "activist," **Yan Jiaqi** (1942-) writes his autobiography, *Toward a Democratic China: The Intellectual Autobiography of Yan Jiaqi*, from the crucible of warring ideas and power-driven ideologies that is China of the last century. (The same China which ground Henry Puyi in its ruthless machinery.) A graduate from the Chinese University of Science and Technology (1964), Yan went on to study philosophy in the elite Chinese Academy of Sciences. He continued his study of physics, wrote imaginative utopian fiction and theology, and participated intensely in the national dialogue promoted by The Cultural Revolution (1966-1978). Though frequently threatened by the ideologues in Mao's camp, Yan was ultimately driven from his country by a death sentence issued by a post-Mao source. (The exact identity of his persecutors was never clear to him.) The leadership Yan most scorned, that of the muddle-headed, geriatric compromisers--Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, who followed Mao-- ordered Yan to cease his biting and sharply thought out attacks on the government, which was sensitized by the June 89 Tienanmen "Massacre." The new compromisers did more than try to silence Yan. They tried to arrest and execute him. Yan and his two closest "co-conspirators" had no choice but to go into hiding. This they did, under harrowing circumstances.

...on June 18 (1989) I spent a seemingly endless black night on a deserted island in south China. On the next day I finally eluded capture by the dictatorial Chinese government.

Yan's subsequent reflections form the material of this book. As you will see, the book is largely concerned with the state and fate of the China Yan had left, and constitutes part of this thinker/activist's ongoing engagement with the meaning of his time. This is an extraordinary autobiography, in which the search for truth and meaning in ideas assumes flesh and blood intensity, and defines a life. You will want to compare Yan's relation to Chinese Communist orthodoxy with that of Henry Puyi. Both men were ground up in the machinery of orthodoxy, one as victim and the other as critic. Western societies experienced the life and death stakes of thought during the Cold War, when Soviet and Western intelligence agencies took mortal chances to acquire military and political secrets from one another. To our very day the role of the top clearance scientist can intersect with the hottest conflicts in geopolitics.

Essays

E1. What view of himself has Yan Jiaqi, as he recounts his complex interrelations with the Chinese Communist Party?

E2. How successfully does Yan Jiaqi blend the intensity of turbulent times with the refined issues of the intellectual? How does he attempt to achieve this blend?

13

Japanese
Autobiography

Osugi Sakae

Osugi Sakae, The Autobiography of Osugi Sakae

Osugi Sakae (1885-1923) was a Japanese anarchist and writer instrumental in radicalizing the Japanese labor movement in the early twentieth century. He was known for his rebellious character, his amorous adventures, and his firm convictions. With his autobiography we step back into an earlier stage of labor consciousness than the Chinese Communist development glimpsed in the preceding two texts. Osugi is still in the stage of trying to forge a new labor consciousness. His personal blend—the

intellectual plus the labor organizer—once again poses a problem for the Western understanding. Perhaps the prominence of a thinker/writer/activist like Cornel West can in some respects offer the contemporary American a comparison point.

From the start, son of a military man though he was, Osugi rebelled against authority. In Cadet school he was found poorly motivated and reckless; he was charged, for instance, with a strictly forbidden homosexual episode, which landed him a week’s detention. After graduation, Osugi’s wayward turn took him toward Christianity and Socialism. Though unconvinced by the “miracles,” Osugi was baptized and briefly ardent in his new faith. The same might be said for his political baptism, in the turbulent new Socialist currents of early twentieth century Japan. Osugi was a generator and activator of perspectives, who himself evolved throughout his short life, in stages leading from Socialism to Anarchism, and to such sustained work as a major translation of the Russian anarchist, Kropotkin. Along the way Osugi was fervently active as a journalist and commentator, writing regularly for the front line radical papers of the time. Within circles interested in political dissidence of any kind, Osugi was a dominant figure for the first thirty years of the twentieth century.

