Henry S. Commager in *The American Mind* says, "Perhaps the best index to the American character is to be found in autobiographical material." It has been observed that "Almost everyone in the United States ... is anxious to tell his life story. Indeed, this very willingness to talk about oneself may well be a distinctive American trait." In fact, *The Bibliography of American Autobiographies* published in 1966 lists as many as 6,377 separate items. A question that is often asked is "What is the motivation for the widespread American practice of writing autobiography?"

Jacob Sloan makes an interesting observation:

As in all human behaviour, there is no single, all-determining motive. Critics have sorted out a number of complex and interlocking reasons. They surmise that autobiographies may be written; to justify a course of action or to apologize for it; to confess one's sins and be able to die in peace; to bear witness to some important historical event or movement; to sum up the lessons of one's life, for the benefit of posterity.

*Posterity may well be the key to the writing of autobiographies, one that opens up all motivations. People put down the stories of their lives in order to leave some record of their stay*
Benjamin Franklin is one of the few men in history who, by personal achievement and public service, have become examples not only in their own times but for future generations as well. His Autobiography is generally regarded as the prototype of the genre in American literature. Franklin begins his account of his life with a letter addressed to his son, thus proving Jacob Sloan's point that "the writer often asserts that he is recounting the story of his life for the instruction and edification of his children":

From the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and in which I passed my earliest years, I have raised myself to a state of affluence and some degree of celebrity in the world. As constant good fortune has accompanied me even to an advanced period of life, my posterity will perhaps be desirous of learning the means which I employed, and which, thanks to Providence, so well succeeded with me. (3)
Of course Franklin's Autobiography has had its detractors. Mark Twain called the book "Franklin's pernicious biography," while Melville called its author a "keen observer of the main chance." "I can't stand Benjamin," wrote D.H. Lawrence. "He tries to take away my wholeness ...." Both nineteenth and twentieth century critics seem agreed with Charles Angoff that "Franklin represented the least praise worthy qualities of the inhabitants of the New World: miserliness, fanatical practicality, and lack of interest in what are usually known as spiritual things." To Lawrence, Franklin epitomized the puritanism out of his (Lawrence's) past and within himself with which all of his writing - indeed, his very life - contended. Though there were many who agreed with Lawrence who did not like Franklin's self satisfaction and sanctimoniousness, Franklin's self regard was justified. One of thirteen children in the family of a poor Bostonian artisan, he had risen by his own efforts. Besides, as Jacob Sloan observes,

his autobiography makes it quite clear that Franklin's rise was not exclusively - or even mostly - due to the exercise of those bourgeois virtues he preached in the person of Poor Richard: diligence, thrift, moderation - the work ethic, so much maligned nowadays. Rather Franklin used the
work ethic as a technique to organize his genius - a word we use advisedly, because Benjamin Franklin was of the same mold as his contemporary Thomas Jefferson, a true eighteenth century universal genius.

Unlike many eighteenth century autobiographies, Franklin's story deals with no heroics in the conventional sense and chronicles no mysterious path to sainthood. He does not describe a world foreign and remote to most men, but a life began in a humble station easily recognised by many. Further, as already mentioned, he rose not by superhuman strength but by application of character traits accessible to anyone. His Autobiography is plain and simple. His language suits the life he describes - simple, direct, and down to earth. The picture is that of a world familiar to most men and with which they could readily identify: "Though Franklin's story is in its own way marvelous and majestic, like any account of human dignity and potentiality, it nonetheless meets its reader on his own ground, telling him on every page that what the author had done anyone else might do by forming the habits he describes."

We can say that the Autobiography is not simply a guidebook on how to get rich but the life story of one of the most successful citizens of a new world, and as such it sets
out moral, psychological, and practical guidelines on how to live in a newly-born society: "His ideas grow directly out of Franklin's empirical experiences in a new, harsh society, and offer pragmatic solutions to the challenges of creating a few and radical society at the edge of the known world."

The book's message seems to be that personal energies must be devoted to the creation of an orderly state. In other words, Franklin does not preach mindless self-reliance and self-aggrandizement, but a radical, generous displacing of selfishness for cultural goals.

To understand the message of the Autobiography it is important to keep in mind that Franklin was shaped by the raw and difficult environment of eighteenth-century America. His mind was ever curious and alert and his temperament could abide neither injustice nor servitude. His restless mind sent him to books at an early age, and his free spirit led him on a career of self-improvement that went beyond his personal self. When he escaped from an economically precarious life in Boston in 1723, he was just seventeen years old.

