

### **Questions to consider in reading Ben Franklin's *The Autobiography***

As with most autobiographies, Franklin chooses certain facts and events in his life and presents them to tell a story, even a fiction. In Franklin's case, he has a particular rhetorical goal in mind for his story. He claims to be writing this for his son, then the governor of New Jersey, but actually he was writing for American readers, who were still trying to figure out what being an American meant (and may still be). You should consider this work, then, not as a collection of facts and events, but as elements of a larger story, one told by more than one *persona*. What are the different voices that are to be heard behind the work? And what IS an American, and especially, what is the way to success that he recommends for his fellow Americans?

What particular lessons does Franklin learn about religion, compassion, writing, arguments, and honesty in his life? What "errata" does he acknowledge and which do you think he is ignoring?

What is the philosophy behind Franklin's public service?

How is Franklin's story different from the story of the Puritans? That is, what is man's relationship to nature, country, and God, according to him? Note his belief in the Enlightenment principles of order, progress, perfectibility, natural law, reason, and pragmatism?

Look carefully at his list of virtues. What sort of virtues are they? What virtues are curiously missing from his list?

### **Reading Questions--The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin**

1. On pp. 1-2, Franklin gives the reason for writing his autobiography. What is it?
2. Also on p. 1, Franklin compares the prospective repetition of his life and the possibility of making improvements to a printer who includes a list of "errata" at the end of a published book. Can you think of other ways of describing moral transgressions? What does Franklin's decision to compare moral transgressions to "errata" say about his philosophy of life? Look for actions described as "errata," and instances where Franklin believes he corrected earlier moral transgressions.
3. To what profession is the eldest son in the Franklin clan always bred?
4. Who was Franklin's namesake?
5. What was the religious persuasion of Franklin's ancestors during the 17th century?
6. Why did Franklin's father Josiah move to New England?
7. On p. 5, who was Franklin's maternal grandfather? What is the significance of this to his story?
8. What was Josiah's plan for his son Benjamin?
9. On p. 7, Franklin states that he possessed a strong inclination for something. What is it?
10. How would you describe Josiah Franklin's socio-economic status, given Franklin's description of his immediate family?
11. Franklin offers a list of books he read growing up. Any notable omissions?
12. What is the relationship between Benjamin Franklin and his brother James?
13. How did Franklin learn to write better prose? How did he develop his rhetorical style? What does this tell us about how he thinks of himself and his own education?
14. How did Franklin gain release from his indenture to his brother? How did he feel about his own course of action?
15. In what condition did Franklin arrive in Philadelphia?
16. What kind of person did people at the Crooked Billet think Franklin was?

17. What lesson did Franklin draw from the experience of catching and eating cod fish?
18. From Franklin's joint project with Keimer in founding a sect and his agreement with Osborne that the first dead should visit the living, what do you make of his attitude toward religion?
19. What did Franklin learn about Gov. William Keith of Pennsylvania?
20. Why did Franklin refrain from drinking liquor?
21. How did Franklin describe his separation from Keimer? Where does he lay the blame?
22. How does Franklin describe his conversion to Deism on p. 63? How did it determine his sense of morality, or "vice & virtue"?
23. Who is Samuel Mickle and what did Franklin think of him?
24. What is the Junto?
25. What point does Franklin make in his reference to the wheelbarrow anecdote?
26. What was the genesis of Franklin's "first project of a public nature"? To Franklin, what was its social and political significance?
27. How many years separated the writing of the first two parts of the autobiography?
28. How does the second part of the autobiography differ from the first?
29. Why does Franklin suggest that one should not take the credit for promoting public works?
30. Franklin makes the point that industry is a means to some end. What is this end?
31. Franklin offers his perspective on formal religious institutions, such as the Presbyterian Church. Why did he decide not to attend services? Would you call him a Christian, given his "testimony"?
32. What "bold and arduous project" does Franklin conceive on p. 90? How did he endeavor to achieve it?
33. Which of the virtues gave Franklin the most difficulty? Why? What does this say about his whole scheme?
34. Franklin offers an admission regarding his "achievement" of the virtue of humility. What is it?
35. What was the conclusion of Franklin's "project"? How did he rationalize this outcome?
36. What is the "Society of the Free and Easy"? How does it relate to Franklin's other thoughts on the nature of religion?
37. According to Franklin, why is it more difficult for poor men to behave virtuously?
38. What did Franklin think of George Whitefield? Describe the course of their relationship.
39. Franklin believed that Philadelphia was a great place to live, but pointed out two very specific deficiencies. What were they? What shape did his response to these deficiencies take?
40. What did Franklin discover about Quaker opposition to warfare and defensive preparations?
41. Why did Franklin admire the Dunkers?
42. According to Franklin, how is "human felicity" produced? How does this relate to his conception of the moral perfectibility of mankind?
43. In Franklin's estimation, why did his scheme for the union of the colonies fail?
44. Franklin gives a long account of the British Army's experience in the Pennsylvania backcountry during the Seven Year's War. What is his assessment of their organization? How about their treatment of the colonists and the friendly Indians? What about their performance in the field? What connections does he make between this and the American Revolution?
45. Why did Franklin find himself in the middle of organizing the defense of the Pennsylvania frontier in the 1750s?
46. What did Franklin learn about human nature in the building of the stockade at Gnadenhut?

47. What was Franklin's suggestion to Rev. Beatty for increasing attendance at public prayers?
48. How did Franklin react to the escort provided by his regimental officers on his trip to Virginia?
49. What is the significance of Franklin's pronouncement that his was "the Age of Experiments"?
50. What was the source of disagreement between Franklin and Granville over the nature of the instructions given to colonial governors? What is Franklin's main objection to Granville's position?
51. Look at Franklin's "outline." How far did Franklin appear to get in telling his story? How might his story have been affected by its continuation?

## **General**

1. Think a little about philosophy and ethics, since Franklin himself is preoccupied with it. Where does Franklin get his sense of morality? Upon what foundation does he build his notion of virtue? Does virtue have a transcendent purpose, or is it more mundane? What is Franklin's notion of "the good"? Why is the word "conscience" missing from his vocabulary?
2. Do you think Franklin is self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-interested, or benevolent, public-spirited, and condescending? Can he be both? If so, how does his self-characterization resolve this seeming tension? If not, then how do you explain his contradictory tendencies? Is Franklin an example of pure individualism, selfless public service, or some odd mixture of these two extremes?
3. Franklin is America's first Horatio Alger--a man of humble origins who arrives at great wealth and stature by virtue of his own industry. Do you buy this line? What elements of Franklin's narrative help to sustain this depiction? What elements appear to work against it? To what factors would you attribute his "success"?
4. Reflect on the development of Franklin's persona through the three major sections of the Autobiography. Is there any sense in which he becomes more "American" as the narrative progresses? Does the term "American" possess sufficient definition to allow us to measure his self-portrait against it, or should we use his text to shed light upon the meaning of the term? In other words, does "American" define Franklin, or does Franklin define "American"?
5. What is the importance of human association to Franklin? What meaning does he invest in his primary social relationships, particularly his family? What about relationships more distant in nature? What sorts of relationships does Franklin appear willing to cultivate, and what sorts does he seem willing to abandon? What is the shape and logic of the "community" that Franklin builds around himself?