To read Osugi’s *Autobiography* is to learn all the above, but in a dramatized and egocentric register. Osugi has a strong ego and never tires of portraying—interestingly--his waywardness. He is forever reading and learning from his reading--for his thinking:

...I can still feel the great excitement I felt when reading Professor Oka’s Lectures on the Theory of Education. I seemed to be growing taller as the horizon steadily receded. The world, which until then was entirely unknown to me, was opening up before my eyes with each new page...this theory of the change and evolution of all things, calling as it did for reforms in the social system that still had great authority in my mind, made it exceptionally easy for me to join the ranks of those advocating socialism.’ (Page 117).

He is at the same time keeping his mind honed by the study of foreign language and culture. During his four imprisonments—always for peace movement or equity protests, and for confinement periods of a year or two each time—Osugi learned four new languages (French, English, German, Esperanto—the Japanese version of which he founded. (“One crime, one language” became his motto.) His Romantic affairs, two adulterous relationships running concurrently, made this flamboyant and hard driving radical a figure of national interest.

This interest, naturally, held limited charms for the Japanese government, which managed to get Osugi rubbed out in a conspiratorial plot at the age of thirty-eight. In circumstances unique to his moment and personality, Osugi shared with Puyi and Yan Jiaqi the discovery that authoritarian states have real muscle and can tame their opponents—for a while.

Essays

E1. In what kind of light does Osugi present himself? Is he attempting to give a “true history” or to create a personality for himself?

E2. Yan Jiaqi and Osugi are both intellectuals immersed in the culture/historical issues of their time. What is the difference in the self-presentation of these two authors?

Kapah Senoh

A Boy Called H: A Childhood in Wartime Japan

Born in 1930 in the coastal city of Kobe, **Kapah Senoh** observes the growth of Japanese militarism and emperor-worship, Japan’s expansion of its war with China into war with Britain and the United States, the fire bombings by B-29’s, the surrender in August, 1945, and the country’s difficult new beginnings as an occupied country and a “democracy.”

To quote from the “Translator’s Preface” by John Bester, “This ‘autobiographical novel’ follow the fortunes of a boy, the ‘H’ of the title, and of a nation, Japan, from the fateful prewar 1930s to the early postwar

period.”

But what brings this public history to life is the way it is registered on the life and mind of H (for Hajime) Senoh. His father, Morio Senoh, is a skilled tailor who before the war had foreign clients. During the war, to avoid being drafted or forced to do war work and because tailoring was no longer in much demand, he becomes a fire-fighter. Toshiko, his mother, is more unusual, being a Christian, but is also very kind and generous to all her neighbors, whom she helps as a kind of block representative. From his father H acquires skepticism about the nation’s imperial ambitions and boastful wartime propaganda, while from his mother he acquires a degree of rebelliousness, even though he is put off by her Christianity. He likes to sneak off to see movies. He dislikes his authoritarian teachers and militaristic classmates. He becomes more and more fond of painting and music. By the end of the book he is beginning a career as a sign-painter and an artist. (Kappa Senoh, his creator and grown-up successor, became a famous stage designer.)

The book is long – 528 pages in 50 chapters of about eight to twelve pages each – but continuously exciting and suspenseful. Dangers of all kinds – from the police, from classmates and teachers, from bombs, fires, hunger, and the threat of invasion – surround H, his friends, and family.

Essays

E1. Has autobiography special power to take us inside another cultural viewpoint, than the one we are “brought up with”? Does H, as did Puyi and Yan, open up an alien culture from a new perspective?

E2. In some autobiographies the narrator presents him/herself in the first person; in some--like *A Boy Called H*-- in the third person. What governs such a choice? How would *A Boy Called H* be different if it were written in the first person?

