

Amy Hissom

English II

Essay #4

December 7, 2005

Writing an Autobiography

My Autobiographical Research & Theory

By: Amy Hissom

After reading the three books assigned, and the research I have done on autobiography and memoir writing during this semester of English, I have realized that there are many ways in which to write about one's self. There are many theories of autobiographical and memoir writing. I have my own ideas about what should be included in a memoir, but have realized that it all depends what the person writing it is trying to say.

In visiting the Center for Autobiographic Studies Web site, I came across a section called Types of Autobiographic Writing. This particular site explains all the types of autobiographical writing. In reading this article, I learned that a full autobiography covers an entire life from birth to present, while a memoir puts a frame onto life by limiting what is included (1). It lists three good reasons for choosing to write a full autobiography. The first reason is to write for yourself to discover the meaning of your life by setting it down. (1) I think that writing about one's self can be healing in a sense that it reminds us of where we have been and maybe gives us an outlook on where we might be headed. The second reason listed for writing a full autobiography is that you want to write your life story for your offspring so that they can know you as a person and not just a parent or grandparent. (1) Why not pass down the story of your life to your children and grandchildren? If I ever find time to do this for my own children, I will. I think they should know what all I went through in life, the good things and the bad things. This way, maybe they would understand me more.

My theory of a full autobiography is that it should include at least three particular parts of the author's life. The first is a timeline of the author's life starting with when and where they were born along with their ethnic, cultural, and spiritual background. The second part to be included is events of the author's life. Throughout this timeline of the author's life, I want to read about both minor and major events, which should include everything from good to bad

regardless of how tragic or ugly the event may be. The third part should include all the people throughout the author's life who may have been an influence on him or her, whether in a positive or negative way or how the author may have influenced others and how they feel about these people.

In basing my opinion on the three parts I have listed, I believe that an autobiography should include anything and everything that could possibly make me understand the subject of the autobiography. If I am interested in reading the autobiography of a certain individual, it is because maybe I want to know what is so special about that person. I might also read a person's autobiography because that person went through the same things in life I went through and I want to know how they handled it. Will it help my situation? I want to know what makes that person who he or she is today. I want to know all the facts of that person's life so that I can more clearly understand the events that made them who they are. I feel that nothing should be left out even if it is down right ugly. Tell me about how your father molested you or how you sold drugs. Did you change? What event caused you to change from that way of life? Can your story help others from going through the same ordeal? Tell me about your religious beliefs. I want to know what caused you to believe in that certain religion, especially if it is the same religion I practice.

I don't care if you are a famous person or just an average individual off the street. Does your story impact the lives of others? I want to know. Did you change history or dedicate your life to God? If so, why? What events of your life led to the decisions you have made? I believe that everybody has a story to tell and everybody is important. I don't believe that anybody has or has had a perfect life. My belief is that everybody has skeletons in their closets, which once revealed, will help me understand that person better.

From what I can see, autobiographies are written for a number of different reasons. Some are written to act as a healing process for the individual who is writing it. It can also be a healing process for the reader who reads it, especially if the subject at hand has gone through the same thing the reader is going through in life. An autobiography can also be a teaching tool, not only for the person writing it, but also for others who read it. It can be a preserver of family history. The list can go on and on. The more you add to your autobiography, the better I will understand you and what you are trying to say. Tell me about your feelings and thoughts about yourself and others and why you feel and think that way. The three books that were assigned for me to read this semester were all full autobiographies. They all pretty much told the whole life of the author.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, written by Ernest Gaines, is a full autobiographical slave narrative. I think that the style and theme chosen by Gaines for this novel was genius. The story being told by a fictional 110 year old black woman who lived through slavery, the civil war and the fight for civil rights during the sixties, in my eyes, was the perfect way to teach the world what inhumanities the African American race had to go through in our country to get to where they are today. In a lot of ways they are still struggling. The actual story of what life was like in the eyes of somebody who lived it was better to me than any factual history book. Miss Jane's history gives us a bigger understanding of the personal experiences of African Americans, which is often ignored in American history books. In writing this novel, Gaines did a great job with the use of regional dialect, historical events, and scenes from Jane's life, which caused me to feel like I was right there seeing all the events with my own eyes.

