

Spring 2009
History 323
Prof. V. Brown

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Seminar: The Art of Biography

“A biographer is an artist who is on oath.” — Desmond McCarthy

The purpose of this seminar is to explore the complex blend of objective and subjective elements that necessarily comprise the writing of biography. Using biographies of Abraham Lincoln as our texts, we will examine challenges in the genre that relate to sources, interpretation, organization, and writing style. We will discuss trends in theoretical approaches to biography, considering how different historical eras and theoretical paradigms influence both writers and readers of biography. We will examine issues related to sources, including the use of correspondence, diaries, the popular press, legal sources, and reminiscence. In all of these endeavors, our we will ponder the similarities and differences between biography and all historical writing in regard to evidence, interpretation, argument, and narrative structure.

Texts

Hanchett, William Out of the Wilderness: The Life of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994)
Wilson, Douglas L. Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998)
Shenk, Joshua Lincoln’s Melancholy (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005)
Oakes, James The Radical and the Republican (New York: Norton, 2007)

Over the course of the semester, you will also use the course Blackboard to access speeches and chapters of books. Selections of primary sources, essays, and book reviews will be distributed.

Writing Assignments

1. Short paper, due Monday, February 16, in class.

You will write a 3-4 page comparison of Douglas Wilson & Joshua Shenk.

My unbending policy on extensions is this: if you contact me 24 hours before this paper is due, you can exercise your 48-hour extension option. I am not interested in why you need the extension, I am interested only in your planning ahead. You lose the option at the stroke of 2:16 p.m. on Sunday, February 15. The option extends only to 48 hours. If you do not exercise your option in a timely fashion and your paper is late, you lose 10 points for every 24 hours it is late. This keeps things simple and straightforward for all of us.

2. Research paper

In Weeks 9-15 of the semester (i.e. from the week after Spring Break until the last day of Finals Week), each of you will have the opportunity to research and write a “chapter” of an imagined biography on a particular individual in American history. You will be free to choose who you wish to study. I will provide a list of individuals to help you choose your subject but am happy to discuss others not on that list, as long as your choice of subject meets certain criteria regarding sources.

There must be available more than one biography on your subject and there must be an accessible set of letters or an autobiography or a set of speeches/writings or a set of profiles/interviews in the public press. The point is: you cannot pick someone on whom there is only archival material in New Mexico.

The concrete goal of this research will be to produce a 20-page “chapter” on the life of the individual you have studied. To achieve that goal, you will be required to read two or three biographies of your individual, along with that individual’s autobiography and/or a published collection of that individual’s correspondence and/or writings by or about that individual when he/she was alive. You will then select one aspect or episode or period in the individual’s life to investigate and interpret in your own way. The broader goals of this research and writing exercise are, first, to give you experience working with both secondary and primary sources; second, to give you experience with fashioning your own way of telling the story of a particular aspect of an individual’s life. This means you will be weaving your interpretation into a narrative structure; you will tell a story and making an argument in the way you structure that story and present the evidence.

Everyone in the seminar will write this paper twice. The first time, you will write the very best paper you can and turn it in to my office by 4:30 on Friday, May 8. **There can be no extensions** since I must meet with each of you, individually, between Monday, May 11 and Tuesday, May 12 to discuss revisions. Then you will write the paper a second time and make it better. There are no drafts. There are only revisions. You can turn in the revised version of your paper any time up to 4:30 on Friday of finals week, May 15.

Class Meetings

1. First Eight Weeks: In the first eight weeks of the semester, the whole seminar will meet twice a week, on Monday and Wednesday afternoons from 2:15 to 4:05 p.m.

We will all prepare for seminar by reading the assigned material and by writing up a page or two of “notes” that allow each of us to access particular passages, examples, page numbers that speak to issues that each of us hopes to raise in that day’s meeting.

Preparation will include, as well, consideration of the 3-4 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS that two members of the seminar will send out the evening before our meeting. Each of you will prepare discussion questions on two occasions in collaboration with a class partner. At our second meeting, I will distribute a schedule for who writes questions when.