Franklin's firm conviction was that by constant application and steadfast adherence to the virtues, a man could improve his own lot and that of his fellowmen. He governed his own life so successfully by this belief that by
the time he was forty-two he was able to retire from his business to devote himself to public good and scientific experiment. The Autobiography is relevant to the common man in that there is easy movement from the personal to the social to the political: "Great questions of public affairs, instead of appearing in a separate realm remote and inaccessible to most men, are dealt with through the skills and attitudes Franklin had taught common men how to achieve." Values impressed upon Franklin in his youth proved highly valuable as he began his ascent in life. The sober, honest, industrious ways of his father were the qualities a tradesman needed to prosper. Poor Richards aphorisms were practical, meaningful advice to rising young men. When Franklin looked beyond his own affairs, and considered community problems with like-minded men, it was apparent that the same virtues, practised cooperatively, were what were required. Devoting himself to the civic betterment of Philadelphia, he had the streets paved, improved their lighting, and evolved a prudent scheme for having them cleaned cheaply; he reformed the city watch, organized a fire brigade and a militia, and was instrumental in founding a library, a philosophical society, and an academy (now the University of Pennsylvania). He also ran the post-office.
Franklin's gradual departure into politics was an extension of his personal and community activities. He became public printer and clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly to advance his business. Then he organised a militia in a Quaker province. He believed that sharing the burden of self-defence had its advantage. Then he gained a seat in the Assembly. His intention was to use the government of the province itself for promoting institutions of public benefit.

In conclusion,

As American writers struggled self-consciously to bring into being a national literature and to convey to the world a sense of the national character, the popularity of Franklin's Autobiography played a key role. Reading it, the world, and Americans themselves, sensed the answer to Crevecoeur's question, "What is an America?" In a twinkling, apparently timeless and eternal patterns of life seemed outmoded. If one wanted to know what Americans were like, what their national aspirations were, one had but to read Franklin's Autobiography.... It has been as well a persistent reminder, whenever American society tends to stratify and stagnate and vulgarize, of what is being lost or betrayed.
In a world full of new nations, Franklin's Autobiography has meaning not only to remind his own country of its juster purposes, but to suggest elements of nationality relevant anywhere .... His Autobiography urges ... that nations, including Franklin's own, conceive of themselves in terms of the everyday lives of their citizens and that they shun metaphysical, overweening, or imperial notions of their destiny.

If Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography is a story of success, Henry Adams' The Education is a story of failure. William Merrill Decker observes,

Although he lived some thirteen years beyond its composition, the Education would remain Adam's last major effort to reestablish his voice as a persuasive moral presence in his country's public discourse, and the effort stands despite the text's famous self-deprecation. In as much as it has been and continues to be read critically, the Education must be judged to have succeeded. And it has done so not only in spite of but because of its apology, its insistence that we attend to the likelihood and nature of its (and our) failure.
The failure of which the book and its author stand self-convicted proceeds from the protagonist Henry Adam's failure: his inability, as student, reformer, author, to make headway against the irrational course of history.

Adams, in fact, set out to write a public autobiography. However his only public experience was his effort to find and grasp a significant public place in post-Civil War America. Education is personal as it involves an individual who is a learner. Adams, though he disliked egotism, was compelled to write a thoroughly self-centred book. In fact, it was a confession of his failure:

Not only had he failed to meet the standards of public eminence set by his ancestors, but he had not achieved his own intellectual ends either. To be sure he set himself astronomical goals. With these in mind, he was able to concentrate all his immense Puritan energies on his own worthlessness. The result is a matchless contribution to the literature of pure sadness. For there was, in his world, no redemption, no posterity, and no God to forgive or condemn him. There was nothing but regret.
As a child he considers his situation very ordinary. We notice this in the very first paragraph of The Education:

Under the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams. (3)

In the passage quoted above we find that place is prior to time and time takes precedence over individual identity. Though Adams was born into a very politically famous family, he was an exile from politics because he was a born spectator. We can say his character was his real fate. Nurtured in the eighteenth century, he faced the nineteenth. Throughout his book he asserts that his education had been a failure. In 1844 he was too young to understand the significance of the industrial age. In 1850, when his father took him to Washington, he had his first glimpses of political corruption. The compromises over slavery disturbed
him. He was terribly upset when he realised that slavery was inseparable from American history. His education gave no answers to his questions about the sorry state of affairs.

