

Teaching

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

An Online Professional Development Seminar



AMERICA *in* CLASS®

from the National Humanities Center

GOAL

- To probe the complexity of Franklin's *Autobiography* and pose ways of reading that respond to that complexity.

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- Is Franklin the representative American? If so, how?
- How does Franklin's *Autobiography* embody Enlightenment thought?
- How does it reveal the strengths and limits of Enlightenment thought?
- What was Franklin's attitude toward religion?
- Why is Franklin's *Autobiography* considered an American classic?



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Alone in America: The Stories that Matter (2013)

The Trial in American Life (2007)

The Federalist Papers (ed.) (2006)

Reading the Early Republic (2004)

The American Enlightenment 1750-1820 (1997)

Law and Letters in American Life (1987)

Benjamin Franklin (1806-1890) and His *Autobiography*

- Wrote his autobiography in four stages and by bits and snatches across twenty years between 1771 and 1790.
- The most famous and longest first section was completed in just thirteen days.
- Called a Memoir at the time.
- Stops with random notes about his life in 1759, never reaching the events for which we now remember Franklin, his contributions to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, his role in securing the Treaty of Paris ending the Revolution in 1783, and his membership in the Federal Convention of 1787 that results in the Constitution of the United States.
- Scattered and episodic nature of Franklin's account of his early life, the sometimes elusive persona he presents on the page, and the subtle tones of his writing style make it a difficult text to teach well despite classic moments and extraordinary power.

D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) and *Studies in Classic American Literature*

- Better known as a major British writer of fiction of the 1920's with such controversial novels about intimate relations and calls for spontaneous feeling as *Women in Love* (1920) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928).
- His study of Franklin appears in *Studies in Classic American Literature* begun in 1917 but only finished in 1923 during an extended stay in the United States and Mexico.
- One of the first European works to treat American literature seriously.
- Dominated criticism for years, helped considerably by leading critic Edmund Wilson's claim that it was "one of the few first-rate books that have ever been written on the subject."

From the Neoclassical Franklin to the Romantic Lawrence

Eighteenth-century neoclassical ideals dominate the formative era of the American Republic.

- Strong reliance on classical antiquity,
- Celebration of reason as the path to enlightenment,
- Love of order
- Necessity of civic virtue
- Belief that nature and human society must cohere through the apparent connection of natural law to human law
- Willingness to trust in mechanism and science
- Reliance on method as the best source of understanding.

Romanticism emerges in the nineteenth-century.

- Trusts to intuition
- Spontaneous feeling
- Organic energy
- Individualism,
- Creativity,
- Natural feeling
- Imagination
- Centrality of personal relationships
- Separate integrity of the self

“I began now gradually to pay off the debt I was under for the printing-house. In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances to the contrary. I drest plainly; I was seen at no places of idle diversion. I never went out a fishing or shooting; a book, indeed, sometimes debauch'd me from my work, but that was seldom, snug, and gave no scandal; and, to show that I was not above my business, I sometimes brought home the paper I purchas'd at the stores thro' the streets on a wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem'd an industrious, thriving young man, and paying duly for what I bought, the merchants who imported stationery solicited my custom; others proposed supplying me with books, and I went on swimmingly. In the mean time, Keimer's credit and business declining daily, he was at last forc'd to sell his printing house to satisfy his creditors. He went to Barbadoes, and there lived some years in very poor circumstances.

Discussion Questions

- Why is the appearance of industry almost as important as the fact of it for Franklin?
- Do we approve the way he engineers that appearance?
- How is the one example of idleness in this passage self-serving?

“Reader, Be encouraged to Diligence in thy Calling.”
[Inscription he places on his Father’s tombstone.]

Discussion Questions

- What does diligence mean to Franklin?
- Why does Franklin want this passage placed on his Father's tombstone?

“About this time I met with an odd Volume of the Spectator. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the Writing excellent and wish’d if possible to imitate it. With that View, I took some of the Papers, and making short Hints of the Sentiment in each Sentence, laid them by a few Days, and then without looking at the Book, tried to complete the Papers again, by expressing each hinted Sentiment at length and as fully as it had been express’d before, in any suitable Words that should come to hand.

Then I compar’d my Spectator with the Original, discovered some of my Faults and corrected them....I took some of the Tales and turn’d them into Verse: And after a time, when I had pretty well forgotten the Prose, turn’d them back again. I also sometimes jumbled my Collections of Hints into Confusion, and after some Weeks, endeavour’d to reduce them into the best Order, before I began to form full Sentences, and complete the Paper. This was to teach me Method in the Arrangement of Thoughts.”

