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# UNIT 1 BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN INTRODUCTION

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## Structure

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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We shall discuss the characteristics of biography and autobiography in this Unit. If you read this Unit carefully, you will be able to:

- outline the various aspects of biography;
- describe the origins and development of biography;
- define the forms of biography and autobiography;
- explain the features of autobiography;
- describe the differences between biography and autobiography.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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We have already discussed some forms of prose in the previous Blocks. In this Unit, we shall give you a brief introduction to biography and autobiography. We shall discuss autobiography as a form of prose in some detail in the next two Units by taking up passages from two-famous autobiographies. We will also give you adequate exposure to a biography and will also highlight the differences between the two.

Biographical literature is a very old form of human expression. It attempts to recreate the life of an individual by drawing upon either memory, written or oral evidence, or even pictures. While biography is the record of someone else's life, autobiography is the story of one's own life written in the first person. In the following sections you will find out more about the differences between the two forms.

We expect you to read each section carefully and then attempt the exercises. You can then turn to the end of the Unit to check if your answers are correct.

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## 1.2 WHAT IS BIOGRAPHY?

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### What is Biography?

We know that biography as a literary form is the written story of the life of an individual. Is this story 'true' or 'fictional'? Should it be written in prose or verse? Are there any special methods by which this story can be written? Before we examine these questions at some length, let us define biography. Broadly, it may be defined as a truthful account of the life of an individual, written in prose. A biography is the life of an individual as opposed to a group. While it may depict several characters, these are depicted only in relation to the individual whose life is being recreated. In short, the focus is always on the individual. A biography must be a truthful account. But while a good biography must be factual it must also be something more. It must have literary value. Now we might well ask: in what does this literary value lie? We may locate it in the writer's use of language. Or in his/her imaginative selection and use of documentary evidence so that the work emerges as a unified whole. Or in the writer's use of literary devices. However, we would like to point out that all these factors contribute to the literary quality of a biography. To sum up, a biography must combine the authenticity of history and the creativity of fiction.

### Biography and History

Biography is closely related to history on the one hand and to fiction on the other. It is related to history because like history, it deals with the past and it also makes use of the same resources that a historian needs for research. Does that mean that biography is a branch of history? No. The crucial difference lies in the fact that history is a factual record of individuals and events. In biography, the focus is not on the background but on the individual. The aim of the biographer is not just to convey facts but to probe into the psyche of the individual and to make him/her come alive. This imaginative rendering of personal experience links biography to fiction. But fiction is primarily imaginative whereas biography aims at truthful presentation of detail.

### Biography and Fiction

Thus we see that the biographer needs to employ the methods of the historian as well as of the writer of fiction. Biography uses the techniques of research to test whether the material at hand is true or false. The biographer must also make a selection of interesting and relevant incidents. By imposing a certain design on the selected material the writer must transform the lifeless material into a living experience. Thus biography has many aspects. It is historical, psychological and aesthetic. It is historical because it provides a factual account of the life of an individual. It is psychological because it probes into the mind of the individual. And it is aesthetic because the writer imposes a certain design on his/her material and renders it pleasing by his/her use of language and other literary devices. As an art form, it not only aims to delight the reader but also to provide a certain insight into the character of another individual. The reader is made to identify with certain feelings and experiences of the characters who seem to come alive.

### Biography as an Art Form

How can we distinguish between a well-composed and a sub-standard biography? There are several ways in which a biography can be marred. Sometimes there is

an undue tendency to celebrate and praise the dead by suppressing unpalatable facts. At other times, the author's personality intrudes unnecessarily into the narrative. At other times a biography suffers if the author starts with a certain thesis or preconceived idea and bends facts to suit it.

On the other hand, a well-written biography, is an honest portrayal of historical facts without suppressing any unpleasant truth. There are no unnecessary digressions impeding the flow of the narrative and the events selected are apt and to the point. A good biography is brief and gripping so that it might seem as if one is reading an interesting novel. As Leon Edel puts it 'The biographer may be as imaginative as he pleases – the more imaginative the better – in the way in which he brings his material together. But he must not imagine the materials. He must read himself into the past, but then he must read that past into our present. (*Literary Biography*, p.31) This clearly means that writing a biography involves exhaustive research. But as a creative artist, the biographer must assimilate facts and then present them in the most interesting manner possible.

