Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1982 Volume II: Autobiography

The Voice Within

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That Frederick Douglass was a slave, Benjamin Franklin a printer, Maya Angelou a writer, and Anne Frank a brave young girl are facts well known; yet who are these people? If they were to visit us, what would they say, how would they say it, and why? This unit will answer these questions, while providing the opportunity for students to meet many interesting characters through the reading of their autobiographies and in person! Finally, the unit will provide models of writing styles for student autobiographies.

The unit will be divided into three sections, Section one will introduce students to autobiographical writing, section two will involve role playing, and section three will involve autobiographical writing by the students themselves based on their experiences in sections one and two. While focusing on different skills, the sections are closely related. The unit is intended for children in grade six or older and would be a part of the English program. The time allotted for the unit will be one marking period per section; the first marking period a reading unit, the second public speaking, and in the third marking period a writing unit. I would like to thank Richard Brodhead, Professor of English at Yale, for sharing many ideas with members of our seminar concerning selections which will be discussed within the unit.

Section One

In beginning this unit on the autobiography, the teacher should establish two important initial goals. The first of these two objectives is that the autobiography is a writing form which allows the author to write what he or she feels is important in their own style. The second objective is the realization that how a person writes can tell us as much about that person as what they say. The following passage may be read by the teacher to the class as part of an introductory lesson for this unit and as a means of achieving the two stated objectives. The teacher, when reading the sample of autobiographical writing, should not identify beforehand its author.

> “Let the trumpet sound when it will, I shall come forward with this work in my hand to present myself before my Sovereign Judge, and proclaim aloud: ‘Here is what I have done, and if by chance I have used some immaterial embellishment it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory.”

Once the teacher has completed reading this brief sample, several questions can be asked of the class

1. Do you think the author is living at the present time or do you think he or she lived in the past?
2. What type of person is the author?
3. What type of words does the author use?
4. Do you think you would like this individual?

The class, having heard only a brief sample of a length, autobiography, will still be able to get a feeling about the author; and the teacher should encourage students to share their thoughts. The format for this introductory lesson will be repeated often in the future, and the teacher should be certain to encourage participation. Several key vocabulary words can also be introduced by the teacher during the discussion. These new terms are important in the understanding of the autobiography as a writing style and will help to answer the questions presented. These vocabulary terms are:

1. Tone—Is the piece serious or light?
2. Pose—Is the writing formal or casual?
   How does the author want us to see him? How does the author stand?
3. Voice—What type of vocabulary does the author use to speak to us?
4. Motive—What is important to the author?
   What are his or her priorities?
   Can we determine the purpose for writing this piece?

The discussion of this passage, using the suggested vocabulary, will reveal many important points concerning the author. We can determine, for example, that the author is very serious, high toned, and appears concerned mainly with his own interests. His choice of vocabulary and style are, at the least, very serious in tone and self-serving in motive. Taken from the autobiography of Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* , we do indeed see Rousseau ready to have God himself read what he has written. Written in the eighteenth century, Rousseau's autobiography was one of the first of many written confessions and certainly one of the most famous.

Having completed the above sample lesson, the class should be introduced to the first common American form of autobiographical writing which was written by the Puritans during the seventeenth century. The Puritans believed it was essential that they prove to the minister that they had been saved in order to be admitted as a member of the church. It was common, therefore, for them to write or tell their autobiographies based on their own salvation here on earth. In many instances, the day in which they were saved is the first

event discussed.

One such autobiography is that of Thomas Shepard, in which the author begins by describing in great detail the day in which he is saved. Shepard makes no mention of his childhood; it is not important. What is important, is the day while attending college when Shepard gets drunk and later repents. While not appearing to be a very serious wrongdoing, for Shepard it is the turning point in his life. Shepard awakens following the incident and says:

> "And when I awakened I went from him in shame and confusion, and went out into the fields and there spent the Sabbath lying hid in the cornfields where the Lord, who might justly have cut me off in the midst of my sin, did meet me with such sadness of heart and troubled my soul for this and other my sins which then I had cause and leisure to think of . . . "

Before identifying Shepard, the teacher should use the format established in the Rousseau sample; let students listen and analyze tone, voice, pose, and motive. In discussing motive, it should be pointed out that autobiographies need not be simply a chronological series of events, but rather a personal account of what is considered important by the author. For Shepard, his fall and subsequent salvation is all that matters.

Before Rousseau and Shepard, there is very little autobiographical writing, Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not feel a need to describe their own lives, and unfortunately we know very little about them. These earlier writers were much more concerned with their work than with themselves.

One contemporary of Rousseau, however, did not hesitate to describe his own life, and did in fact change autobiography as a written form; this was Benjamin Franklin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is one of the most famous autobiographies ever written and is the first book to be read by the class in this unit. Although not a difficult book to obtain the teacher would be wise to order in advance the necessary number of copies.