Discussion Question

What does this passage tell us about learning to write?

I put on the humble Enquirer and Doubter [through Socratic disputation]...I found this Method safest for myself [in argument] and very embarrassing to those against whom I used it, therefore I took a Delight in it, practic'd it continually and grew very artful and expert in drawing People even of superior Knowledge into Concessions the Consequences of which they did not foresee, entangling them in Difficulties of which they could not extricate themselves, and so obtaining Victories that neither myself nor my Cause always deserved. I continu'd this Method some few Years, but gradually left it, retaining only the Habit of expressing myself in Terms of modest Diffidence, never using when I advance anything that may possibly be disputed, the Words, *Certainly, undoubtedly*, or any others that give the Air of Positiveness to an Opinion....This Habit I believe has been of great Advantage to me, when I have had occasion to inculcate my Opinions and persuade Men into Measures that I have been from time to time engag'd in promoting....Pope says judiciously,

*Men should be taught as if you taught them not,
And things unknown propos'd as things forgot,*

farther recommending it to us,

To speak tho' sure, with seeming Diffidence.

Discussion Questions

- How does Franklin present himself here?
- Is this a good strategy in dealing with people? If so, what can we learn from it today?

I have been the more particular in this Description of my Journey, and shall be so of my first Entry into that City, that you may in your Mind compare such unlikely Beginning with the Figure I have since made there. I was in my **working Dress**, my best Clothes being to come round by Sea. I was **dirty** from my Journey; my Pockets were stuff'd out with Shirts and Stockings; **I knew no Soul, nor where to look for Lodging**. I was **fatigu'd** with Travelling, Rowing and Want of Rest. I was very **hungry**, and my whole Stock of Cash consisted of a Dutch Dollar and about a Shilling of Copper. The latter I gave to the People of the Boat for my Passage, who at first refus'd it on Account of my Rowing; but I insisted on their taking it, a Man being sometimes more generous when he has but a little Money than when he has plenty, perhaps thro' Fear of being thought to have but little. Then I walk'd up the Street, **gazing about**, till near the Market House I met a Boy with Bread. I had made many a Meal on Bread, and inquiring where he got it, I went immediately to the Baker's he directed me to in Second Street; and ask'd for Biscuit, intending such as we had in Boston, but they it seems were not made in Philadelphia, then I ask'd for a three-penny Loaf, and was told they had none such: **so not considering or knowing the Difference of Money and the Greater Cheapness nor the Names of his Bread**, I bade him give me three pennyworth of any sort. He gave me accordingly three great Puffy Rolls. I was surprised at the Quantity, but took it, and having no Room in my Pockets, walk'd off with a Roll under each Arm, and eating the other. Thus I went up Market Street as far as Fourth Street, passing by the Door of Mr. Read, my future Wife's Father, when she standing at the Door saw me, and thought I made as I certainly did a most awkward ridiculous Appearance."

Discussion Questions

- Why do Americans believe so fervently in the story of Franklin's first entrance into Philadelphia?
- How true do you think it is? How does Franklin make it seem so true?

I went to see him [James] at his Printing-House. I was better dress'd than ever while in his Service, having a genteel new Suit from Head to foot, a Watch, and my Pockets lin'd with near Five Pounds Sterling in Silver. He receiv'd me not very frankly, look'd me all over, and turn'd to his Work again. The Journeymen were inquisitive where I had been, what sort of a Country it was, and how I lik'd it? I prais'd it much, and the happy Life I led in it; expressing strongly my Intention of returning to it; and one of them asking what kind of Money we had there, I produc'd a handful of Silver and spread it before them, which was a kind of Raree-Show they had not been us'd to, Paper being the Money of Boston. Then I took an Opportunity of letting them see my Watch: and lastly, (my Brother still grum and sullen) I gave them a Piece of Eight to drink and took my leave. This Visit of mine offended him extremely. For when my Mother some time after spoke to him of a Reconciliation, and of her Wishes to see us on good Terms together, and that we might live for the future as Brothers, he said, I had insulted him in such a Manner before his People that he could never forget or forgive it. In this however he was mistaken.

Discussion Questions

- How does Franklin use money in this passage?
- Is he sincere in his assertion that his brother “was mistaken”?

