An Annotated Bibliography for a Discussion of Ethics: Wendt Focus in Week 7 of UD Course ENG 112/Introduction to Literature (Truthfulness) “In American Autobiographies, Must the Writer Tell ALL the Truth?”

By Rodney Smith

Books


This novelized autobiography has frequently been on lists of banned books during the 1960’s and 1970’s because the ending describes Angelou as an unwed mother, unrepentant.

The thesis of the autobiography is that education, if it is unprejudiced by stereotypes, can liberate the individual from the effects of black/white racism. This education may be from relatives, community, church, free press(reading). Angelou says she found freedom in 3 sources: Her grandmother, her bible, and William Shakespeare.

This autobiography is the first of 7.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969); Gather Together in My Name (1974); Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas (1976); The Heart of a Woman (1997); All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes (1986); Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now (1996); A Song Flung Up to Heaven (2002).

Angelou claims that her life has taught her that ‘displacement’ is the ‘razor at the throat of the young black child.’ What, she asks, can a child believe in when she realizes that educators (white) are educating her to be a servant? How did whites justify this process in the Bible-belt?

As to truthfulness? Maya Angelou is not her name; her grandmother was one of the richest people in the area where she complains she was so poor; and no one has, seemingly, ever prevented her from becoming an American icon.


Franklin is most famous as a scientist for the experiments with electricity: the kite, key, and thunderstorm. If he had actually done this, he would have been electrocuted. Therefore, one begins with the question of truthfulness. Was he truthful in his autobiography? Considering the bifocals he invented, the Franklin stove which kept Americans warm, the establishment of fire departments, public libraries, and insurance companies, and so forth, one famous possible-lie does not contradict an entire lifetime of achievement. Or does it?

Franklin’s life story, his auto -biography, is best understood as an 18th century French memoire.

Mark Twain summed this kind of truth/untruth writing up in his opening of Huckleberry Finn: “he told the truth, mainly, with some stretchers here and there.” (Twain, Preface)
Two very American attitudes are important as the foundation of the autobiography: 1. the true joy he found in making inventions to improve human happiness; and 2. the ‘stretchers’, the little fibs that embellish a human life, which he consciously used to form his life as an American success story.


First Oprah supported him, then she abandoned him, then she castigated him for being untruthful.

How truthful should a fictionalist make his “life story”? Should Mr. Frey have told all, exactly as his life unfolded through his choices, or was he allowed to alter these experiences to let readers assume what they were reading was the entire truth, verbatim?

Ms Winfrey decided that Frey was guilty of misrepresentation. She asked Pilate’s question: “What is truth?” She answered it by insisting that an autobiography must, by the definition of the technique, be truthful to the facts.

A new word was brought forward during this public debate: truthiness. Franklin, Angelou, and Frey: each writer faced the decision of how much truth was the real truth.

Scandal now surrounds this putative autobiography. The author is accused of telling lies. The author argues that fiction is, in its own way, truthfulness, and mediated truth (truthiness) is acceptable.

The public debate has obscured the book’s thesis, which is that character really IS destiny.

The thesis also developed the idea that an act of will can precipitate change and the change creates a new destiny from unpromising materials (addiction, personal degradation, falsehood).


Gough’s argument is based within the classical Greek idea that knothe seuton (know thyself) is the goal of a person’s life. The emphasis on personal ethics is not Platonic Greek. If one believes that ethics is a system of universal, discoverable truths, then personal ethics might be held to be either selfish or too limited. Gough discusses the process by which personal and eternal verities can be brought together, but it may be that Protestant moralists hold this to be possible whereas universalists do not. If one falls within the classical Greek/ethics camp, then the text is not satisfying. For the Protestant audience, who deeply value personal ethics, it may seem reasonable that private life (moral decisions) shape destiny.

As he works through this process, chapter by chapter, Gough reaches the point where he concludes that the fair measurement of a well-lived life is built by daily actions. The just man says “No!” to opportunities to violate the golden rule.

Franklin, Angelou, and Frey (autobiographers)
argue the Nature/Nurture controversy. Angelou concludes her mediated autobiography with her mother’s voice: “See, you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then you do it without thinking.” (Angelou, 289). Gough disagrees.


Holmes cites Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* to begin his discussion of “Moral Identity” (Holmes, 69). Holmes accepts that Bloom’s discussion of *moral relativism* has merit, but Bloom’s focus on *cultural* identity for Holmes is too limited. It is limited because of relativism. A moral identity must be based within what is permanent, a “predictability of behavior” (Holmes, 69)

Holmes assumes that his position via Chickering (*Education and Identity*) is correct, and proceeds to discuss moral identity as the search for permanent (predictable) behavior, which creates the possibility of a moral identity.

