

THE BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL AND THE EVOLUTION OF BIOGRAPHY: HISTORY, TYPES, AND LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract: This study examines the development of biography as a literary genre and explores the emergence and growing prominence of the biographical novel. Beginning with the classical foundations of biography in Ancient Greece and Rome, the paper traces its transformation into a distinct literary form in the eighteenth century and its further evolution through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the influence of psychology and sociology. Particular attention is devoted to the biographical novel, a hybrid genre that blends historical fact with imaginative reconstruction. While initially dismissed by critics in the early twentieth century, the biographical novel gradually achieved both commercial success and scholarly recognition. The article analyzes various types of biography—popular, critical, historical, literary, reference, and fictional—and highlights their functions in shaping readers' understanding of historical and contemporary figures. Through selected examples of notable biographers and influential works, the study demonstrates the enduring cultural and artistic significance of biography and its adaptations in literature, film, and theater.

Key Words: Biography; biographical novel; biographical fiction; historical narrative; literary genre; fictionalization; historiography; narrative structure; life writing; adaptation.

БИОГРАФИЧЕСКИЙ РОМАН И ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ БИОГРАФИИ: ИСТОРИЯ, ТИПЫ И ЛИТЕРАТУРНОЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ

Аннотация: В данной работе рассматривается развитие биографии как литературного жанра и анализируется становление и возрастающая значимость биографического романа. Начиная с классических истоков биографии в Древней Греции и Риме, исследование прослеживает её формирование как самостоятельного жанра в XVIII веке и дальнейшую эволюцию в XIX–XX веках под влиянием психологии и социологии. Особое внимание уделяется биографическому роману — гибридному жанру, сочетающему исторический факт и художественную реконструкцию. Хотя в начале XX века критики относились к этому жанру скептически, со временем он получил как коммерческое признание, так и научное одобрение. В статье анализируются различные типы биографии — популярная, критическая, историческая, литературная, справочная и художественная — а также их функции в формировании читательского понимания исторических и современных личностей. На основе ряда значимых произведений демонстрируется культурная и художественная значимость биографии и её адаптаций в кино и театре.

Ключевые слова: Биография; биографический роман; биографическая проза; исторический нарратив; литературный жанр; художественная интерпретация; историография; повествовательная структура; документальная проза; экранизация.

BIOGRAFIK ROMAN VA BIOGRAFIYANING EVOLYUTSIYASI: TARIXI, TURLARI VA ADABIY AHAMIYATI

Annotatsiya: Mazkur tadqiqotda biografiyaning adabiy janr sifatidagi rivojlanishi hamda biografik roman janrining shakllanishi va ortib borayotgan ahamiyati tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot Qadimgi Yunoniston va Rimdagi klassik manbalardan boshlab, XVIII asrda biografiyaning

mustaqil janr sifatida shakllanishi hamda XIX–XX asrlarda psixologiya va sotsiologiya ta'sirida yanada boyib borishini yoritadi. Alohida e'tibor tarixiy fakt va badiiy talqinni uyg'unlashtiruvchi gibrildi janr — biografik romanga qaratiladi. XX asr boshlarida tanqidchilar tomonidan e'tirof etilmagan bo'lsa-da, vaqt o'tishi bilan bu janr ham tijoriy, ham ilmiy doiralarda keng qabul qilindi. Maqlada biografiyaning turli shakllari — ommabop, tanqidiy, tarixiy, adabiy, ma'lumotnama va badiiy-biografik turlari — hamda ularning tarixiy va zamonaviy shaxslarni anglashdagi o'rni tahlil qilinadi. Mashhur asarlar misolida biografiyaning adabiyot, kino va teatr san'atidagi madaniy va estetik ahamiyati ko'rsatib beriladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Biografiya; biografik roman; biografik proza; tarixiy rivoyat; adabiy janr; badiiy talqin; tarixshunoslik; narrativ tuzilma; hayotiy yozuv; ekranlashtirish.

Introduction

The biographical novel is a literary genre that presents a fictionalized account of a historical or contemporary person's life. As with other forms of biographical fiction, certain details are often condensed, altered, or reimagined to suit the artistic demands of the novel. Such reworked narratives are sometimes referred to as semi-biographical novels, emphasizing their partial departure from strict historical accuracy.

The genre gained prominence in the 1930s with best-selling works by authors such as Robert Graves, Thomas Mann, Irving Stone, and Lion Feuchtwanger. While these novels achieved commercial success, literary critics initially dismissed the genre. Over time, however, biographical novels gained wider critical acceptance and have since become both popular and respected within literary circles.