14

African
Autobiography

Mandela

Long Walk to Freedom

Nelson **Mandela**’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, is an epic – the long, arduous, thrilling story of his struggle for equality and justice in South Africa. Starting with his birth in 1918 in the tiny village of Mvezo, in the district of Umtata, 800 miles east of Cape Town and 500 miles south of Johannesburg, it traces his journey from student to lawyer to leader of the African National Congress in its increasingly bitter battle against apartheid that ends with his trial and imprisonment in 1964 on Robben Island, off South Africa’s Atlantic coast. But the story does not end there, because 25 years later he is released, and after negotiations with his former oppressors, he becomes South Africa’s first black Prime Minister. He also wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and in 1994 publishes this autobiography. Therefore his story is simultaneously his people’s and his nation’s story as well – truly an epic.

The consequence, however, is that much of the *Long Walk* is not as personal and introspective as other autobiographies. It is more like a memoir or a first-person history of the political events – the policy debates and decisions, the demonstrations, and the legal trials – that Mandela and his fellow leaders and followers went through.

There are some fascinating exceptions to that, however.

The first part, from his childhood to his circumcision at age 16, show him in traditional roles where personal experiences affirm the tribal experience and culture, a kind of autobiography common in Africa. It ends, tellingly, when he is told that he is not to go work in the white man’s gold mines like other men. Other very revealing parts are his personal opinions of Communism and his views on Gandhian non-violence. He was obviously a very thoughtful and sociable man who enjoyed long conversations and debates with his friends in which he carefully worked out his plans and ideas. The experiences of banning, living underground, and solitary confinement were

extremely hard and unnatural for him.

Essays

E1. Mandela decided that Gandhian non-violence was not “an inviolable principle” but “a tactic to be used as the situation demanded.” What would Gandhi reply?

E2. One of the ways by which Mandela preserved his dignity while in prison was secretly writing his autobiography. How does the writing of an autobiography preserve dignity? Does it always?

E3. Compare Gandhi’s, Chaudhuri’s, or Khankhoje’s descriptions of British policies in India with Mandela’s of Afrikaner policies.

Laye

The Dark Child

The Dark Child is a brief compelling look at the background of the West African writer, Camara Laye. Though the book deals with life-initiation stages which will seem foreign to a Western reader, the author manages to evoke the universal in his account. He displays for us some crucial events in his early life, his departure from home for the city, and, at the end, his taking up residence in France, to which he had won a scholarship to study automotive design and repair. The cultural differences Camara coped with, in this life transition, are dramatic. His family background rooted him in the Islam practiced in the Malinke tribe of Upper Guinea, between Senegal and Ivory Coast. His father was a blacksmith, an honored and traditional craft intimately associated with animist social traditions--for instance with the cult of the sacred serpent. Camara, consequently, remained until his mid-teens a child of a quite specific West African traditional culture. Village scenes, circumcision rites, the learning of craft skills; all these life details are powerfully sketched. The reader from another culture could hardly expect a more vivid introduction to the richness of West African culture.

The remainder of the book opens to Camara the reality of Colonialism, which he observes in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. There the once youthful Camara is exposed to unfamiliar African traditions and languages and to the bureaucracy of that French culture which was soon to transport him to Paris itself. (The Western reader will readily substitute the familiar themes of the lonely immigrant, or the move from country to the big city.)

In stately but dreadful scenes, Laye reintroduces his mother, as she begs, curses, and implores him not to leave for France, not to forsake the Malinke world. The irresistible call of “the new” tears the young man from his tradition. These scenes bear the mark of the universally human. In life-reality, as it turned out, Camara Laye would later return to West Africa, where for a while he served Guinea in an ambassadorial role. At the age of fifty-three a chronic kidney disease felled him as he wrote the last chapter of the life of this master of cultural autobiography.

Essays

E1. Is it possible for a mature autobiographer to depict his/her childhood? What kind of perspective onto oneself makes this possible?

E2. What are the major similarities between the autobiographies of Nelson Mandela and Camara Laye?