Franklin, Thoreau, Angelou and Frey are not so sure. Thoreau argues in *Walden* that: “The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?” (Thoreau, 20)

Opposing Holmes, Thoreau states: “{we deny} the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be

drawn radii from one center. Change is a miracle to contemplate... .” (Thoreau, 20)


Boston: St. Martin’s, 2007.

This distinguished anthology offers the following excerpts which can be assigned as supplemental to the discussion of this Wendt project: “Is an autobiography the absolute truth or is it relativistic?”

Kenneth Burke: “Literature as Equipment for Living”, 645-650.
Michel Foucault: “What Is an Author?”, 904-914.
Thoreau, Henry. *Walden or Life in the Woods*;  
“On the Duty of Civil Disobedience”.  

Thoreau is a dissenter. *Walden* records his plan to find what the minimum of labor was (farmer) which would gain him the maximum of leisure. Therefore his first chapter is “Economy”. His minimalism opposed the over-consumption which Twain and Warner termed “the Gilded Age”. “The wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor.”

Franklin feared poverty (financial). Thoreau dismissed it. Angelou’s grandmother raised her to think of herself as poor (she wasn’t). Frey? Frey had the luxury of choice, and degraded himself; that is poverty of soul.

Franklin and Thoreau record 2 opposing kinds of mind. Franklin, scientist and entrepreneur, bent his mind to accumulating wealth: “A penny saved is a penny earned.” Thoreau, pencil manufacturer, refused to accumulate wealth to buy leisure. No penny-saving for him. Angelou thought that money was the important possession which separated her from those ‘on the other side of the tracks.’ When she became aware that the real separation was the separate and unequal cultural code of white/black Arkansas (1930’s), the revelation overwhelmed her. How could she live in an unjust world? Frey’s self-story is admittedly corrupted by partial truths, but they were his to choose, whereas Angelou’s were imposed upon her. She falls into the agony of spirit that Thoreau described: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”(18) And then, like Thoreau, learns that: ”It is never too late to give up our prejudices.(18-19)

**VIDEO/DVD**


For the purposes of the ENG 112 syllabus, Week 7, the focus is on AUTOBIOGRAPHY. The investigation of the Nature/Nurture controversy is the thesis-focus of the course. The major text in week 7 is Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The text is investigated as a Social Gospel/Social Christian text, and argued in contrast to the Social Darwinist text with which the course begins. The first text, *The Call of the Wild*, is adamantly Social Darwinist: life is ruled by forces beyond the control of the characters. In contrast, Angelou argues that the motivated individual, rooted in personal ethics within the Christian tradition, *can* change entire societies. Therefore, character is “destiny.” To visually examine Angelou’s transformational thesis, “Talking with Thoreau” explores the Wendt thesis, which as I am using it, says that personal integrity is the most valuable tool the individual has. Thoreau/Emerson described it as “self-reliance”. Wendt positions this inward light as
Ethical behavior.
The video presents these personal views of civil disobedience: David Brower, Sierra Club radicalism

  B.F. Skinner, Behaviorist
  (Conditioned Response)
  Rosa Parks, Leader/Civil Rights
  Elliot Richardson, Attorney General/
  Defied Nixon.

These are not actors; these are the real people. All dead now, still they speak to us about 4 ethical positions: Brower on individual action; Skinner on the value of conditioned social responses; Parks on the necessity of one person to NOT do something; Richardson on a lawyer finding it ethically necessary to break a law and defy a President.

**The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring.**

  The Exordium contains the statement “the hearts of men are evil...” The opening 5 minutes are shown to illustrate the Social Darwinist position: Success comes only to the strong; the weak rightly perish. The classroom question is raised about the essential nature of the members of the class: Evil or good? Truthful or Untruthful? Is this message about being evil the best message to send to the film’s audience, adolescents?


  The Exordium of this film is based in a Social Christian emphasis: “A good heart overcomes all that is evil.” The Social Darwinist theories are parodied in the “That’s the way it is” explanation of all that is bad in Babe’s life and the life of all people/animals. It’s a children’s fable of course, but the message is penetratingly anti-Darwinist. Possibly even anti-biblical, as the entire film posits that destiny can be manufactured by an act of will. Conflicting views of human nature, in films like The Lord of the Rings and Babe, seen by millions and millions, illustrate the unsteady relativistic ethical position of Americans.

**Pleasantville: Nothing Is as Simple as Black and White.**

  This film argues the thesis of Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: that prejudice comes from a failure to look with truthfulness on daily behavior. Angelou opens with “What are you looking at me for?” The film opens with a scene which proves to us that ‘reality’ is manufactured from our personal point of view: We think we are seeing a boy talking to a girl, but then the camera draws back and we realize that they are 100’s of feet apart. What we see is NOT what we should believe. The film consistently deals with prejudice based in color. The film is Dadaist in its perspectives-discussions.
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