In this work, we see that there is a break from the religious emphasis of Rousseau and Shepard; the new direction is toward career success. The teacher, in discussing motive with the class, should be certain that the change is noted. Franklin is, to a large degree, responsible for the shift from the Puritan tradition to the Yankee tradition in America.

To begin this section of the unit, the teacher may wish to take a few passages from the autobiography of Franklin and ask the class to comment on who the author might be much as was done with Rousseau and Shepard. The following two passages are representative of many like them:

> "I was now on a fair footing with them, and soon acquired considerable influence."

> "It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection."

Comments on the type of person who is speaking should be encouraged before details are given by the teacher. Many students will be quite alert, at this point, to the ideas of voice and motive.

The class may note that the sentence structure for Franklin is more direct (subject—verb) than is the language of Rousseau or Shepard. There is no uncertainty of meaning. Also, this is a person both self-confident and successful, Franklin wrote his autobiography late in life and wanted everyone to know just how he accomplished such a great deal in his lifetime.

For Benjamin Franklin life, or at least as he implies in his writing, was a series of problems to be solved and so you solved them. Whether it was starting a business, finding a wife, or making yourself a better person, all problems could be solved by finding the right system. The type of language he uses, and the tone and style of his autobiography illustrate his confidence in the belief that all problems could be solved.

In one very interesting section, Franklin uses a chart in which he lists all of the virtues he feels are necessary to achieve success. He then procedes to show us how through the use of his chart he was able to achieve a perfection early in life which permitted him to accomplish other great goals. Franklin never speaks of losing these acquired virtues. Once a problem was solved, it remained solved, His chart on virtues would be of interest to students and should be discussed, It has been an inspiration for many successful people throughout history as well as a target of mockery.

One other part of Franklin's autobiography worthy of discussion is his very detailed description of his arrival at Philadelphia. It was upon this arrival that his career began and this debut into the world of business is, for Franklin, of prime importance. While telling very little of his childhood, he spends a great deal of time focusing on this arrival. For Franklin, the beginning of his career was the beginning of his life.

The second autobiography to be read by the class is that of Frederick Douglass. Published in 1845, Douglass gives an account of pre-war slavery which is both powerful and moving. As with Franklin, the language is direct and forceful. This too is a man of action; a man able to escape slavery. teach himself to read and write, and to educate thousands to the evils of slavery. Though different, his accomplishments are as great as those of Franklin.

The following two passages are examples highlighting this powerful narrative; the first describes a whipping, the second the importance of learning to read. Once again the passages may be read to the class for comment before identifying the author as a means of motivating students to listen to the voice within the description. A great deal of the character of an individual can be determined through this technique.

> "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin."
>
> ". . . the argument he (the master) so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn."

Using only these two short passages, the voice of Frederick Douglass is clear. In the first, we see an individual unable to read as a child, now able, as an adult, to very vividly describe slavery. His description almost allows us to feel the whip going back and forth. Douglass was an orator, and from this description, it is evident that he was a very powerful speaker.

The second passage is at the heart of this autobiography. For Douglass to read meant freedom. As Franklin's career was important to him, learning to read was important to Douglass. This point should be stressed to those students who do not see the importance of learning to read and write well.

Students should also be asked to compare Franklin's arrival at Philadelphia with Douglass's arrival at Baltimore As with Franklin's life beginning with the start of his career, so to Douglass sees his sale from the farm master to the city master as a great opportunity Even in slavery, there was hope for Douglass. His

narrative should be an inspiration for us all.

The third work to be considered is *Anne Frank—The Diary of a Young Girl.* This selection, as with Douglass, is an inspiration. In hiding for two years from the Nazis in Holland during its occupation, Anne Frank writes of daily events, her fears, and loves. Children can identify with Anne Frank because of her age and because despite her very difficult like, she describes many events common to teenagers everywhere. Consider the following examples:

> "New idea. I talk to myself more than to the others at mealtimes, which is recommended for two reasons. Firstly because everyone is happy if I don't chatter the whole time, and secondly, I needn't get annoyed about other people's opinions."

That Anne's father was the only one of the eight people in hiding to survive the concentration camp is a tragedy, that she left this wonderful diary has made this a better world for others. The individual teacher may wish to concentrate on the history surrounding this selection; for this unit, however, the stress will be on everyday events such as Anne's interaction with members of her family, her favorite books, her loves, her hopes, and her fears.

The final selection to be discussed in this unit is the autobiography of Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings.* What makes this work special is the sincerity and feeling with which Maya Angelou speaks. Many of the incidents in her life are difficult and tragic; yet she does not quit. She is abandoned, tormented by the Klu Klux Klan, and even raped, and yet it is in her description of everyday events that we hear the voice of this warm and sincere person.