I believe I have omitted mentioning that in my first Voyage from Boston, being becalm'd off Block Island, our People set about catching Cod and haul'd up a great many. Hitherto I had struck to my Resolution of not eating animal Food; and on this Occasion, I consider'd with my Master Tryon,* the taking every Fish as a kind of unprovok'd Murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any Injury that might justify the Slaughter. All this seem'd very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish, and when this came hot out of the Frying Pan, it smelt admirably well. I balanc'd some time between Principle and Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs: Then, thought I, if you eat one another, I don't see why we mayn't eat you. So I din'd upon Cod very heartily and continu'd to eat with other People, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable Diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do.

*Thomas Tryon, *Way to Health* (1683), p. 343. "Flesh and Fish cannot be eaten without Violence, and doing that which a man would not be done unto."

Discussion Questions

- How does Franklin present reason in this passage?
- How much does he believe in it?

“We have an English Proverb that says,
He that would thrive
Must ask his Wife,

it was lucky for me that I had one as much dispos'd to Industry and Frugality as myself. She assisted me cheerfully in my Business, folding and stitching Pamphlets, tending Shop, purchasing Old Linen Rags for the Paper-makers, etc., etc. We kept no idle Servants, our Table was plain and simple, our Furniture of the cheapest. For instance my Breakfast was a long time Bread and Milk, (no Tea,) and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen Porringer with a Pewter Spoon. But mark how Luxury will enter Families, and make a Progress, in Spite of Principle. Being Call'd one Morning to Breakfast. I found it in a China Bowl with a Spoon of Silver. They had been bought for me without my Knowledge by my Wife, and had cost her the enormous Sum of three and twenty Shillings, for which she had no other Excuse or Apology to make, but that she thought *her* Husband deserv'd a Silver Spoon and China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbors. This was the first Appearance of Plate and China in our House, which afterwards in a Course of Years as our Wealth increas'd, augmented gradually to several Hundred Pounds in Value.”

Discussion Questions

- How important are proverbs to Franklin?
- Is he telling us the truth about his wealth in this passage?

The five *errata*.

- a. Running out on the secret indenture with his brother.
- b. Breaking into Vernon's money.
- c. Writing Deborah only once from London.
- d. Printing "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity."
- e. Attempting familiarities with Ralph's milliner friend.

Discussion Questions

- What is an "erratum"? What does it suggest about Franklin that he describes his shortcomings as "errata"?
- Why does he confess his mistakes?
- What do Franklin's many confessions signify?
- What do we think of the specific errors that he admits to and his correction of them?
How candid are these sections of the memoir?
- Which erratum is most important and why?

“Like the Man who in buying an Axe of a Smith my Neighbor, desire to have the whole of its Surface as bright as the Edge; the Smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the Wheel. He turn’d while the Smith press’d the broad Face of the Axe hard and heavily on the Stone, which made the Turning of it very fatiguing. The Man came every now and then from the Wheel to see how the Work went on; and at length would take his Axe as it was without farther Grinding. No, says the Smith, Turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by and by; as yet ‘tis only speckled. Yes, says the Man; but—*I think I like a speckled Axe best.*”

Discussion Questions

- What is the point of this anecdote?
- What is Franklin suggesting about the fit object of our ambitions and the amount of effort we should invest in them?

I respected and lov'd him: and we might have gone on together happily. But in the Beginning of February, 1726/7 when I had just pass'd my 21st Year, we both were taken ill. My distemper, a Pleurisy, which very nearly carried me off: I suffered a good deal, gave up the Point in my own mind, and was rather disappointed when I found myself recovering; regretting in some degree that I must now sometime or other have all that disagreeable Work to do over again. I forget what his Distemper was. It held him a long time, and at length carried him off. He left me a small Legacy in a nuncupative [oral] Will as a Token of his Kindness for me, and he left me once more to the wide World.

Discussion Questions

- What can we say about Franklin's apparent attitude toward the one person who seems to have helped him generously and without reservation early in life?
- Do we accept this seemingly rather casual account of Franklin's closest brush with death in the *Autobiography*?
- Do we learn more about his attitude toward industry and work here?

Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such; but I entertain'd an Opinion, that tho' certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them; yet probaby those actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered. And this persuasion, with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian Angel, or accidental favourable Circumstances or Situations, or all together, preserved me thro' this dangerous Time of Youth.

Discussion Questions

- What is the relation between faith and reason in this passage?
- What are we supposed to learn from this passage?
- How religious is Franklin?