Sol Stein writes in his article, Frank Talk About Writing Your Memoir, that you should create scenes. He says, "Creating interest at the outset is with a scene that you know is dramatic;

the sudden death of someone close, a huge disappointment or exhilarating surprise” (Stein 2). He also states, “The best scenes have some adversarial content” (Stein 2). I agree with Stein’s theory completely and feel that Gaines used this same idea when creating the scenes of Jane’s life. That’s why when reading the book I felt like I was right there in that same place and time seeing all the event’s unravel with my own eyes. Stein says, “Organizing a memoir by scenes can have the advantage of making the events of yesterday feel like they’re happening in front of the reader” (Stein 2).

Gaines is able to describe one hundred years of African-American history, as experienced by Miss Jane, by using a personalized narrative. This fulfills my theory of how all the events of one’s life should be included. Because Gaines included all the events of Jane’s life, I was able to have a more in depth understanding of the true African American History. Gaines’ character told the events of her life in detail and that is what I want to see in a full autobiography. Details help me to understand a person and what they are feeling based on the events in their lives. The details of Miss Jane’s life taught me how these people were treated on a more intimate level. In reading this story, I not only know the history of the African Americans in our country, I know them on a personal level.

In telling the events of her life, Miss Pittman also talks about the lives of the friends and people who were a part of her life. She explains how she felt about each and every one of them. I think Mr. Gaines chose to add their stories because what happened to them affected her. They looked up to her and came to her for advice. In their eyes, she was older and wiser. In doing this, Gaines fulfills my theory where one should include influences. Jane influenced others, but in a positive way. The editor writes the introduction of this novel, or should I say Miss Pittman’s interviewer. In his introduction he talks about how Miss Pittman’s story went in all kinds of

different directions. I believe he meant that she would talk about herself one time and without finishing the story, she would go on to talk the next time about somebody else. I'm sure it was because their story tied into her life. In the editor's closing statements of the introduction he says, "*This is what both Mary and Miss Jane meant when they said you could not tie all the ends together in one neat direction. Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's*" (Gaines viii). This fits in to my theory where the author should include all events of his or her life. Jane felt that whatever was happening to them was happening to her.

The first chapter of this book talks about Corporal Brown who was a very positive figure to the very young Miss Pittman. This good-hearted man and his words to her was what gave her determination. He was a white man who looked at her as his equal. He gave her the hope of a new tomorrow. I'm sure there were others like him in real life that positively encouraged Blacks. Corporal Brown didn't like her being called Ticey. He said to her, "*Ticey is a slave name, and I don't like slavery. I'm going to call you, Jane*" (Gaines 8). That's how she got her name. She was so proud! He was one person who cared about her and that is why, once freed, she set out to find him. I believe that she felt that once she found him she would be safe and have the peace she was really looking for. Here is another example of how Gaines covers my theory that influencing people should be included in an autobiography. This was a person who positively influenced Jane. In telling this particular part of Jane's life, it taught me how Jane got her name.

The Color of Water, which is an autobiography and a black man's tribute to his white mother, written by James McBride, not only tells the entire life of McBride, but also tells the entire life of his mother. James and his mother both narrate it. In this book, James talks about how it was for him growing up bi-racial, his mother being a white Jewish woman and his dad

being African American. His mother talks about how it was being white, Jewish, married to a black man, and living in a very prejudice society.

While growing up, James was very worried about his mother. He looked at her white skin as being very different from those around them. His mother chose to live in a black community instead of a white community. I think this was not only because she felt that black people were more loving than the Jewish family that she grew up in, but also because her children would be more accepted. She was trying to spare her children from being ridiculed by white people, most of which were prejudice. She didn't care that she was different. James knew that there were blacks that were also prejudice when it came to the whites. All the talk about black power made him fear for his mother's life. His mother, however, was not afraid. I think she also felt more accepted by blacks than whites. She had been through so many bad things growing up. The people she chose to live amongst were a breath of fresh air considering the Jewish customs she was raised by and the fact that she was molested by her father who was supposed to be an Orthodox Jewish Rabbi.