It should be noted that there are incidents within this work which concern sexual contact and teachers may wish to review them before they use this selection. If the entire selection is not used, it should at least be used in part. It is too wonderful a selection to skip.

There are so many examples of everyday experiences brought to life by Angelou, that it is difficult to select one as an example for teachers. The following passage concerns meeting Louise, Angelou's first real friend, while at a church picnic. Maya is off by herself in a clearing looking at the sky when Louise arrives. They talk and soon begin playing a game of falling back and pretending they are falling into the sky.

> "I liked her for being able to fall in the sky and admit it, I suggested, "Let's try together. But we have to sit up straight on the count of five." Louise asked, "Want to hold hands? Just in case?" I did. If one of us did happen to fall, the other could pull her out."

All students can identify with experiences like the above and others like them in the lives of Anne Frank and Maya Angelou. Drawing upon these everyday experiences will give children a chance in section three of this unit to imitate these styles and to describe everyday events in their own lives. While much autobiographical writing focuses on crisis or major events in the life of an individual, the writing of everyday experiences is just as important. To children who say that their lives aren't interesting enough to write about, have them read Maya Angelou.

Section Two

Having now read four or more autobiographies, students will be familiar with the idea that when a person sits down to write about his or her life, they decide on what to say and how to say it. We learn as much about a person by how he or she says something as we do about what they say. It is with this in mind that the second

part of this unit was developed.

In this section, each student selects an autobiography to read and then visits the class dressed as that person, and using the voice and mannerisms of that individual. Additional books or research may be needed to gain a complete picture, but basically the autobiography will determine the type of sentence structure and tone of the oral presentation.

Incidents described in the talks should be typical of the work. What is important to the author should be important to the speaker. If the author is serious, so to the presenter. What is sought is “Living Autobiography.”

Teachers may wish to have students begin their presentations without giving too many details as to character identities. The class might be able to give a fairly accurate picture of the person through the presentation.

It is entirely possible that the person chosen may not be familiar to the class. This is no problem. Students, by this point, will have an appreciation for the idea that the language and voice of the autobiography, and not just the listing of events by a noted figure, are what is important.

Actual presentations will depend on grade level and ability. Up to five minute talks, and allowing time for questions and discussions, is suggested. Taking photos of presentations for display is also fun. Students enjoy becoming another person, actually taking on their voice and appearance. They also learn a great deal about a great many people from the presentations of others within the class. It is suggested that no more than three student presenters are assigned in any one day to allow time for discussion and to give each presentation proper attention.

Section Three

If it is possible to take on the voice and appearance of a character for an oral presentation, so to it is possible to imitate the writing styles of great writers, It is unfair to ask children to write in their own voice when they haven’t yet developed one, We learn by imitation, and in section three children will be doing autobiographical writing activities, many of which are based on the styles of others. The objectives of section three are the better understanding of autobiography as a writing form and the development of a writing voice on the part of each student. Activity one requires a trip to the library. Children are asked to find and read from microfilm, a copy of the newspaper on the day they were born. They are then asked to compare their feelings concerning today’s world and the world at the time when they were born. The purpose of this activity is to generate interest in the past, while at the same time forming a time frame within which students will work—a time line.

As a second activity, closely related to the first, children can describe and give feelings about their family histories. The information will be gathered through conversations with older family members. Included in this section would be answers to questions such as nationality, when their ancestors arrived in America, their first occupations, and how they came to be born where they did.

Many famous writers begin their autobiographies with the idea that if you want to know about the writer, you must first know where he or she came from and how they view their past. In the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, at the beginning of Chapter I, an example of this searching to know one’s origin is presented. It can be read to the class as an example of what is to be done in activity two. Other examples can be found by

students as a separate or follow-up activity.

In the third part of their autobiographies, children are asked to remember early life experiences by writing poems entitled “I Remember . . .” These poems are simply a series of declarative sentences beginning with the words “I Remember . . .” This type of brainstorming in which children remember past experiences will be of great use later in the prose expansion of many of these ideas. A second poem entitled “Childhood is . . .” and following the same format should follow. Both poems should include at least eight thoughts.

Many times students will have interesting thoughts but do not expand on their ideas. Once children have listed their thoughts on a subject, as in the “Childhood is . . . ” poem, they can be asked, in activity four to add four or more details to one of the thoughts. The article, “Hers,” by Laura Cunningham in the September 1981 edition of the *New York Times* , offers an example which can be used to illustrate this technique. If the statement made by a child is, “Childhood is when my grandmother comes to visit,” what details can you add? Laura Cunningham, in her article describes such an arrival in the following manners:

> My main concern on the day of my grandmother’s arrival was: How soon would she start the cookies? I remember her arrival, my uncles flanking her as they walked down the apartment corridor. She wore a hat, a tailored navy blue suit, an ermine stole. She held tucked under her arm, the purple leather folder that contained her work in progress, a manuscript entitled “Philosophy of Women” She was preceded by her custom made white trunk, packed with purses, necklaces, earrings, dresses and more purple-inked pages that stress “the spiritual above the material.”

