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## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CHARACTER SKETCH: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Among the oral histories of African Americans, autobiography ranks high; some could even claim it is the most important. There is a huge amount of criticism and commentary around black life-stories since they are such a potent force in and distinctive feature of modern society. The authors approach the topic from a variety of angles, including the literary, philosophical, social, and psychological. This variety is evidence of the genre's depth, the difficulty in categorizing its subgenres, and the wealth of knowledge and insight they convey.

**Key Words:** Autobiography, Contemporary culture, Perspectives

To know oneself is to experience oneself, and vice versa. Different people develop their senses at different rates when they are exposed to novel experiences. Ideas from Goethe's Reflections and Maxims sprang into my head. Novels, short stories, epic poems, plays, etc. are all included under the umbrella term "genre" in French.

Meyer H. Abrams writes that the conventions of this kind of writing "establish expectations that aid the reader in absorbing the text" (1993: 77). 1993, p. After the success of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, readers had high hopes for Maya Angelou's follow-up, *Gather Together in My Name*. The first-person point of view and an emphasis on the author's life experiences are hallmarks of this literary style.

Since World War II, African Americans in the United States have often used life stories as a means of self-expression. Today is the 10 year anniversary of *Black Boy's* first theatrical release. Reviews were positive and 325,000 people signed up to read it as part of the Book of the Month Club. Wright's ability to transport readers back in time to his youth in Mississippi via his memories and the reader's imagination allowed him to portray the postwar American psyche. As an example, W.E.B. Du Bois, whose book *Dusk of Dawn* came out five years before, was a formidable opponent.

The context for both works is provided by their subtitles. Wright's *A Record of Childhood and Youth* serves as a sobering reminder that *Black Boy* is not fiction but rather an interpretation of real events, while Du Bois's *An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* demonstrates the lengths to which he is willing to go to produce a truly autobiographical account. The works of writers like Du Bois and Wright have pushed the boundaries of the black autobiography genre, allowing for more examination, criticism, and creation of black life and culture. Since the publication of these landmark works, authors of African descent have been using the memoir form to tell their tales. Du Bois and Wright have both utilized their work to reclaim a place in history and the present, despite the fact that they come from very different backgrounds. Considering the potential literary and historical value of autobiographies, they have served as sources of inspiration for a wide range of writers.

A cultural achievement was achieved, one that pays tribute to the likes of Langston Hughes, Ida Wells Barnett, James Weldon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, and the nineteenth-century slave narrators on whose stories Du Bois and Wright relied as children. Paperbacks of masterpieces from the 1960s and 1970s were widely distributed in classrooms, libraries, pharmacies, and grocery stores, ensuring their continued fame and popularity. The autobiographical success rate for many authors of color is higher than that of white authors. In it you'll find the likes of Billie Holiday, Andante Shaw, Claude Brown, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, W.E.B. Dubois, Dick Gregory, Maya Angelou, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Angela Davis (Ned Cobb).

These and similar literary techniques unite the black author with his audience and galvanize them to back his quest for civil rights and cultural autonomy. Because of the potential for these stories to alter one's sense of self, sociologists and cultural theorists are concerned about them. The significance of black autobiography in today's culture is becoming more apparent to the general public. These perspectives have been impacted by many different fields, including history, ideology, literature, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. The genre's intricacy, difficulty in categorizing its subgenres, subject matter, and competence are all on display in the wide range of methods taken to it.

Many historians have examined slavery and slave narratives, but much fewer have looked at contemporary black life via autobiography. Ulrich Phillips', Stanley Elkins', and Daniel Moyaniham's disagreements illustrate the need to examine black historical generalizations in light of black men's unique experiences. Scientists like E. Franklin Frazier, St. Clair Drake, Lee Rainwater, and historians like John Hope Franklin and Kenneth Stampp, all known for their sensitivity, have either avoided autobiographies or treated them only in terms of their explicit content, without giving any thought to the language, style, or psychological aspects of these personal documents.

Autobiographies are a way to let off steam by providing a creative narrative, personal history, and mental energy release.