### Use of Time

Does a biography proceed in strict chronological sequence? This is a question that you might well ask! As biography is not history it is not necessary to follow the birth to death sequence. The biographer does not have to begin his/her account of the individual's life from the day s/he was born and conclude the narrative at the death. The biographer can and often does use time in a flexible manner, moving forward and backward in time. Thus an individual life is not portrayed strictly by the clock. This method helps to make the person come alive, as Leon Edel believes (*Literary Biography*, xvi).

### Selection of Details

Lytton Strachey, an extremely successful practitioner of the form, suggests that a biography must have 'a brevity which excludes anything that is redundant and nothing that is significant' (*Preface to Eminent Victorians*). Does this mean that a biography has to be brief? There are no hard and fast rules about the length of a biography. It may run into hundreds of pages as we find in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* or it may be as brief as a character sketch. The idea is to make the character come alive and to project an impression of unity in the work. The length then becomes a matter of individual choice.

### Why do we Read Biography?

Clearly different persons would have different reasons for selecting specific reading material. Curiosity about the lives of others may be one reason for reading biographies. However, the function of biography is not only to interest and delight but also to stimulate our sympathy so that our understanding of the human condition is enhanced and our sympathies extended. It is for this reason that Lytton Strachey described biography as 'the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing'. H.W. Longfellow, the American poet has said:

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime  
And departing leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time



iii) Why do people read biography? Give your reasons in about 4-5 sentences

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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### 1.3 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BIOGRAPHY

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#### Earliest Biographical Literature

The initial impulse towards biography can be found in the ancient sagas and epics and elegies written to commemorate dead friends, relatives and public figures. The first biography was written by the fifth century B.C. Greek poet, Ion of Chios. He wrote brief sketches of his famous contemporaries such as Pericles and Sophocles. The Church also began to record the lives of its early founders and saints. This branch of biography is called hagiography or commemoration of the lives of saints. At this point, another function was added to biography. At the very beginning only the dead were commemorated, but now it became didactic as well. The lives were recorded in order to provide ethical models of conduct for others. While the history of biography is as old as human history, the word biography was first used only in the seventeenth century to create an identity for this kind of writing.

#### Development of Biography

Biography, as we now understand the term, began to appear in the sixteenth century. Cardinal Morton's *Life of Richard III* (circa 1513) and *Cavendish's Life of Wolsey* (1554-7) are two of the first biographies written. The more famous of seventeenth century biographies are Bacon's *Life of Henry VIII* (1612) and Walton's *Lives* (1640-78). Among the biographies written in the eighteenth century, also known as the age of prose, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) established the form beyond doubt. Johnson's contribution to the form consists in insisting that only the undiluted truth be told. Boswell broke the stiffness and formality of tone by speaking in his natural voice. In the nineteenth century, primarily an age of the novel, there was a decline in the form but the more famous biographies written are Lockhart's *Life of Scott* (1837-38) and Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* (1863). In the Victorian age the decline also occurred because of the undue tendency to eulogize.

#### Biography in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century, however, has seen a flowering of the form. Lytton Strachey found himself famous after the publication of *Eminent Victorians* (1918). This set the trend for debunking or exposing the feet of clay of venerated public figures. There was a change in point of view as well. The author was no longer the admiring sympathetic underling in the service of the hero/heroine but an equal

who may admire or be critical according to his/her understanding of the situation. The impulse to eulogize was replaced by the impulse to reconstruct the life as vividly as possible. Instead of the tendency to praise or hero worship, the twentieth century witnessed an increasing trend of presenting the characters in their human dimension with all their positive and negative aspects. This Virginia Woolf termed as the 'new biography'. Another prominent example of this is Leon Edel's biography of the famous American novelist Henry James.

Another visible change in twentieth century biography was the reduced length. Biography no longer ran into several volumes but was often the size of a novel. The biographer was no longer a chronicler but an artist. Biography thus acquired an aesthetic dimension. The biographer did not just portray the outer life of work and activity but also the inner life of emotion and thought. There were no fixed standards of morality to which the subject must conform. The interest was in the individual as a human being with all his/her faults and idiosyncrasies. Biography from its status as a hybrid form began to acquire an identity as a distinct genre.