Ntantala

Phyllis Ntantala, A Life's Mosaic

This intimate, feisty, and well written autobiography, *A Life's Mosaic*, traces the life and above all the personal development of Phyllis Ntantala (1920-). Her life experience begins in Duff Mission, a remote but fairly upscale outpost in the Transkei, in southeastern South Africa. Her parents, transplants into the Region from the Orange Free State, worked like the other local Africans of the area to maintain and support the Mission founded there by the Free Church of Scotland. In the event, Phyllis and her family were comfortable and fairly prosperous farmers, with a wide network of friends and co-responsibles. Phyllis grew up with enough privilege to make it forever difficult for her to accept the role, of “Coloured” and classified, that South Africa was determined to force on her.

The first third of this book provides a generous indication of daily life in the benign colonized setting in which Phyllis passed her formative years. The

Anglo-Saxon colonizer is always there in the background, guaranteeing a churchly presence and a Victorian benevolence. So are the busy native friendships, the emotionally rich, close family Phyllis relied on, living as she did a life somewhere between Her Majesty's rule and Xhosa traditions. Favorite foods, flirtatious dances, and a surpassing love of Dad make the recipe for Phyllis' childhood. If anything helps her define herself from outside, it is the man she finally let her attentions settle on. A.C., a scholar by temperament and a proud Coloured, was to take Phyllis forever from her home setting, and outward into the world, where she would survive him thanks to his effective life of love for her. A.C.'s own story, of academic success in a white world both African and American, is an extraordinary additional discovery for the reader.

The tale that follows has much to do with the same South African apartheid system that enveloped the life of Nelson Mandela; and that to North Americans resonates against the similar history of racial stress that marks their culture. That apartheid system hardly impacted Phyllis in her decent Coloured growing up environment. However as she let herself out into her society, first as advanced student then as teacher, she grew painfully aware of the inequalities in the system. (The educational system, as had been the case in the United States before Civil Rights, had in every instance been skewed against Black learning.) The effort to rectify injustice was to dominate Phyllis' increasingly public life until her departure for England and the United States in 1964. (In fact her life in the United States, as a keenly sensitive faculty wife at the University of Wisconsin, later in Michigan, was to plunge her into the Civil Rights Movement, and to keep her fervent for the cause of racial equality.) The story of Phyllis' own harsh educational lessons in South Africa, and the humiliations her husband suffered as a rare Black University Professor in late fifties South Africa, prepare us for the Calvary of sufferings that awaited survivor Phyllis in America. The death of her husband at the University of Wisconsin, the death of a beloved daughter and the deportation of her son, were only parts of the puzzle of setbacks that left Phyllis, at the end of her book, a vigorous and active survivor, but one who had deeply drunk the cup of difficulty.

Essays

E1. Ntantala's autobiography involves portraying a social system widely disparaged. How does Ntantala tell her life story without demonizing the forces against which she is struggling?

E2. What is Ntantala's attitude toward Colonialism itself, as distinct from the apartheid system?

E3. Compare the intimate childhood descriptions in the autobiographies of Ntantala and the Indian Chaudhuri. What similarities do you find?

15

Latin American
Autobiography

Menchu

I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala

Rigoberta **Menchu's** *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is the life story of a Guatemalan Indian woman, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1992. The story was narrated to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, a Latin American anthropologist, and then translated into English by Ann Wright.

The story speaks from the life of Rigoberta, to age 23. She was born a poor village peasant in the highlands of Northern Guatemala. Her community was closely bonded together, sharing many goods and deeds, and inheriting ancestral traditions—concerning planting practices, marriage customs, healing treatments—of intimate importance to the group's self-respect. Unfortunately, the Guatemalan government, in the person of the rich Guatemalan landholders of the north, intruded brutally onto this cultural setting. The way this intrusion played out in the seventies and eighties of the last century had disastrous consequences for Rigoberta's village and family life. As the northern village communities discovered, landowners or would be landowners concocted every sort of legalistic, then physically intrusive, trick to win the land away from the peasants, and to convert

them into virtual serfs. The story before us is one of increasingly pitched struggle between the peasants and the “forces,” a struggle in which Rigoberta and her entire family turn to total resistance, having seen family members tortured and hallowed traditions scorned. The text brings the reader to a stage, in Rigoberta’s life, at which she has become a committed fighter for justice, an exile from her own country, and a young but brilliant defender of human rights.