This part of the book fits into my theory that you should tell everything about yourself, even if it is a terribly embarrassing event. How would we know about the bad things people go through in life if they didn't tell about it? How would we know why a person is the way they are if we don't have the understanding of why? This is where my idea of the healing process comes in. The more we teach each other, the closer we get to understanding why things happen the way they do.

Ruth's father was constantly saying that he hated black people and would call their children bad names in Yiddish. He would say, "*Look at them laughing. They don't have a dime in their pocket and they're always laughing.*" (McBride 61) During this part of Ruth's story, she

recalls how her father had plenty of money, but her family was still miserable. I think this taught Ruth something. I think she learned from her poor, black neighbors that richness and being happy comes from love and family closeness and not from how much money you have in your pocket.

While James struggled with his identity his mother stayed strong, and taught her children what the true meaning of “family” really is. One day when James was young, he and his mother were on their way home from church and he asked her if God was black or white. His mother responded by saying, *“Oh boy...God’s not black. He’s not white. He’s a spirit.”* Then James says, *“Does he like white or black people better?”* His mother says, *“He loves all people. He’s a spirit.”* James then asks his mother, *“What’s a spirit?”* His mother tells him, *“A spirit’s a spirit.”* Then James asks, *“What color is God’s spirit?”* His mother answers by saying, *“It doesn’t have a color. God is the color of water. Water does not have a color.”* (McBride 51) In my eyes, Ruth is a very wise woman who taught her children well. Her answer to James’ question was perfect. This covers the part of my theory in including spiritual background. Ruth faithfully took her children to church and taught them where they were confused.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to and written by Alex Haley, is a perfect example of my Autobiographical Theory. In telling every graphic detail of the good and bad points of his life in order that they happened, showed me how Malcolm was constantly growing as a person. His childhood stories of his father, the welfare system breaking up the family after his father’s death, his mother being placed in a mental institution as a result, school and the teachers who discouraged him, are all important factors that helped me understand what led Malcolm to a life of crime. The detailed stories of his crime life and prison, along with the early stories, are all important factors that helped me to understand why Malcolm changed his way of

life to support and believe in the Nation of Islam. All his stories of Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam and Malcolm's trips to Mecca helped me understand how Malcolm finally found what was right and good. After reading this book, I feel that Malcolm truly was a great man who not only wanted the best for his people, but also wanted the best for all people. Too many people today still feel that he was a radical leader that taught hate. Maybe at one point in his life he was and did and can you really blame him?

Malcolm tells the story of his father's death and how three of his father's siblings died at the hands of white men. He talks about how their home was burnt down and how the Ku Klux Klan would pay visits to them. He talks a lot about the white people in his life that steered him away from being the best that he could be. He held the highest grades in his class when he told his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, that he wanted to be a lawyer. Mr. Ostrowski replied by saying, "*Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you have to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something that you can be*" (Haley 43). Mr. Ostrowski was great at encouraging the white students to be all that they could be, but that was not the case for Malcolm. This is just one of the events that happened in Malcolm's life that led him to hate white people. This made Malcolm feel very uneasy towards this particular person who was white. In this chapter Malcolm says, "*What made it really begin to disturb me was Mr. Ostrowski's advice to others in my class---all of them white...they all reported that he had encouraged what they wanted. Yet nearly none of them had earned marks equal to mine. It was a surprising thing that I had never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn't, I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be*" (Haley 44).

This fulfills my theory that an autobiography should include the subject's feelings toward others who have had some type of effect on his or her life. This particular person, along with others and the Nation of Islam, helped Malcolm decide that all white people are bad. In telling this part of his story, I understand him more. This also shows me how, back then there was not much opportunity for the black man. This problem caused the black man to use his skills for bad things instead of good things because that was the only choice they were given. This is what caused Malcolm to be a hustler, pimp, drug dealer and eventually an addict. For me, Malcolm's autobiography was a teaching tool for everyone regardless of color. It fulfills my theory in many ways by including tragic events, bad choices, people of influence and the effects they had on his life, spiritual beliefs, cultural and ethnic background, along with many more points of interest.

In writing a memoir, one should talk fully of the subject in particular he or she is writing about. I am writing a book about my house. My house is not my whole life, just a part of it. This would be a historical memoir of home place, which will include stories of all my ancestors, and living family members who have lived in my house along with pictures and special memories that I am collecting from family members who are still here today. This will preserve the history of my house, which for my family, dates back to the year 1923. This book will also include copies of all deeds to my house.

