

# Benjamin Franklin

by Dr. Mark Canada

This article originally appeared in the *Encyclopedia of American Literature*, 2008.

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## Life

Benjamin Franklin, in the words of biographer Carl Van Doren, was a “harmonious human multitude.” As Van Doren's assessment suggests, Franklin's life and work are at once difficult and simple to summarize. On the one hand, his multitude of contributions to the worlds of printing, journalism, literature, science, and politics defy brief summary. On the other hand, these many accomplishments were in harmony with one another, sharing a common theme of human progress through human initiative. More than any other American, Franklin personified the Age of Enlightenment, a time when humans were growing more aware of their world and inventing ways to control it for their benefit.

His Enlightenment perspective shines through his literature, which includes some of the most important works to appear in America in the eighteenth century. Over more than six decades, he produced an enormous and varied body of work, including the best-selling *Poor Richard's Almanack*, literary hoaxes such as “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” and “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” satires such as “An Edict by the King of Prussia,” humorous sketches such as “The Ephemera” and “The Elysian Fields,” and informational pieces such as “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America,” as well as countless news articles, letters, scientific reports, and proposals related to civic

affairs. His masterpiece, *The Autobiography*, is one of the classic books of American literature.

Although he eventually would become strongly associated with Philadelphia, Franklin began his life in Boston, where he was born on January 17, 1706. He entered a large family, which included his father, Josiah Franklin, and his mother, Abiah Folger Franklin, as well as eleven siblings. His father, who made soap and sold candles for a living, hoped that his youngest son would enter a religious profession and sent him to grammar school when he was eight years old. His father changed his mind, however, and moved Benjamin to George Brownell's English school during the 1715-1716 academic year. When he was ten years old, Benjamin left school for good after only two years and went to work in his father's shop. The work, however, did not agree with him, and his father set out to help his son choose a different trade. Finally, at the age of 12, he became an apprentice in his brother James Franklin's print shop, where he would work for several years. When he wasn't setting type or doing other work in the shop, young Franklin was reading, sometimes deep into the night. He took a special interest in the witty, satirical essays he found in a popular English periodical, *The Spectator*. In an effort to improve his own writing, he sometimes read the essays, noted the basic ideas in the sentences, and then attempted to rewrite them in his own words. In 1722, when he was 16 years old, he wrote a series of satirical essays under the pseudonym of "Silence Dogood" and secretly slipped them under the door of his brother's shop. These essays made their way into his brother's newspaper, the *New-England Courant*, and were among Franklin's first published works.

The two brothers' relationship was a tense one, however, and Benjamin decided to break his indentures. In 1723, when he was 17, he left his job and family in Boston, going by boat first to New York and then to Philadelphia, where he landed with a handful of change and no connections. His entry into Philadelphia would become one of the most famous episodes in his autobiography. "I was in my working Dress, my best Cloaths being to come round by Sea," Franklin wrote. "I was dirty from my Journey; my Pockets were stuff'd out with Shirts & Stockings; I knew no Soul nor where to look for Lodging. I was fatigu'd with Travelling, Rowing, & Want of Rest. I was very hungry, and my whole Stock of Cash consisted of a Dutch Dollar, and about a shilling in Copper."

Coming from such humble origins, Franklin perhaps had little reason to think that he would become famous and wealthy. He was, however, a man of means. Over the next several years, as he worked for various businesses in Philadelphia and England, he studied human nature and mastered the means of achieving success. When, for example, he refused to pay a fee he found unfair—and consequently found his work sabotaged—he changed his mind and paid the fee, "convinc'd of the Folly of being on ill Terms with those one is to live with continually." In short, Franklin was a model of practicality, a theme nicely summed up in his evaluation of deism, a religious philosophy he had adopted as an adolescent: ". . . I began to suspect that this Doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful."