Some biographical novels bear only a loose resemblance to historical narratives or incorporate elements from other genres that overshadow the retelling of actual events. For instance, Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter primarily follows the conventions of vampire fiction rather than strict biography. Biographical fiction often intersects with historical fiction or alternative history genres.

There are also novels celebrated for their literary qualities that incorporate substantial biographical detail in subtler ways. A notable example is Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, which is believed to draw heavily on the life of a person Goldsmith had closely observed.

Biographical novels frequently serve as the basis for cinematic adaptations, contributing to the genre of biographical film.

For further discussion on the different ways biographical information is incorporated into literature, see *Biography in Literature*.

A biography (pronounced *BYE-og-ruh-fee*) is a written account of a person's life authored by someone else. It presents significant details from the subject's life, usually in chronological order. The term "biography" comes from the Latin *biographia*, which combines *bios* ("life") and *graphia* ("write"), reflecting its literal meaning: "writing about life."

Although historical records have long documented real people, it was not until the 18th century that biographies emerged as a distinct literary genre. Related forms, such as autobiographies and memoirs, fall under the broader biography category but are different because the subjects themselves write them. Biographies remain a popular source for documentaries, television programs, and films.

The origins of biography trace back to Ancient Rome and Greece. In 44 BCE, the Roman writer Cornelius Nepos published *Excellentium Imperatorum Vitae* (Lives of the Generals), one of the earliest surviving biographies. In 80 CE, the Greek historian Plutarch released *Parallel Lives*, a collection of 48 biographies of prominent men. Later, in 121 CE, the Roman historian Suetonius wrote *De Vita Caesarum* (On the Lives of the Caesars), a series of twelve biographies covering Julius Caesar and the first eleven Roman emperors. These works were widely read in their time, and parts of them have survived through the centuries.

During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church significantly influenced biographical writing. Historical, political, and cultural biographies declined, while accounts of religious figures—such as saints, popes, and church founders—became prominent. One notable exception was Giorgio Vasari's 1550 work, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, which gained immense popularity and is considered one of the first bestsellers.

It was not until the 18th century that biographers began to focus on a single subject rather than multiple figures in one work. James Boswell's 1791 *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is widely regarded as the first modern biography, establishing the genre as separate from general historical writing.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, advances in psychology and sociology further shaped biographical writing, allowing authors to provide more comprehensive portraits of their subjects. Pioneering biographers of this period include Lytton Strachey, Gamaliel Bradford, and Robert Graves.

Types of Biographies

While all biographies chronicle real lives, authors present their material in diverse ways:

- Popular biographies are written for a general audience. Examples include *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer.
- Critical biographies analyze the relationship between a subject's life and their work. Examples are *The Billionaire Who Wasn't* by Conor O'Clery and *Unpresidented: A Biography of Donald Trump* by Martha Brockenbrough.
- Historical biographies emphasize the interplay between a person's life and the historical context, such as *John Adams* by David McCullough and *Catherine the Great* by Peter K. Massie.
- Literary biographies focus on writers and artists, blending life stories with analyses of creative output. Examples include *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* by Nancy Milford and *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* by Gregory White Smith and Steven Naifeh.
- Reference biographies are scholarly works, often written by multiple authors, covering multiple figures within a single topic. They provide verified facts, background information, and supplemental resources like bibliographies and glossaries. Examples include *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* and *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.
- Fictional biographies, or biographical novels, use creative license to narrate a real person's life, often in a novelistic format. Examples include *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory and *Fire and Blood* by George R.R. Martin, which presents a fictional royal family history in a richly detailed, biography-like style.

Biographies serve several important purposes:

- They inform readers about notable individuals, including historical facts, motivations, psychological traits, environments, and both immediate and long-term impacts.
- The author's third-person perspective allows for a more omniscient account, placing events in broader contexts, comparing behaviors, and exploring psychological and sociological themes beyond the subject's own awareness.
- Biographers also structure lives to be engaging and readable, often using a narrative framework with introduction, conflict, rising tension, climax, resolution, and conclusion. While life unfolds naturally, narrative shaping ensures the biography is compelling to readers.

Writers Known for Biographies

Many contemporary authors have devoted significant portions of their careers to writing biographies. Among the most notable are:

- Kitty Kelley, author of *Jackie Oh! An Intimate Biography*; *His Way: The Unauthorized Biography of Frank Sinatra*; and *The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty*.
- Antonia Fraser, author of *Mary Queen of Scots*; *Cromwell: Our Chief of Men*; and *The Gunpowder Plot: Terror and Faith in 1605*.
- David McCullough, author of *The Path Between the Seas*; *Truman*; and *John Adams*.

- Andrew Morton, author of *Diana: Her True Story in Her Own Words*; *Madonna*; and *Tom Cruise: An Unauthorized Biography*.
- Alison Weir, author of *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*; *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England*; and *Katherine Swynford: The Story of John of Gaunt and His Scandalous Duchess*.