Designing discussion questions is not, as you well know, easy. You will receive a brief handout from me giving some advice on this. And I will ask that you and your partner meet with me to discuss and polish your proposed discussion questions on either Friday afternoon (if you have Monday questions to write) or Tuesday afternoon (if you have Wednesday questions to write). My criteria for assessing the suitability of discussion questions will be: do they focus us on significant, core issues in the reading and are they phrased in a way that invites discussion?

On the day for which you write discussion questions, you and your partner will lead discussion in the first hour of the meeting. I will relieve you in the second hour.

2. Last Five Weeks: Once you begin your individual research, the seminar will divide into two research groups. One group will meet on Monday afternoons, the other group will meet on Wednesday afternoons. The Schedule of Class Activities and Readings lays out for you the progress each of you should make by the time of that week's meeting. You will each report on your week's work at that meeting.

Evaluation

Seminar members' performance will be evaluated on the following basis:

Participation	= 35%
Short paper	= 15%
Research paper	= 50%

Re: your Participation grade. Those who loyally attend class and demonstrate that they have done the day's reading will get 75% of a possible 200 points. If you have a day when you are concerned that you did not demonstrate your engagement with the reading, you have the option of handing in your prep notes. You will never be required to hand in notes, but this option is available to you if you wish to ensure that a quiet day is not misread as a day when you did not do the reading.

Your design of discussion questions will figure in your participation grade, as will your handling of the portion of discussion that you will "run." I will happily meet with you before class to talk over the questions and how you plan to run the first hour of our meeting.

Ultimately, "participation" in a seminar is about interaction, not speechifying. It's about listening and responding and trying to work over ideas with one another. It's about disagreeing and explaining why or agreeing and explaining why. It's about finding a place in the text that improves on or raises questions about someone's argument. It's about making the most of your classmates' discussion questions, seeing where you can take them, and raising additional questions that invite genuine discussion.

Finally, your participation grade will also be influenced by your contributions in the research phase of the semester, in those weekly meetings to discuss progress on your paper. Participation in this context is not only about your readiness to share your work that week and to engage us in discussion about your project. Participation in the research phase of the semester is also about your attention to others' work, your creative engagement with individuals' reports, your thoughtful questioning about what others' research strategies, their evidence, their arguments.

Participation means taking responsibility for the success of the day's meeting by thinking about fruitful lines of discussion and taking the initiative to bring up the issues you thought about while reading. Good participation rests on thoughtful reading and preparation.

My Schedule

I will be on campus every day this semester, except Thursdays. I live in Iowa City, but I stay over in Grinnell on Monday and Tuesday evenings. My **home phone** in Iowa City is: **319-354-8867**. If you need to reach me quickly on a Thursday or over the weekend, I advise using the phone instead of e-mail.

I will be in my office at the following times:

Mondays: 9:00 a.m. to noon

Tuesdays: 3:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Wednesdays: 9:00 a.m. to noon

Fridays: 9:00 a.m. to noon

And by appointment if necessary.

Schedule of Class Activities and Readings

Week One

January 19: Introduction to the seminar and to “biography”

Reading: Blackboard: Fish, Parini, Reynolds, Edel, and Silverman

January 21: The Simple Story & the Questions it Raises

Reading: Hanchett, Out of the Wilderness

Writing assignment: Come to class with three big, serious questions that Hanchett raised in your mind about Lincoln’s character, motives, and/or ideological positions.

Week Two

January 26: Getting Acquainted with the Sources

Reading: Shenk, Prelude, Introduction, and Afterword, “What Everybody Knows;”
Wilson, Honor’s Voice, Introduction – p. 51

January 28: Reading and Interpreting Sources

Reading: Wilson, Honor’s Voice, pp. 53-86 and selected interviews from Herndon’s Informants

Week Three

February 2: Honor's Voice

Reading: Wilson, pp. 86-194

February 4: Honor's Voice

Reading: Wilson, pp. 195-323

Week Four

February 9: Lincoln's Melancholy

Reading: Shenk, pp. 11-111; Blackboard: Burlingame, "Lincoln's Depressions"

Collection of Lincoln speeches will be distributed in class for you to consult as you read Shenk and to read as an assignment for Feb. 18.