From *Studies in Classic American Literature*

“The ideal man! And which is he, if you please? Benjamin Franklin or Abraham Lincoln? The ideal man! Roosevelt or Porfirio Diaz?” [Mexican dictator]

Discussion Questions

- With whom does Lawrence compare Franklin?
- Why does Lawrence make these particular comparisons with Franklin in the search for an ideal American?

“The perfectibility of man, dear God! When every man as long as he remains alive is in himself a multitude of conflicting men. Which of these do you choose to perfect, at the expense of every other? Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He’ll rig him up for you, the pattern American. Oh, Franklin was the first down-right American. He knew what he was about, the sharp little man. He set up the first dummy American.

At the beginning of his career this cunning little Benjamin drew up for himself a creed that should ‘satisfy the professors of every religion, but shock none.’”

Discussion Questions

- Why is D.H. Lawrence so angry with Franklin?
- Does he understand what Franklin was trying to do?
- Does he read Franklin accurately?

Franklin's Virtues

1. TEMPERANCE

Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.

2. SILENCE

Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.

5. FRUGALITY

Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.

7. SINCERITY

Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

9. MODERATION

Avoid extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

Lawrence's Virtues

1. TEMPERANCE

Eat and carouse with Bacchus, or munch dry bread with Jesus, but don't sit down without one of the gods.

2. SILENCE

Be still when you have nothing to say; when genuine passion moves you, say what you've got to say, and say it hot.

5. FRUGALITY

Demand nothing; accept what you see fit. Don't waste your pride or squander your emotion.

7. SINCERITY

To be sincere is to remember that I am I, and that the other man is not me.

9. MODERATION

Beware of absolutes. There are many gods.

Discussion Question

Can we reconcile these contrasting lists of virtues or are the divides too great?

“[C]rammed in the corners [my father’s almanac] had little anecdotes and humorisms, with a moral tag. And I used to have my little priggish laugh at the woman who counted her chickens before they were hatched and so forth, and I was convinced that honesty was the best policy, also a little priggishly. The author if these little bits was Poor Richard, and Poor Richard was Benjamin Franklin, writing in Philadelphia well over a hundred years ago.

And probably I haven’t got over those Poor Richard tags yet. I rankle still with them. They are thorns in young flesh.

Because, although I still believe that honesty is the best policy, I dislike policy altogether; though it is just as well not to count your chickens before they are hatched, it’s still more hateful to count them with gloating when they are hatched. It has taken me many years and countless smarts to get out of that barbed wire moral enclosure that Poor Richard rigged up.”

Discussion Question

Why does Lawrence hate the proverbs?

“And now I, at least, know why I can’t stand Benjamin. He tries to take away my wholeness and my dark forest, my freedom. For how can any man be free, without an illimitable background? And Benjamin tries to shove me into a barbed wire paddock and make me grow potatoes or Chicagoes.”

Discussion Questions

- Why is D.H. Lawrence so angry with Franklin?
- Does he understand what Franklin was trying to do?
- Does he read Franklin accurately?

Benjamin, in his sagacity, knew that the breaking of the old world was a long process. In the depths of his own under-consciousness he hated England, he hated Europe, he hated the whole corpus of the European being. He wanted to be American. But you can't change your nature and mode of consciousness like changing your shoes. It is a gradual shedding. Years must go by, and centuries must elapse before you have finished. Like a son escaping from the domination of his parents. The escape is not just one rupture. It is a long and half-secret process.”

Discussion Questions

- Why does Lawrence not want to recognize that Franklin loved both Europe and America and had a hard time choosing between them?
- Why doesn't he want to recognize Franklin as the truest cosmopolitan figure and ambassador at large of his age, a man who crossed the Atlantic Ocean no less than seven times, an unprecedented number for the times?

“The spiritual home of America was, and still is, Europe. This is the galling bondage, in spite of several billions of heaped-up gold. Your heaps of gold are only so many muck-heaps, America, and will remain so till you become a reality to yourselves.

All this Americanizing and mechanizing has been for the purpose of overthrowing the past. And now look at America, tangled in her own barbed wire, and mastered by her own machines.... Now is your chance, Europe. Now let Hell loose and get your own back, and paddle your own canoe on a new sea, while clever America lies on her muck-heaps of gold, strangled in her own barbed wire of shalt-not ideals and shalt-not moralisms. While she goes out to work like millions of squirrels in millions of cages.”

Discussion Question

Franklin is admittedly an enormous proponent of financial prosperity and the making of money. Does Lawrence accurately capture the problems with this, and is he right to blame Franklin for it?

Final slide.

Thank You