The description continues, but certainly children can see the tremendous amount of detail stemming from a single thought. Not only do we learn about how the grandmother looked but we learn about her as a person and the way in which others view her.

Activity five involves having children describe their relationship with a family member or friend. Throughout all of these activities, photographs or drawings can be incorporated, as children enjoy sharing photographs with others. Examples of this type of writing, in which relationships are discussed in great detail, can be found in, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings.* In Chapter 20, Angelou describes meeting Louise, her first childhood friend. The teacher should read this chapter to the class as an example of exploring ones inner feelings. The chapter concludes with the author saying, “. . . after being a woman for three years I was about to become a girl.”

As Roger Porter and H. R. Wolf point out in *The Voice Within* , “We are less interested in what you did at one time than in what you think about it now and the way you define and elaborate your understanding.” [1] The authors further explain that no autobiographer can represent exactly what happened back then any more than a historian can definitely describe the real truth of the past. What is important is that authors be committed to examining their inner selves in language that is faithful to their sense of experience. Angelou is a perfect example of an author who is constantly searching to better understand the meaning of her past and its effect on the present.

The temptation for students in writing autobiography is to write only about times of crisis in their lives—the broken arm, the flood, or the time they had to move. While this is not wrong, and certainly these events are important, students should realize that descriptions of everyday events are also interesting topics for autobiography, and are in fact a much greater part of our lives than the occasional crisis. Having now read Anne Frank and Maya Angelou in section one of this unit, students will be familiar with examples of very common everyday activities and the beauty with which they can be described. In activity six, children are asked to describe in detail an everyday or very ordinary experience. The responses can range from sitting in

the back seat of the car on a long trip to brushing one's teeth.

Earlier in this unit, we discussed the idea that in autobiography each person is able to write about events which are important to them. For Franklin, it was his career, for Douglass, it was learning to read and write. The attention each man gave to these topics makes this obvious. They do, in fact, describe in great detail their entries into cities where they are able to pursue their goals, Franklin in Philadelphia and Douglass in Baltimore. After reading of these journeys, students, in activity seven, are asked to describe their entries into a new experience in quest of a goal. It may be leaving elementary school and going to middle school that is described, or perhaps it is trying out for a team. Whatever it is, the students are to describe their debuts in the same manner as Franklin and Douglass and with the same degree of significance.

Autobiography is not limited to prose. Activity eight allows children to explore other areas of expression. Artists such as Van Gogh and Rembrandt allowed us to learn more about them through self-portraits and Rousseau and Thoreau used poetry for self-study. Children in this activity must use another medium, perhaps poetry or art, as a part of their autobiographies. The poem, drawing, or other form of expression may represent a favorite interest or talent, or be a self-portrait.

Activity nine is a creative writing assignment dealing with autobiography in the future. Students are asked to write a story entitled, "The Class Reunion." This reunion occurs in the year 2000 and should include all members of the class. Not everyone will enjoy what their classmates feel is in store for them, but they will certainly enjoy sharing their stories.

Finally, in activity ten, the completed autobiographies should be given a worthy title. With careful thought, students should select a title which they feel represents their experiences and how they feel about themselves. The title of a recent autobiography by Richard Rodrigues, *Hunger of Memory* is just such a title.

In his autobiography, Rodrigues describes his life as a struggle to educate himself by learning English and therefore bettering his life. Never, however, is Rodrigues able to forget completely his past. He does, in fact, hunger for memories of family times when Spanish was spoken at home—a past he had to leave.

In concluding a unit on the autobiography, the teacher should discuss with students the idea that when a person writes his or her autobiography, they should not be writing something they already know. The author must think things through and try to understand them in a different way The autobiographies read, oral presentations given, and writing activities completed have hopefully helped students better understand the personal nature of the autobiography and its value as a writing form.

Notes

1. Roger Porter and H. R. Wolf. *The Voice Within.* New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc., 1973. p. 5.

Student and Teacher Bibliography

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Teacher Bibliography

Olney, James (Editor). *Autobiographies: Essays Theoretical and Critical.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1980.

(examines famous autobiographies and comments on their significance and style)

Porter, Roger J. and Wolf, H.R. *The Voice Within.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1973.

(discusses autobiography as a writing form and examines common features in autobiographical writing)