Let us now examine some of the different forms of biography.

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## 1.4 FORMS OF BIOGRAPHY

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There are many kinds of biographies but let us broadly place them in two categories – those compiled by first hand knowledge of the individual and those compiled by research. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) belongs to the first category. Boswell was a friend and admirer of the great literary figure of his age, Samuel Johnson. As such Boswell spent a lot of time with him observing him and recording his conversations in his diaries. On the other hand, Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* (1922) is a biography based on research. Also based on research are reference biographies that we find in Encyclopaedias and dictionaries of biographies. Their function is to provide factual information. However, we are interested in biography as a literary form and will not discuss biographies used purely for reference purposes.

Some biographies are written subjectively with the author's personality intruding upon the narrative while others are written objectively and with detachment. In such cases, the author does not intrude with comments or explanations but recounts the main events so that we have an effect of a life unfolding itself. This form of biography is known as 'standard' biography. 'Fictionalized' biography, is another form in which: conversations are imagined and materials invented without any consideration for factual information. There is an attempt to fuse the appeal of biography with the charm of the novel. Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* (1959) is a fictional account of the life of Van Gogh, the famous Dutch painter. Allied to this form is fiction presented as biography – there is no attempt at authenticity. It is simply a novel written as biography or autobiography. Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) does not attempt to project itself as a life. The attempt is to evoke a life (the painter Gauguin's in this instance) rather than to recreate it.

In your course, you will find one passage from what we have just defined as 'standard' biographies. It is taken from Lytton Strachey's famous work *Queen Victoria*. We hope you will enjoy reading it.

## Check Your Progress 2

Answer the following questions in your own words.

- i) Describe the two main changes that took place in biography writing in the twentieth century.

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- ii) Name two famous biographies each from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

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## 1.5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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### What is Autobiography?

Autobiography is a branch of biographical literature written in subjective prose. It is unfinished as it is the story of a person who writes it him/herself. It is usually written at a later stage in life. The events are recollected either in chronological sequence or at random, moving back and forth in time. However, all autobiographies are not written when the author is old. For example, Dom Moraes wrote his autobiography entitled *My Son's Father* when he was only twenty two!

An autobiography may appear biased which is justifiable because a personal point of view is being presented. Details of personal experience are made interesting so that regardless of the fame or obscurity of the writer, the reader's attention is engaged and curiosity aroused. Writers talk freely about themselves making frequent use of the first person pronoun. The reader is expected to be sympathetic rather than to sit on judgement. What is important in such a literary form is not a rigid or strictly logical structure, but a spontaneous, easy and flexible movement. Thus we cannot judge autobiography in the same way as we would biography. In a biography, the objectivity of the writer is a major consideration in judging its overall merit.

### Informal Autobiography

Autobiographies can either be informal or formal. Informal autobiographies may or may not be intended for publication. Letters, diaries and journals fall within

this category. Letters of famous men like Byron are an index to their personalities and therefore of great interest to the reader. The young Jewish girl Anne Frank's *Diary* created such an impact that it has often been staged as well as filmed. Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals* (1897) record her experiences providing us with information about the little-known facts about her more famous brother, the poet Wordsworth. All these books represent a self-conscious form of revelation. But they are not important only for the information that they provide but are also aesthetically pleasing. Memoirs are another form of informal autobiography. Here the emphasis is on the events and experiences remembered rather than on the personality of the person who remembers.

### **Formal Autobiography**

Formal autobiography attempts to reconstruct a life through recollection. The autobiographer has the advantage of first-hand experience of his/her own subject i.e. him/herself. The problem that the author faces is that of striking a balance between sounding too modest or too aggressive. What are the other types of autobiographies? There are religious autobiographies like *St. Augustine's Confessions* (circa AD 397 to AD 401) and intellectual ones such as J.S. Mill's *Autobiography* (1873). (Mill's autobiography was published posthumously). Fictionalized autobiographies like James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916) transpose the actual experiences of the author onto a fictional plane and as such do not come under the category of biography.