In 1728, Franklin and an associate, Hugh Meredith, started a printing house of their own in Philadelphia. Meredith would leave the business within a few years, but Franklin's printing establishment eventually became the most successful in the colonies. Over the next two decades, the firm published 432 broadsides, pamphlets, and books,

including *The Psalms of David* (1729), antislavery pamphlets by John Woolman and other Quakers, and Jonathan Edwards's *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1742). In 1744, he reprinted Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, thus becoming the first printer to publish a novel in the colonies. A translation of Cicero's *Cato Major*, which Franklin published the same year, has been called "the most beautiful example of the colonial printer's art." Franklin also became a force in colonial printing, supporting a number of other printers, influencing others' practices and principles, and making significant improvements in the printing press. He retired from printing in 1748 when he was 41, but he would long identify himself with the trade. Years later, writing his autobiography, he sometimes slipped into the language of printing, referring to mistakes he made during his life as "Errata," the printer's term for errors in a published document.

Even while he was becoming the leading printer of colonial America, he also was becoming one of its leading journalists. In 1729, a year after he and Meredith went into business, Franklin began publishing a newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which he had bought from his former employer, Samuel Keimer. In an age when more than half of newspaper starts failed within two years, Franklin's *Gazette* not only survived, but succeeded brilliantly. Calling it "the best newspaper in the American colonies," journalism historians Edwin and Michael Emery note that the *Pennsylvania Gazette* "had the largest circulation, most pages, highest advertising revenue, most literate columns, and liveliest comment of any paper in the area." Much of this success may have grown out of Franklin's own journalistic instincts. As a reporter, he wrote cogent "straight news" stories on crimes, acts of nature, and other subjects. He also had what journalism historian Frank Luther Mott has called "a lively news sense for the unusual and

interesting,” and his paper sometimes featured what modern journalists call “brights”—quirky stories intended to entertain readers. On October 16, 1729, he reported: “And sometime last Week, we are informed, that one Piles a Fidler, with his Wife, were overset in a Canoo near Newtown Creek. The good Man, ’tis said, prudently secur’d his Fiddle, and let his Wife go to the Bottom.” Franklin and journalism were a good match.

“Journalism,” biographer Esmond Wright explains, “was, in Franklin's day, the career before all others that offered opportunity to enterprise and imagination.”

Franklin’s career as a printer and a journalist provided him with a venue for both his ambitious sense of enterprise and his lively imagination. In the *Gazette*, he published scores of his own essays and sketches on a wide range of topics, including health care, defense, business, drinking, religion, marriage, and virtue, often using a penname, such as “Anthony Afterwit” or “Obadiah Plainman.” Some of these writings, such as “Apology for Printers” (1731) and “On Protection of Towns from Fires” (1735), were serious discussions of civic affairs. Others—such as “The Art of Saying Little in Much” (1736), which features a parody of legal prose, and “The Drinker’s Dictionary” (1737)—were lighter fare. He also published writings, including “Essay on Paper-Currency, Proposing a New Method for Fixing Its Value” (1741), in his *General Magazine*. He occasionally published writings in other periodicals, as well. Before acquiring the *Gazette*, he published a series of satirical essays, known as the “Busy-Body” series, in the *American Mercury*. His most famous sketch from this time, “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” appeared in a London periodical, the *General Advertiser*, in 1747. From his press came his greatest commercial success, *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, later known as *Poor Richard Improved*, which appeared annually from 1732 until 1758. A compilation of information

on astronomy, weather, and other matters, along with clever and amusing aphorisms, this book became one of the period's best-sellers.

As Franklin's writings on money and fire prevention suggest, Franklin was heavily involved in the civic life of his community at this time. In 1727, he formed a group of Philadelphia men, many of them tradesmen like himself, who could benefit themselves and their community through conversations. Members of this group, called the Junto or the Leather Apron Club, gathered on Fridays and discussed matters of business and society. In "Rules for a Club Formerly Established in Philadelphia," written around 1732, Franklin lists some of the questions for discussion, including "4. Have you lately heard of any citizen's thriving well, and by what means?" and "15. Have you lately observed any encroachment on the just liberties of the people?" Franklin's Junto nicely demonstrates one of the central tenets of his Enlightenment perspective—that is, that humans can greatly improve themselves and their world through collaboration. "The Junto," biographer Leo Lemay notes, "served as the incubation chamber for several public projects." One of these projects was the first subscription library in the colonies, the Library Company of Philadelphia, founded in 1731. In these early decades of his life, Franklin also played important roles, partly through his writing, in the formations of a fire department, a night watch, a hospital, and the *University of Pennsylvania*.