February 11: Lincoln's Melancholy

Reading: Shenk, pp. 112-218; Blackboard: Dwight Anderson, "Quest for Immortality"

February 12: ABE LINCOLN'S 200th BIRTHDAY!

Evening showing of clips from old movies and a recent documentary on Lincoln?

Week Five

February 16: Analyzing Wilson and Shenk: Student presentations and discussion

Short paper analyzing Wilson and Shenk due in class.

***We will also discuss strategies for identifying your own paper topic. Start looking!

February 18: Lincoln as a Writer

Reading: Blackboard: Douglas Wilson, Lincoln's Sword, Prologue

Plus: Collection of Lincoln speeches distributed on February 9.

Week Six

February 23: Lincoln & Race: the quasi-biographical approach

Reading: Oakes, The Radical and the Republican, pp. xiii - 171

February 25: Lincoln & Race continued

Reading: Oakes, The Radical and the Republican, pp. 173-288

***February 26: Douglas Wilson will be at Grinnell to deliver the Convocation and meet with YOU for lunch and conversation. Clear your calendars. This is a MUST!!!!

Week Seven

During this week and next, each member of the seminar will meet with me to discuss ideas for the research paper. Proposal due Sunday, March 8.

March 2: No class meeting; individual meetings to prepare for research proposal
Research assignment: While you're out cruising the library and the web for your own research project, find at least one whacky, funny, outrageous, poignant, or pointed blog commentary or website re: Lincoln at 200.
Bring to class on Monday, March 9.

March 4: Habeus Corpus?

Reading: Chapters from Goodwin, Donald, and Neely on Blackboard = 116 pgs.

Week Eight

Sunday, March 8: Research Proposal due, via e-mail, by 5:00 p.m.

Proposal should include 1-2 pages of text explaining why you selected this topic and what you expect to do with it. Attached should be a bibliography of sources and an indication of whether your sources are at Burling Library or must be acquisitioned through Inter-Library Loan

March 9: Anticipating the Research Process

Reading: Everyone will read everyone else's research proposals, which I will send out on Sunday evening. We will discuss these and your Lincoln-at-200 web findings.

March 11: Reviews and Reflections on Lincoln

Reading: Selection of reviews and essays on Lincoln

Spring Break. Take a rest, yes, but also spend a part of these two weeks reading one biography on your subject. Your life will be much better if you do that reading over Spring Break.

Week Nine/ March 30 & April 1:

First meeting of research group: Each of you should be prepared to state what you read over break, which "chapter" in subject's life you have decided to research and why . . . and what primary sources you must read this week.

Week Ten/April 6 & 8:

Each of you should report on your chapter's focus and what the reading in primary sources is suggesting to you about a different approach you might take from what you've seen in published biographies.

Week Eleven/April 13 & 15

Each of you should report on reading you've done to place your subject in better historical context.

Week Twelve/April 20 & 22:

Individual meetings with Prof. Brown re: progress and direction of paper. Meeting will be optimally productive if you bring a one-page outline of your paper with you.

Week Thirteen April 27 & April 29:

Each of you should be prepared to set forth his/her thesis and discuss the organization of the narrative. This is an opportunity to articulate and discuss organizational, conceptual, evidentiary, or interpretive problems. **Everyone should have started writing by now. Come to class with your first three pages!!!!**

Week Fourteen/May 4 - 8

Stay home and write. I'll be in my office during regular office hours and during seminar meeting times for individual consultation.

Friday, May 8: First, BEST version of paper absolutely due at 4:30 in my office. Don't mess with me on this, folks. I face a tough weekend and won't be charitable!

Finals Week

May 11 & 12: Individual meetings to discuss revision strategies.

May 15: Paper absolutely, positively due at 4:30 in my office, Mears 303.