Autobiography is one of the most popular and important genres in early American literature. Reading and analyzing autobiography uses many of the same skills as we use in reading poems and novels, but there are some special concerns that are helpful to keep in mind. As William Andrews notes in his landmark book on African American autobiography, *To Tell a Free Story*, “Whatever else it is, autobiography stems more often than not from a need to explain and justify the self” (1). Early American autobiography always involves three central questions. Why does the writer feel the need to justify his/her self? To whom is s/he writing? Why (if published) was the story of that self interesting enough to merit publication? These basic questions can help you think critically about the literary choices in the text.

**WHAT IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY?**

While an autobiography draws on “real life” and “real events,” in the end, it is not an objective or pure version of the life being told. An autobiographer offers a carefully selected and highly constructed version of his or her life — a story (even a fiction) about who they are. That story is always motivated. There is a reason the writer feels compelled to tell their life story; in most cases the autobiography is a means for the writer to make sense of some significant experience or psychological need. Writers like Mary Rowlandson, Elizabeth Ashbridge, and Frederick Douglass write their story as a way to:

- help make sense of what they have experienced
- argue for the relevance of their life story as a lesson for some larger public good
- testify to the discovery of self-knowledge as a result of the experiences they have had
- help define themselves in their own terms, free from limiting social definitions.

All of these aspects of autobiography are subjective and interpretative. Autobiography is not really ‘about’ the facts and events related; it is about how the writer chooses to interpret and make sense of these events. As readers, we are drawn to the tensions and the drama of that struggle to make meaning and to find self-knowledge. As critics, we are interested in analyzing how the writer uses storytelling to explore questions about meaning, the self, and the social and political forces that affect that self. We are also interested in how language and narrative give us meaning and give us a sense of self.

**HOW DO WE ANALYZE AUTOBIOGRAPHY?**

For the most part, we use the same tools we use in fiction, although we might apply them in a slightly different way. The following are some of the possible critical approaches you might use, and some ideas of how they might relate to Douglass.

1. **Wordplay and Imagery:** How do specific language choices reveal something about how the writer wants to make sense of experiences? Or how s/he wants to define his or her self? In Mary Rowlandson, we look at how she uses Biblical imagery, and Christian metaphors like sheep and wolves, to make sense of the disorientation of captivity, or the violence of warfare. We might also look at the imagery she uses to describe her hunger
and ask how these images work for or against her desire to justify herself and the Puritan faith.

2. **Intertextuality:** This is a fancy word for the idea that any given text contains in it references to other texts. This can be a reference to a specific text, as in the ways Mary Rowlandson and Elizabeth Ashbridge draw on passages from the Bible. However, it can also refer to the way a text draws on other literary traditions and styles. For example, Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative borrows from a lot of other genres: the captivity narrative (notice the language of providence); sentimentalism (notice the emotional appeals for sympathy); romanticism (compare the heroic suffering of Douglass to Magawisca’s sacrifice in *Hope Leslie*); revolutionary rhetoric (examine his arguments and assumptions about freedom and resistance); and transcendentalism (compare his discussion of the power of literacy to Emerson’s idea of self-reliance). We can examine how and when he uses these other genres... and to what purpose and effect.

3. **Narrative, Structure:** A writer makes choices about what to include, what to exclude, how to arrange events, and what degree of emphasis to give to different kinds of events. Consider, for example, what details of her captivity Rowlandson does discuss (what foods she ate and where she acquired that food), and what she overlooks (like the sleeping arrangements in the wigwam). Given the speculation about a woman’s chastity that would always accompany her return, a concern specifically alluded to by both Rowlandson, this omission might be deliberate and significant. These kind of choices often reveal a great deal; they affect how we read and respond to the story, and shape our impressions of the “I” who tells the story. Remember that the narrative is a partial and very public representation of the writer’s identity. The “I” of the story is like a character or a mask. We cannot assume that it is a full, complete, or even accurate picture of the “real” identity of the writer. All we have is the impression created by the text. This impression is crafted through what we are told, when, and how. We can look at how these choices help create a particular image of the writer. For instance, why does Frederick Douglass omit any mention of his wife until the end of the narrative? How does his decision to withhold the details of his escape effect our image of him and/or his motives?

4. **Language and Self-Representation:** How does writing the autobiography itself become part of the process of defining the self? One rich area of study is the ways in which writers of autobiography explore the relationship between language and identity. Douglass is a perfect illustration of the importance of language. His autobiography spends a great deal of time exploring the impact of literacy on his sense of self. The autobiography might be seen as an extension of that process of using language to define who he is — to reclaim himself from the definitions imposed on him by slavery.

5. **Patterns of representation:** Are there patterns of association in the text that reoccur at pivotal moments? What do these patterns suggest about how the writer defines his or herself? What does it reveal about their values, assumptions, etc. For instance, Douglass emphasizes several scenes where he gets into fights with white men. He describes each incident with great detail, and assigns these moments great significance in his
transformation from a slave to a “man.” Critics see this pattern as a significant insight into how Douglass defines manhood; men do not submit to illegitimate masters. A man must defend his manhood with violence if no other means are available. The ‘man’ who refuses to be a slave becomes a hero with the same (or more) moral legitimacy as a revolutionary figure like Patrick Henry (who he compares himself to).

6. **Ideological structures:** This is related to the last item; it is really an extension of it. Every narrative depends on certain cultural, religious, or philosophical assumptions about the world, human nature, or the self. Autobiographies often explore conflicts or tensions in these assumptions. Douglass’s narrative explores many such conflicts. Some critics suggest that his story revolves around two competing symbols of power — the whip (illegitimate, corrupt, degrading) and the pen (true, transcendent, liberating). We can use this conflict as a way to make sense of his narrative, and try to come to an understanding of its impact and its power.

7. **Gaps and Slippages** — In autobiography, particularly captivity and slave narratives, there are sometimes gaps in the facts, or places where there seems to be a contradiction or an inconsistency in the image of the self or the representation of events.