### **Autobiography and Memoir**

An autobiography is distinct from a memoir. As Roy Pascal puts it, 'In the autobiography, proper attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others' (*Design and Truth in Autobiography RKP*, 1960, p.5). These two forms may be in the same book or even the same page. But the difference lies in the focus. In an autobiography the emphasis is always on the self. It is clear that the individual does not live outside society. And thus even in an autobiography, it is essential to portray people and places. But in general the interest remains mainly on the self.

### **Biography and Autobiography**

We have discussed some different types of biography and autobiography. Let us now look at the main differences between the two:

- 1) In autobiography, childhood is portrayed prominently. On the other hand, in biography the author concentrates on the active period of the individual especially his/her success.
- 2) The biographer places special emphasis on the death of the individual while in an autobiography, needless to say, death does not figure at all.
- 3) Autobiographies often feature the relationships with parents and siblings, biographies, on the other hand, deal with relationships with friends and colleagues who directly or indirectly contributed to the person's success.
- 4) A biographer has to rely on external evidence. He may have a close relationship with the subject. Or he may reconstruct his/her life by culling evidence from documents, diaries or letters. An autobiographer does not



need to rely on such evidence. S/he can take recourse to his/her memory. But that does not mean that the autobiographer does not make use of documentary evidence. As you read on, you will discover that Bertrand Russell made extensive use of letters in his *Autobiography*.

- 5) The main difference, as we know, lies in the point of view. In biography the life is recreated by a third person narrator, who may or may not be objective. In autobiography, the first person narrator is mainly subjective.

### Why do we read Autobiographies?

The reasons for reading autobiography are as manifold as those for reading biography. One reason could be curiosity and the other could be the desire to gain insight into the lives of people like ourselves. Another could be simply delight in the book as a work of art.

Autobiography, as you know is the most personal of literary forms. What are the ways of reading autobiography? One can read it as a historical record or as a work of art. A literary autobiography is read as a work of art. Here one would keep in mind the idea behind the writing. For example, how does the writer perceive his or her own nature and development and how does s/he give form to this perception? To put it simply, how does s/he shape his/her material? Another relevant question at this point would be: how effectively does s/he use language to convey his/her experience to the reader?

You will read two passages taken from the autobiographies of Bertrand Russell and Gandhi in this Block. You will notice the different styles, different experiences and the different cultures from which they arise. They are fine specimens of the autobiographic form and you will find that they make interesting reading.

### Check Your Progress 3

Answer the following questions in about 100 words each.

- i) What is autobiography? Name some forms of autobiography.

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- ii) What are the differences between biography and autobiography?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.)

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## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit, we have discussed:

- biography as a truthful account of the life of an individual;
- autobiography as a first-person unfinished account of the life of an individual;
- the differences between biography and autobiography;
- the origin of biography in early sagas and epics;
- the development of biography over the ages; and
- different forms of biography and autobiography.

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## 1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Biography is a truthful account of the life of an individual. It is written in prose. While it is based on facts, a biographer uses his/her imagination to present a lively and interesting picture of the person portrayed.
- ii) History is a factual record of individuals and events while in biography the focus is not on the background but on the individual. Fiction is independent of facts and operates solely in the realm of the imagination. While a biographer must be imaginative, s/he cannot lose sight of facts.
- iii) Curiosity about the lives of others may be one reason. Another may be to draw lessons that may have some relevance to our lives. By reading about the lives of others, our understanding of the human condition is enhanced and our sympathies extended.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) In earlier times, there had been a tendency to praise the subject. In the twentieth century, a 'new' biography developed wherein one can find that the biographer is not an admiring subordinate but a critical equal who examines the character from all angles – positive and negative. Biographies also became almost as short as the novel. The interest shifted from a mere depiction of outer events to the states of mind of the character.
- ii) 18th century :  
Boswell's *Life of Johnson*  
20th century :  
Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria*

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) An autobiography is a branch of biographical literature. It is the story of the life of a person written in his/her own words. It is usually written at a later stage in life and events are recollected either in chronological sequence or at random. Autobiographies are either formal or informal.

- ii) A biographer has to rely solely on external evidence but an autobiographer uses memory as a major source. The biographer also makes use of documentary evidence. A biographer concentrates on the successful middle years of a person's life while in autobiography childhood is portrayed extensively.

