

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Autobiography is defined as “a narrative of a life written by the person who lived it.” The term designates a retrospective account that a person gives of their own life. It is written from the standpoint of the present, focusing on the shaping of the self through memory, reflection, and experience. M H Abrams notes that autobiographies may vary in form and purpose: Some are full-length narratives intended for publication, such as, often regarded as the prototype of modern autobiography. Others may take the form of memoirs, which emphasize the writer’s personal experience of events, especially those involving public affairs or notable figures. There are also diaries and journals, which are written day by day and not necessarily intended for publication, but which may later serve autobiographical purposes.

It is typically written in the first person and offers insight into the author's internal world. The form is both a reflection of individual consciousness and a historical document, often mirroring the societal and cultural context of the time in which it is written.

The roots of autobiographical writing in English literature can be traced back to medieval and early modern texts. One of the earliest examples is *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is often considered the first autobiography in English. This text chronicles the spiritual visions and pilgrimages of a medieval English mystic and reflects both personal and religious experiences. In the 17th century, John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) stands as a classic example of a Puritan spiritual autobiography, focusing on sin, redemption, and the author’s relationship with God.

The 18th century marked a shift in autobiographical writing with the rise of rationalism and individualism. Autobiography began to reflect a more secular and psychological approach to self-exploration. Although James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) is technically a biography, it incorporates many autobiographical elements, including Boswell’s personal thoughts and experiences, thus blurring the boundary between biography and autobiography.

The Romantic and Victorian periods brought a deepened emphasis on emotion, memory, and personal identity. Romantic writers like William Wordsworth used autobiographical elements to explore the development of the individual’s mind and imagination. His *The Prelude*, a long philosophical poem, is a prime example of poetic autobiography. Similarly, in the Victorian period, John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* (1873) provided a more intellectual and introspective account of his moral and emotional crisis, showcasing how personal suffering can lead to growth and reform.

In the 20th century and beyond, autobiographical writing became more diverse, inclusive, and experimental. Writers began to explore themes such as race, gender, class, colonialism, and trauma. The autobiography was no longer confined to elite or religious figures; it became a voice for the marginalized. For example, Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* explores memory and identity through fragmented, introspective writing. Similarly, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou presents a powerful narrative of Black womanhood and personal resilience.

In conclusion, autobiography in English literature has evolved significantly over the centuries. From religious confession to modern explorations of psychological and social identity, it remains a dynamic genre that not only records the life of the individual but also reflects broader historical and cultural realities. Its enduring appeal lies in the human desire to understand the self and to share that understanding with others.

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Examples:

1. William Wordsworth – *The Prelude* (1850)
2. John Stuart Mill – *Autobiography* (1873)
3. Mahatma Gandhi – *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927)
4. Virginia Woolf – *Moments of Being*
5. Maya Angelou – *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)
6. *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela
7. *Wings of Fire* by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam
8. *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank
9. *Playing It My Way* by Sachin Tendulkar
10. *Becoming* by Michelle Obama