By the age of twenty-three her commitment has become not only pan-Indian, but pan-human, a no holds barred defence of justice. The author’s passion and intelligence carry her to a level of mature vision which is astonishing in a person of her age—the age of twenty three at writing. To find a parallel in American culture might involve reviewing the relation of the White Man to Native American life over the past two centuries. Figures of commitment like Dennis Banks and Russell Means come to mind.

The dynamic power of autobiography, to illuminate a period of lived history, explodes in the text of Rigoberta. The American anthropologist David Stoll, in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, 1998, raised provocative questions about Rigoberta’s narrative. Basically, he saw many places in her narrative where she was “twisting the facts” in order to support the cause of the Guatemalan Guerilla Movement to which she had come to belong. Supporters of Rigoberta’s position came to her rescue, with arguments rebutting Stoll’s contention. The resulting controversy, over her narrative and the autobiographical narrative in general, raises vital questions about the genre of writing our course is about. Can an autobiographical narrative be “objective?” Can autobiography be clearly and sharply distinguished from fiction?

Essays

E1. Can the autobiography be effectively blended with a political agendum?

E2. Does Rigoberta, as a freedom fighter opposing power forces from within her own country, differ from thinkers like Neruda, whose foe is an outer one, “Western Capitalism?”

Neruda

Pablo Neruda, Memoirs

The Chilean Pablo **Neruda** (1904-1973) is one of the most distinguished poets of the twentieth century, a winner of many literary prizes, including the Nobel Prize in 1971. He was also deeply read in world literature and widely traveled, having served his country as a Consul and Ambassador in many countries, beginning in Burma, Java, and Ceylon in the 1920s and ending in Paris in the 1970s. While Chilean consul in Spain in the 1930s he became a close friend of Garcia Lorca and other Spanish writers and artists and sided personally, though not officially, with them in their opposition to the dictator Franco. This led to his siding with European Communists and his being welcomed in the Soviet Union and Communist China, though he later became disillusioned and disgusted with the oppressive regimes of Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. Still, in 1945 he became a member of Chile’s Communist Party while serving in the Chilean Senate. In 1948 the right-wing government removed him from the senate and ordered his arrest. He went into hiding, and in February, 1949, fled the country by crossing the Andes into Argentina. For three years he lived in exile, traveling, lecturing, and reading his poetry in Europe, Russia, India, and China. Meanwhile his poetry was translated into dozens of languages.

In 1952, his arrest order revoked, he returned to Chile, though he continued to travel widely in South America and around the world. In 1958 he resumed his energetic political activity in Chile, often criticizing its upper class elite and their connections with mining interests in the United States. This, along with his Communist associations, led to the U.S. State Department’s attempting to stop a visit the U.S. in 1966, an attempt overcome by protests from American writers. In 1970 he actively supported Salvador Allende for President.

But politics and world affairs are only two subjects in this unusual autobiography. The very remoteness of Chile, squeezed in between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean, and stretching all the way from tropical

deserts in the north to cold and blustery Cape Horn, gave Neruda a different orientation. Parral, where he was born, is about halfway between the north and south and between the Andes and the Ocean. Temuco, where he grew up, is farther south. The house he later built on Isla Negra is 80 kilometers south of Valpariso, overlooking the rocky coast of the Pacific. His world was decidedly different, one where spring came in September, fall in March, and Christmas in June.

Finally readers should note Neruda's vigorous sexuality, his love of common people, and his identification of his poetry with his passion, spontaneity and soul.

Essays

E1. Does Communism serve Neruda as a weapon of attack against the Colonial West?