Like many young men, Franklin was carving out his identity as a public person at the same time that he was facing momentous developments in his personal life. In 1730, he entered into a common-law marriage with Deborah Read Rogers, whose first husband had abandoned her. In his autobiography, written years later, Franklin recalled that his future wife had witnessed his humble entry into Philadelphia as a boy of 17 and must

have found him a “ridiculous” sight. Together with Franklin’s illegitimate son, William, born to another woman around 1729, the couple lived in a house on Market Street in Philadelphia. In 1732, Deborah gave birth to their first child, Francis. They would lose this son to smallpox in 1736. They had one other child, Sarah, or “Sally,” born in 1743. Franklin’s marriage to Deborah would last until her death in 1774, although they spent many years apart, as she never accompanied him to England, where he lived from 1757 to 1762 and from 1764 to 1775.

In 1748, at the age of 41, Franklin retired from printing. For two decades—from the establishment of his partnership with Meredith in 1728 to his transfer of the business to a new partner, David Hall—his press had provided him with publicity for his writings, a voice in civic affairs, and support for his growing family. Now it was about to give him something else: freedom. Thanks to the success of his printing business, Franklin was now a wealthy man and did not need to devote time to making a living. As Franklin explained years later in his autobiography, his retirement gave him the leisure to pursue his interest in science.

As Philip Dray notes in *Stealing God’s Thunder*, Franklin had a “life-long fascination” with science. Good Enlightenment thinker that he was, he continually observed the workings of nature and, in some cases, developed ways of controlling it. Even before his retirement, he had found time to invent, in 1741, the Pennsylvania Fireplace, or “Franklin stove,” which could heat a room efficiently while restricting smoke from entering it; two years later, he made an important discovery concerning the movement of storms in the northeast. Around this same time, he became fascinated with the study of electricity, then still a novelty. People knew it existed and observed it, even

using it to perform tricks, but no one completely understood it. Franklin, like Abbe Jean-Antoine Nollet and other contemporaries in France and England, began developing experiments with Leyden jars and other equipment to study this magical phenomenon. He reported on his work in *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, published in 1751.

In 1752, in what would become the most celebrated incident in his life, he set out to test his hypothesis that lightning was a form of electricity. With the help of his son, William, he flew a kite equipped with a pointed piece of wire in stormy weather and felt a shock when he put his hand in range of a key attached to the string. His hypothesis validated, Franklin continued studying electricity and eventually invented a device that would change the world. Almost comically simple, yet revolutionary in its effects, the lightning rod provided Franklin's contemporaries with a means of preventing the fires often caused by lightning strikes. Perhaps even more significant was the psychological effect of the invention; as Dray points out, Franklin had unveiled one of nature's greatest enigmas and most threatening forces. His work in electricity made Franklin, already a mover and shaker in Philadelphia, an international celebrity. He received the Copley Medal from the Royal Society of London in 1753 and became, as historian Gordon Wood notes, "the most famous American in the world."

Franklin's contributions to science and technology continued long after his triumph in electricity. In 1761, he invented a musical instrument called the armonica, which became a sensation in Europe; both Mozart and Beethoven composed music for it. In 1768, he mapped the Gulf Stream, and, in 1784, he invented bifocals. Believing that



inventions should serve one's fellow humans, Franklin refused to secure patents on any of his inventions and thus forfeited untold income from his ideas.