These writers are widely recognized for their extensive research and their ability to present historical figures in engaging and accessible ways. Examples of Biographies:

James Boswell — The Life of Samuel Johnson

Widely regarded as the work that ushered in the modern era of biographical writing, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* offers a comprehensive account of Johnson's life—from his birth and rise to prominence as one of England's leading literary figures to his death. Boswell was personally acquainted with Johnson, which allowed him to draw upon numerous firsthand conversations and observations. This close relationship lends the biography an immediacy and authenticity that distinguishes it from earlier works. Moreover, because Boswell wrote about a contemporary figure, readers encounter Johnson within the social and cultural context of his own time. Rather than portraying him as a distant historical icon, Boswell presents him as a living presence whose influence was visible and tangible.

Sylvia Nasar — A Beautiful Mind

Published in 1998, *Sylvia Nasar's biography of mathematician John Nash* received a Pulitzer Prize nomination and introduced a wide audience to Nash's extraordinary life and intellectual achievements. The book traces Nash's journey from childhood through his academic career, personal relationships, and struggles with schizophrenia, culminating in his receipt of the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. In addition to its Pulitzer nomination, *A Beautiful Mind* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography, became a New York Times bestseller, and served as the basis for the Academy Award-winning 2001 film of the same name.

Catherine Clinton — Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom

Catherine Clinton's biography of the abolitionist leader Harriet Tubman presents a sweeping and detailed account of Tubman's life. It begins with her birth in the 1820s as Araminta Ross, traces her escape from slavery, examines her courageous work on the Underground Railroad, highlights her symbolic role as a "Moses" figure for enslaved people seeking freedom, and concludes with her death in 1913. Because Tubman was unable to read or write, she left behind no personal letters or diaries. As a result, Clinton reconstructed her life entirely through secondary sources and historical records. The book is frequently regarded as one of the most authoritative and comprehensive accounts of Tubman's life.

Megan Mayhew Bergman — Almost Famous Women

Almost Famous Women is not a traditional biography but rather a collection of fictionalized stories inspired by real historical women. Each short story centers on a woman who lived in proximity to fame, including figures such as film star Marlene Dietrich, Standard Oil heiress Marion "Joe" Carstairs, aviator Beryl Markham, Oscar Wilde's niece Dolly, and Lord Byron's daughter Allegra. Through imaginative reinterpretation, Bergman reexamines these women's lives, placing them in vivid narrative episodes that offer renewed recognition and perspective. The work blends historical fact with creative storytelling, suggesting alternative ways of understanding women whose stories history has often overlooked or marginalized.

Discussion

Biographies may be written about individuals at any stage of life, whether they are living or deceased. However, biography as a literary form has certain limitations. Even when the subject cooperates with the biographer, the writer cannot gain complete access to the subject's private thoughts and emotions. As a result, every biography involves a degree of interpretation and reconstruction.

Biographical works generally recount the major events that shape a person's life, including details about childhood, education, career development, and significant relationships. In some

cases, biographies are adapted into other artistic forms, such as films or theatrical productions. The musical Hamilton, for example, is a notable adaptation of a biographical work that became one of the most successful productions in Broadway history.

Many assume that biographies must focus exclusively on famous individuals. While public figures are frequent subjects, this is not always the case. Biographies typically center on individuals who are noteworthy for their achievements, influence, or extraordinary life experiences. These may include pioneers in a particular field, individuals who have made significant contributions to society, or people who have endured unusual, tragic, or controversial circumstances.

Biographical subjects may also include individuals who committed infamous acts or those recognized for exceptional talent or ability. As a literary form, biography is valuable because it enables readers to understand another person's life story and historical context. Such narratives can be informative, inspiring, and meaningful, fostering deeper human connection and insight.

Conclusion

Biography has developed from its classical origins into one of the most versatile and enduring literary genres. From early works in Ancient Greece and Rome to the establishment of modern biography in the eighteenth century, the genre has continually adapted to changing intellectual, cultural, and artistic contexts. The rise of the biographical novel in the twentieth century further expanded the possibilities of life writing by integrating fictional techniques with historical material, thus creating a dynamic interplay between fact and imagination.

Although the genre has faced criticism regarding historical accuracy and artistic liberties, it has ultimately secured a respected place in both popular and academic literary traditions. Biographies and biographical novels not only preserve the memory of significant individuals but also interpret their lives within broader social, political, and cultural frameworks. By combining documentation with narrative artistry, biography fosters historical awareness, psychological insight, and emotional engagement. Its continued adaptation into film, theater, and other media confirms its lasting relevance and cultural impact.

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