Since literary critics place so much importance on language and presentation, it should come as no surprise that the literary approach to black life is more insightful than the historical. Sidonie Smith and Stephen Butterfield have done new research that builds on and expands upon the work of Rebecca Chalmers Barton. The expanding corpus of knowledge is demystified by concise introductory pieces by John Blassingame, Michael G. Cooke, and Roger Rosenblatt and in-depth studies by Houston A. Baker, Warner Berthoff, George E. Kent, David Levinson, and Carol Ohmann. Researchers are looking at the innovative potential of the offspring of Du Bois and Wright. Each individual and their life experiences are "unrepeatable entities," according to James Olney, hence there are no rules or limits for writing an autobiography (1972: 21).

Memoirs are the most reliable source of information when writing about African American history. Long before 1853, when the first book written by an African-American was published, people of African descent had been recording and preserving their history. The subtitle is appropriate, considering that William Wells Brown became famous as a writer because he wrote about his experiences as a runaway slave. Autobiography and fiction have had a lively dialogue in African American writing. The memoirs written by African-American authors in the last several years have been lacking in both rhetorical skill and cultural significance. A black critic's contention that "ours is a self-reflective lineage" is supported by the fact that some well-known works by African Americans in the 20th century read like or are presented as memoirs (1993: 1). 1993:1.

A black critic's claim that "ours is an extraordinarily self-reflexive heritage" is supported by the fact that some of the most important works by African Americans in the 20th century resemble autobiography (1993: 1).

Robert B. Stepney claims in his work that African American storytelling has a call-and-response structure (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979). Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s introspective works such as *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey* (1993) provide more evidence.

It is the story of African Americans' fight for freedom in the 18th century that "long black song" narrates (Houston A. Baker, 1972). Autobiographies written by African Americans since that time have served as a monument to the aspiration of people of color to realize the potential of their American history and to share the stories of their own and African Americans' achievements with the world. For decades, African American authors have turned to autobiography as a potent tool for confronting and altering the social and cultural realities of the United States.

Reading about slaves who fought back motivated white readers more than any other antislavery speech for 19th century abolitionists. The first comprehensive scientific study of African American (or American) autobiography was published in 1948 by Rebecca Chalmers Barton under the title *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography*. Although they convinced America's literary elite to rethink the metaphysical connection between writing and social struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called black revolutionary writers of that period

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have been mostly forgotten. Since then, the antebellum slave narrative has received more critical attention than any other subgenre of American autobiography, lending credence to the idea that black life-writing illustrates the urgency with which the United States must address its past if it is to progress.

The literary and social significance of African American autobiography remains debated twenty years after Barton's seminal work. The focus of academic and popular attention on African American autobiography has shifted from author biographies, which might provide light on the book's relevance to the study of history and behavior, to evaluations of the vehicles and graphs represented in and by the book (writing). Many reviewers of African American autobiographies shifted their focus from issues of race to questions of self and identity in response to the Black Power and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The persistence with which black autobiographers of the 1980s and 1990s questioned these authors' writing styles might be seen as a precursor to the post-structuralist unwillingness to award any work, particularly autobiography, credibility. To better understand the rhetorical choices black autobiographers made and the restrictions they faced, scholars and critics have begun the most comprehensive research on black autobiography to date. Because of this effort, previously lost works of literature have been reprinted.

Republishing works by Harriet Jacobs and Zora Neale Hurston enables readers to reevaluate what black authors have genuinely written in light of biographical, historical, and critical study on African American autobiography. Researchers may devote more effort to analyzing the experiences, perspectives, and historical contexts of black autobiographers as a result of "reclaiming" movements.

Scholars and critics are refining their approaches as a consequence of this in-depth study of African American autobiography. An effort is also underway to include autobiographies like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of His Life* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in the American literary canon. There's also the argument that it's a mistake to apply Western-style normative ideas about life, the self, and writing to the study of black American autobiography. Those who disagree with the positive reception of African American memoirs have urged for more nuanced standards of literary evaluation. Assumptions that imply a consistent Western standard by which

all autobiographies may be examined have been rejected in this criticism, restoring the study of black American life-stories as its own field.

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