In a way that almost seems scripted, Franklin's successes in printing and science contributed to his successes in yet another field, politics, to which he would devote much of his time and energy in the third major phase of his adult life. In the 1751, he won election to the Pennsylvania Assembly, where he would serve until 1764. As joint deputy postmaster for the colonies from 1753 until 1774, he introduced important developments in the postal system, including home delivery, and improved efficiency. In 1754, he proposed the Albany Plan of Union, an early plan for uniting the English colonies in North America.

His greatest political triumphs, however, were still to come. In the 1760s, Franklin watched the growth of tensions between England and its American colonies. As Gordon Wood has shown in *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, Franklin, who loved England, initially played the role of peacemaker, trying to resolve the tensions and prevent a break. Nevertheless, he found fault with England's government of the colonies and, in 1773, aired his grievances in two of his best-known satires, "Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One" and "Edict by the King of Prussia." These sketches, which were frequently reprinted, helped to create a rift between Franklin and England, which removed him from his office as deputy postmaster in 1774. The one-time peacemaker was now, in Wood's words, "a passionate patriot, more passionate in fact than nearly all the other patriot leaders." In 1775, he represented Pennsylvania in the Second Continental Congress; the following year, he collaborated with Thomas Jefferson and others on the Declaration of Independence. Later that year, Congress sent him to

France to seek assistance in the war effort. There, the fame Franklin had achieved as a writer and a scientist worked to his advantage. As Wood has noted, Franklin, by helping to secure an alliance with France in 1778, helped the colonies win a war they otherwise might have lost. Although he helped the colonies win the war, Franklin suffered a painful loss of his own. In siding with the Loyalists, William Franklin alienated his father, and their once-close relationship dissolved. They would never effect a complete reconciliation.

Before the break, however, Franklin's relationship with his only living son had helped to inspire his greatest literary achievement. In 1771, he began writing his autobiography, which he addressed to William. At separate stages over the next two decades, Franklin continued his life story, which would become a classic of American literature. He died before finishing it, writing the last installment in 1790. In this last stage of his life, he wrote other important works, as well. To entertain some of his French friends, he wrote a series of brief, witty sketches, which he called "bagatelles." Two of the best known of these works are "The Ephemera" (1778) and "The Elysian Fields" (1778).

In 1785, after nine years in France, Franklin returned to what was now, thanks largely to his efforts, an independent nation, the United States of America. He helped to shape what that nation would become, serving as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Two years later, he wrote the first remonstrance against slavery to be addressed to Congress. By this time, however, he was suffering from poor health, plagued by both gout and kidney stones. Finally, on April 17, 1790, he died at his home in Philadelphia at the age of 84.

He left a legacy of diverse, yet harmonious accomplishments, held together by a common thread. In the aphorisms of Poor Richard and the lessons of his autobiography, in his invention of the Franklin stove and the lightning rod, in his establishment of the Junto and the Library Company, and in other words and actions, we see a commitment to the principles of the Enlightenment. His pragmatism, furthermore, has become a touchstone of American values—for better or worse. Although some have celebrated Franklin and his accomplishments, others have found him opportunistic, materialistic, even simplistic. D.H. Lawrence, for example, complained that Franklin oversimplified human psychology. “Why, the soul of man is a vast forest,” Lawrence declares in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, “and all Benjamin intended was a neat back garden.”

Detractors aside, Franklin remains one of most successful and diverse men in American history. He was indisputably the country’s greatest printer, as well as one of its most successful journalists. In the field of science, he made important contributions to the study of electricity. As a Founding Father, he was instrumental in the cause of independence. Throughout these various careers, he wrote, producing an astounding number of news articles, essays, satires, sketches, hoaxes, proposals, observations, reports, aphorisms, bagatelles, and letters, as well as an autobiography that has become a classic of world literature. Indeed, Franklin’s literature may be his most enduring legacy. More than two centuries after his death, his words continue to enlighten.

### **“A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” (1730)**

As editor of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin sometimes wrote straight news articles on local events; however, like Mark Twain and other writers who followed him, he did not always confine himself to the facts in his journalism. In “A Witch Trial at

Mount Holly,” which appeared in the *Gazette* in 1730, he “reported” a fictitious event, in which people in the town of Mount Holly, New Jersey, try to determine whether two accused persons are witches.