Adams went to Harvard College in 1854 and to Berlin in 1858. Ironically, he learned the most when least a student, when, for instance, he sat in a beer garden in Berlin and listened to the music of Beethoven, and realized how deprived he had been of sensual experience. Unlike some of his classmates, he did not have to think about making a name for himself. His social position was so good it could not be improved. But it made him afraid of risks. He was an intellectual -- aloof and critical -- and what he needed was certain knowledge. But his quest for it proved interminable. As he looked back upon learned men, statesmen, and active politicians, he realized that he knew more than what they knew. But he also realized that all his wisdom made him futile and passive.

Adams visited Italy in 1859. He refers to the decision to write the decline and fall of the Roman empire that Edward Gibbon took while sitting on the steps of a Roman Church. But no such inspiration came to Adams. When he returned to America, he noticed events threatening the decline and fall of the United States: Lincoln had become the President and the South was about to secede from the
Union. Adams got an opportunity to visit England when his father, Charles Francis Adams, was appointed minister to England by Abraham Lincoln. Adams accompanied his father to London as his private secretary. Chapters eight to fifteen are devoted to a description of the diplomatic efforts of the father and the social and intellectual adventures of the son. Critics observe that except chapter fifteen, all other chapters are the least satisfactory chapters of The Education.

What Adams saw in England was the hostility of the Government and the ruling classes to the North and sympathy for the South. Dealing with the British government was extremely difficult, but Charles Adams and Henry Adams thought that they came to understand the motives and policies of its individual members. Only later did Adams realize that both he and his father had been wrong about almost everyone. Even the diplomacy of the Civil War turned out, in retrospect, to have been paradoxical, a series of misunderstandings. When he returned to America after seven years in England, he noticed that he had no place in his own country. The resulting uneasiness was made worse by the realization that his failure was due not only to the social and political transformation of America, but to his own temperament: "America had no use for Adams because he was
eighteenth-century, and yet it worshipped Grant because he was archaic and should have live in a cave and worn skins" (266).

When, in 1870, his brother-in-law telegraphically informed him, from Italy, that his sister was dying of tetanus, Adams’ frustration turned to anguish. When he went to Italy, he had two entirely different experiences, the softness of an Italian summer outside and horror inside his sister Louisa’s room. The lesson Louisa’s death taught Adams was that "Chaos was the law of Nature; Order was the dream of Man" (451). The rest of the book describes his quest for that dream.

The final chapter that describes his youth, Chapter XX, has the simple title "Failure." It describes his leaving Washington to become a professor of medieval history at Harvard, which he considered the only honorable service in America. Paradoxically, Adams came to the conclusion that his life at Harvard was also a failure. It was a failure partly because he did not believe in academic education, and partly because he came to see his experiences at Harvard as foreshadowing all the sadness he was to feel as an old man. During his stay at Harvard, Adams published a number of books on American history including History of the United States
during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. As Allen Guttmann observes, "The history was an ironic meditation on national failure."

The Education also describes the rise of his friends, John Hay and Theodore Roosevelt. But Adams considered political decisions inconsequential when compared to the changes in technology and science. He began to study mathematics and physics in his quest for order. Convinced by the physicist Karl Pearson's view that "Order and reason, beauty and benevolence, are characteristics and conceptions which we find solely associated with the mind of man" (450), Adams set about with renewed determination to emulate the physicist, to impose an order on the apparently chaotic facts of history. He tried to show how European society had moved from the unity of the Middle Ages to the disintegration and diversity of the present. "For in the end Henry Adams had to return to Europe, spiritually at least. That, after all, is where America began and the attempt to understand its present degradation led him back to the age of the cathedrals."

But though he tried his best, he could not believe in Christianity and could not understand theology. His twin symbols, the Virgin and the Dynamo, tell us more about his psyche than about medieval Europe. Finally Adams "realized that the sciences did not even offer a road to cosmic order and unity. He found some satisfaction in the thought that at
least confusion reigned everywhere, not only in the minds of American historians."

Every page of The Education is filled with irony. It begins with the purpose of showing young men what sort of education might be useful to them. However, it is at once clear that no example, certainly not Adams', can be of any value. His final discovery was that not only his education but all education was pointless, whether it was his own obsolete eighteenth-century one or an up-to-date version. No one could be shown how to cope with an inscrutable, ever-changing world. The very idea of education that prepared young people for success was a delusion.

To conclude, Adams realized that "Man ... was a helpless plaything of some dark and inscrutable forces which he could neither understand nor master. This was a bitter truth, but truth always fortifies and sustains. In this sad truth our American Odysseus finally found a peace and reconciliation which can never be attained by unearned optimism."