Marilyn Gardner's article "From Memory To Printed Page" talks about weeklong course that is taught by Denis Ledoux. Mr. Ledoux is the director of the Soleil Lifestory Network in Lisbon Falls, Maine. This article includes interviews with Mr. Ledoux and some of the students taking his course. They talk about their reasons for writing a memoir. Most of them talk about writing about their lives to preserve family history. In this article Mr. Ledoux suggests topics for his students to write about. He says, "Write about your introduction to work. What is work

for you in your life? Write about your marriage relationship – your hopes and expectations, your needs. Write about your children. Writing about your child’s childhood is like giving gold to somebody.” He also states that another crucial topic is one’s spiritual journey (Gardner 4). Mr. Ledoux seems to have the same ideas for memoir writing as I do.

I am very excited about writing my book. My mother and her two sisters will be the first to receive copies. I am hoping that it will bring them back together. I feel that if they read this special preservation of their own history in the place they called home, which has been home to many of us, it will make them close again. Also, since this is such a special place to me that is now mine and will be passed down to my children, I want them to know the history of it and the people who lived here. My aunt has researched our family genealogy and because of this I know where I came from. I know who my ancestors are, from myself back sixty generations. A lot of them have stories of their lives included with their names, birth dates and death dates. I sure would like to have life stories for all the others that only include names and dates. Because of not having those stories, I have realized the importance of memoir and autobiographical writing. After I am finished with this book, I am going to write my own autobiography. This is something that I want to do mostly for my own children. I will, however, include stories of family members in this book. I’m hoping that it will help my children to see me in a different and more positive way.

Nicci Yang’s article titled, “Memoir Writing” is about op-ed and ad writer Cathleen O’Connor Schoultz. Schoultz says she has always been drawn to writing about feelings, but feelings by themselves cannot create a memoir. She says, “A memoir’s key element is memory. A memory and the feelings it reawakens are the beginning of memoir writing” (Yang 1). As I stated in my own theory, a memoir can be a healing tool for the one writing it and the one

reading it. When writing my book about my family house, I believe that including the memories of others who have lived there and myself, will help my family members remember good things about each other along with preserving our history.

During Scholastic Scope's interview with Walter Dean Myers, titled "Turning Memories Into Memoir", Myers talks about why memoir writing is valuable. He says, "It clarifies your own thinking. You are ordering your thoughts to look at issues that are bothering you. There are issues in your life that you don't feel comfortable discussing, but if you write about them, you can deal with them" (Myers 1). His idea fulfills my theory of writing to heal yourself or others. If I am to write my own autobiography, it is not because I am uncomfortable discussing details of my life, it is because it comes out better in words when you write it. I have tried many times to explain to my kids why I am a certain way about something, but have a hard time saying it in the right words. I feel that if I write the story of my life and what I have gone through to become the way I am, it may be more understanding to them.

I have learned a lot this semester about autobiographical and memoir writing and I have come to the conclusion that to me, preserving the history of one's life and family history is the most important aspect of the whole idea. I want my family that is yet to come, to know about me when I am long gone. I don't want my descendants to know me only as a name and date.

Works Cited

- Gaines, Ernest J. The Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman. New York: Bantam Books, 1972.
- Gardner, Marilyn. "From Memory To Printed Page." Christian Science Monitor 93 (2001): 1-5
- Haley, Alex. The Autobiography of Malcolm X: Grove Press, 1965
- McBride, James. The Color of Water. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1997.
- Myers, Walter Dean. "Turning Memories Into Memoir". 6 Sept. 2002. Scholastic Scope : 1-2
- Stein, Sol. "Frank Talk About Writing Your Memoir." Writer 118 (2005): 1-5
- "Types of Autobiographic Writing". Center for Autobiographic Studies. 2005, Nov. 2005.<http://www.storyhelp.com/autotypes.html>. 1-9
- Yang, Nicci. "Memoir Writing". 29 Mar. 2005. Washington Independent Writers. 5 Nov. 2005. <http://www.washwriter.org>: 1-2