Since it is a fictional story passed off as nonfiction, “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” belongs to the genre of hoax. Today, journalists such as Stephen Glass have gotten into trouble for publishing hoaxes; newspapers of Franklin’s day, however, often mixed fact and fiction. Like later hoaxes by Twain and Edgar Allan Poe, Franklin’s story has a satirical bent, as it pokes fun at the kinds of intolerant, simple-minded people who conduct witch hunts with laughable litmus tests. In the sketch, the accused man and woman are subjected to two tests; in one of them, they are placed in water, where, if they are witches, they are supposed to float. Franklin’s own, more reasonable opinion on the matter comes in a sentence near the end of the sketch: “The more thinking Part of the Spectators were of Opinion, that any Person so bound and plac’d in the Water (unless they were mere Skin and Bones) would swim till their Breath was gone, and their Lungs fill’d with Water.”

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Why do you suppose Franklin chose to write this satire in the form of a hoax? Are hoaxes a legitimate form of journalism or literature? Explain.

Compare “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” with another hoax, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “Balloon Hoax” or Mark Twain’s “A Bloody Massacre Near Carson.” Which hoax do you find most believable? Why? Identify some examples of satire in each hoax.

Write your own hoax. When you have completed it, write a separate paragraph explaining how you made it believable.

## “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” (1747)

One of Franklin’s best-known sketches, “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” appeared in the *General Advertiser* in 1747. Adopting the persona of an unwed mother, Franklin pretends to address a group of judges who are trying her for having a child out of wedlock. In a clever plea for clemency, Polly Baker argues, among other things, that she has actually benefited her country by producing more subjects for the king.

Like many of Franklin’s other writings—including both serious proposals such as “The Albany Plan of Union” and satires such as “Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One”—“The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” is an argument. The persona, Polly Baker, states a position and presents support for it. On another level, the sketch presents an argument on behalf of women in general, since it calls for an understanding of a woman’s position, even in defiance of the status quo. Indeed, it even goes so far as to point out the inequity in the treatment of men and women. Polly points out that one of her partners proposed marriage to her, stole her virginity, impregnated her, abandoned her, and then went on to become a magistrate. She adds: “. . . I must now complain of it, as unjust and unequal, That my Betrayer and Undoer, the first Cause of all my Faults and Miscarriages (if they must be deemed such) should be advanc’d to Honour and Power in the Government, that punishes my Misfortunes with Stripes and Infamy.”

Even as it questions contemporary attitudes toward women, “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker” also challenges moral and legal positions, suggesting that bearing children out of wedlock is not wrong and that, even if it is, the government has no business passing judgment on those who defy religious strictures. “If mine, then, is a religious Offence,” Polly argues, “leave it to religious Punishments.”

## Questions for Discussion or Writing

Evaluate Polly Baker's argument about her punishment. What is her thesis? How does she support this thesis? Do you find her argument convincing? Why or why not?

Polly suggests that the judges should not punish her for "a religious offense." Do you agree? Defend your position. Do you think Franklin favored a "separation of church and state"?

## "The Way to Wealth" (1758)

Known by a variety of titles, including "The Way to Wealth" and "Father Abraham's Speech," this sketch first appeared as the preface to the 1758 edition of his annual almanac, first known as *Poor Richard's Almanack* and later called *Poor Richard Improved*. In an era before television and the Internet, almanacs supplied farmers and other colonists with useful information on astronomy, weather, and other matters. Franklin provided such material, but he also spiced up his books with witty aphorisms—pithy sayings expressing truths and lessons—which he inserted into the almanac's informational tables. These aphorisms, many of which Franklin adapted from ones he had encountered, proved to have remarkable staying power; many of them—such as "God helps them that help themselves" and "Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise"—are still widely known today. Indeed, thanks largely to these aphorisms, Franklin is one of the most quoted Americans.