E2. How does Neruda differ, as a political sensibility, from Yan Jiaqi?

Moyano

**The
Autobiography of
Maria Elena
Moyano: The Life
and Death of a
Peruvian Activist**

Maria Elena **Moyano** (1960-1992) was a Peruvian activist and mother, who from early in life fought for gender and social equality in her native country. She was brutally murdered in 1992 by the Maoist Sendero Luminoso Movement, for which she represented a too conciliatory social revolution, fundamentally in sync with the reigning ideology of the government.

This brief but intense autobiographical story consists of two parts. The First Part (pages 37-72) consists of scattered notes and remarks by Moyano, concerning topics like Communal Kitchens in Lima, the Economic crisis in Peru, the failure of the left to respond to her women's movement, or the power background of the Sendero Luminoso movement. All of this material is autobiographical, though in a less formal format than the conventional autobiography. That autobiography proper (pages 75-94), what Moyano entitles her *Autobiography*, is brief but pungent. In this sketch of her life Moyano shows us herself in many phases: her childhood setting, the beginnings of her University life, which was brief and already interhatched with volunteer community activities, her marriage and child birthing, her involvement with social and political issues in Villa El Salvador, the largely down-classed suburb of Lima in which she lived, her involvement with mothers' groups, and her activism in establishing a female social consciousness movement in Lima.

In a fierce but modest way, Moyano encircles what was the world to her. The autobiography itself takes us to the edge of the autobiographical material processed in Part One. There we have already learned of the political prominence ultimately fated for Moyano. She was to become Mayor of Villa el Salvador, a growing suburb of 300, 000 people; she was to represent her Women's Movement to the admiration of many world leaders; and, on a humbler but persistent level, she was to activate many social aid programs which built a new social solidarity among Peruvian woman. Of particular note are her organization of communal kitchens and of the Vaso de Leche project, whose long lasting goal was to provide a glass of milk a day for every Peruvian child. Her autobiography reads more like a report from the front, notes on a life in progress, than like a stately literary genre.

The "report from the front" thread, in contemporary autobiography, is modifying the genre. You will be interested to read Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago, 2007). This book studies the new explosion of 'autobiographical' material in blogs and internet transactions, and shows how volatile a form autobiography is in an era of mass migration, cultural clash, and the sound byte mentality. With this turn in the genre of autobiography the stately document of a Mandela or Gandhi seems far away, part of another literary perspective.

Essays

E1. What have Moyano and Rigoberta in common as activists? Does the autobiography serve as the perfect medium for the expression of their outrage?

E2. Do you see any distinctive gender traits of autobiography written by women? If so, what are they?

Unit Essay

UE1. Gandhi, Nirad Chaudhuri, and Pandurang Khankhoje responded to colonial rule in very different ways. Describe the responses of three of them, showing how their responses are consistent with each man's own personal experience and character as presented in his autobiography.

UE2. Native cultural traditions are very strong forces in the lives of Nelson Mandela, Camara Laye, and Phyllis Ntantala. Describe those traditions, the conflicts between them and the cultures of the Afrikaners, French, and British powers in their countries, and how each responds.

UE3. Autobiography is a form that is closely identified with western individualism, even egotism. If so, what is its attraction for non-western people who have been colonized by western nations? Why have they chosen it? How do they use it? Whom do they write for? What can be said about the effects of writing it on the different authors? Answer by comparing the autobiographies of several of the ones you have read? Do not choose more than two authors from the same country.

UE4. Some of the autobiographies we read were from China, Japan, India, Africa, and Latin America. Does it seem to be important where the author of an autobiography is from? Justify your answer in terms of specific texts we have read. Choose examples from the course.

UE5. Please address the issue of autobiography and activism and use the texts from this course in your answer. Which of the authors involved wants to make a "change in the world"? Did those authors seem to consider their autobiographical work part of the process of change?"

V

Finals

Essay

FE1. Please write short autobiographies of your 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 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.