In "The Way to Wealth," Richard Saunders, or "Poor Richard"—the persona Franklin created to serve as the supposed author of his almanac—claims that he has overheard a speech by a man named Father Abraham. He then presents a transcript of this speech, in which Father Abraham quotes scores of Poor Richard's aphorisms preaching industry and frugality.

It has been noted that the aphorisms in “The Way to Wealth” do not fully represent the aphorisms in the previous versions of Franklin’s almanac or even the principles that guided his life. Nevertheless, the themes in “The Way to Wealth,” particularly industry, appear prominently in other writings by Franklin and thus may provide an index to at least some of the principles that he valued. Both industry and frugality, in fact, appear in his list of 13 virtues in Part 2 of *The Autobiography*. The aphorisms that Father Abraham quotes, furthermore, are an interesting study in themselves, as they demonstrate various elements—rhyme, metaphor, simile, syntactic parallelism—that help to make them memorable.

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Summarize Father Abraham’s advice. Would you take it? Why or why not?

Discuss Father Abraham and Poor Richard as characters. What kind of people are they? What do they value? Do you think they speak for Franklin? Explain.

Analyze the aphorisms that Father Abraham quotes. What makes them memorable?

Write some of your own aphorisms. Do they sound like Franklin’s aphorisms? Why or why not?

### **“Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One” (1773)**

Before helping to secure an alliance with France in 1778, Franklin put his pen to work to express the sentiments of the colonists. In this sketch, published in the *Public Advertiser* in 1773, Franklin provides a list of 20 actions that a large empire, such as England, can take to alienate its colonists, foment a rebellion, and ultimately reduce its size. Number 11 of these actions, for example, reads: “To make your Taxes more odious, and more likely to procure Resistance, send from the Capital a Board of Officers to

superintend the Collection, composed of the most *indiscreet, ill-bred* and *insolent* you can find.”

“Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One” belongs to the genre of satire. A favorite form for eighteenth-century writers such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, satire involves ridicule of someone or something—a person, for example, or an institution. In this case, the target of Franklin’s satire is the English government. Like the Declaration of Independence, which Franklin helped to write three years later, this sketch delineates England’s transgressions against its colonies. Instead of taking a straightforward approach of simply naming these transgressions, as the Declaration of Independence does, this satire employs irony, a common ingredient of satire. Irony always involves some kind of contrast; in this case, Franklin implies that the English leaders wish to turn their “Great Empire” into a “Small One,” when he knows very well that they do not. As is often the case with irony, the effect is humor.

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Compare this satirical sketch with the Declaration of Independence. What do the two works have in common? How are they different? Why do you think that Franklin chose this satirical approach to criticizing England’s behavior?

Imagine that you are an English authority. Write your own set of “rules,” in which you satirize the colonists’ behavior.

### **“An Edict by the King of Prussia” (1773)**

In this sketch, also published in *The Public Advertiser* in 1773, the king of Prussia, a country located in the vicinity of modern-day Germany, supposedly outlines some new regulations on the Prussian “Colonies,” otherwise known as England. The people living in these colonies, for example, are forbidden to transport wool from their



sheep or hats they have manufactured across county lines. Furthermore, the king announces that Prussia will send its criminals to England.

“An Edict by the King of Prussia” may puzzle some readers. Even if they figure out that it is a hoax—that, in fact, Franklin made up the entire “Edict,” just as he made up the “Witch Trial at Mount Holly”—they may not immediately recognize the butt of his joke or the point of the sketch. Employing his literary license, Franklin is saying one thing in terms of another; in speaking of Prussia’s relationship with England, he is really discussing England’s relationship with America. As the king notes, England was settled by people from the region now occupied by Prussia; thus, if England can impose unfair, destructive regulations on its colonies in America, why cannot Prussia impose similar restrictions on its “Colonies” in England? Franklin makes the parallel explicit near the end of the sketch, when the king explains that the rules to be imposed on England were “copied from their own Statutes . . . and from other equitable Laws made by their Parliaments, or from Instructions given by their Princes, or from Resolutions of both Houses entered into for the GOOD *Government* of their own Colonies in Ireland and America.”

“An Edict by the King of Prussia” resembles a number of Franklin’s other works in various respects. Like “Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One,” it is a satirical attack on England. As in “The Speech of Polly Baker” and “The Sale of Hessians,” Franklin speaks through a persona. Finally, as a hoax, it resembles “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly.”

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Evaluate Franklin's analogy. Is his comparison of Prussia's relationship with England and England's relationship with the American colonies valid? Explain.

What is the point of the final paragraph?

## **“The Sale of the Hessians” (1777)**

Published in 1777, “The Sale of the Hessians” takes the form of a letter from a Prussian nobleman, the Count de Schaumbergh, to the man in charge of the Hessian mercenaries, Baron Hobendorf. In this letter, the count expresses joy at the number of Hessians who have died, since he earns income for each one who dies in combat.

Another satire from the revolutionary era, this sketch features several instances of “dark humor”—a kind of humor involving death, cruelty, or other things that are generally not considered appropriate subjects for humor. The count, for instance, encourages the baron to have doctors let the Hessian soldiers die, since he makes money on each fatality. As in “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” Franklin put words in the mouth of a persona; here, instead of showing positive qualities, the count's words expose his greed and insensitivity.

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Identify some of the satirical portions of this sketch. What is the source of Franklin's humor? Which of these humorous passages would qualify as “dark humor”? What makes them “dark”? Is Franklin employing Juvenalian satire, which tends to belittle or humiliate its subjects, or a gentler form known as Horatian satire?

Compare “The Sale of the Hessians” with another satirical work, such as Jonathan Swift's “A Modest Proposal” or Mark Twain's “Journalism in Tennessee.” Consider each writer's use of irony, dark humor, or both.

Look up the definition of the “dramatic monologue” in *A Handbook to Literature* or another glossary of literary terms. Does this sketch qualify as a dramatic monologue? Explain. Compare or contrast this sketch with Robert Browning's poem “My Last Duchess.”

## **“Remarks Concerning the Savages of North-America” (1783)**

These “Remarks,” which Franklin wrote in 1783, consist mainly of descriptions of various Native American practices, such as those concerning the reception of visitors, as well as accounts of interactions between Native Americans and whites.

The reference to “Savages” may lead some readers to assume that this set of remarks is another racist attack on Native Americans, something along the lines of Captain John Smith’s condescending treatment of the Powhatan tribe in *A Generall Historie of Virginia* or Mary Rowlandson’s derisive descriptions of the Wampanoag people in her captivity narrative, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. As it turns out, Franklin’s remarks are designed to challenge the use of the term. “Savages we call them,” he writes, “because their Manners differ from ours, which we think the Perfection of Civility. They think the same of theirs.” He goes on to suggest that all cultures show signs of civility and rudeness and, in the paragraphs that follow, adduces several pieces of evidence showing that Native Americans’ behavior is often civil and logical. He notes, for example, that these people warmly receive visitors and then paraphrases a Native American’s description of a much colder reception by whites.

Franklin was not alone in praising Native Americans. His younger contemporary, Thomas Jefferson, expressed admiration for native peoples in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau idealized what he called the “noble savage.” Furthermore, elsewhere Franklin was not always as positive toward Native Americans as he is here. Still, “Remarks Concerning the Savages of North-

America” shows a somewhat uncommon ability to view cultures objectively and to recognize differences as differences rather than as deviations from what is “right” or “normal.” It also showcases Franklin’s inclination to challenge conventional thinking, as he does in “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker.”

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Reread the first two paragraphs. Why, according to Franklin, did the whites of his time refer to Native Americans as “Savages”? Was this term appropriate, in his opinion? Explain.

Consider the two kinds of education Franklin mentions: Native American education and white education. Does one seem better than the other? Explain.

Compare Franklin’s description of Native Americans with a description in John Smith’s *Generall Historie of Virginia*, William Bradford’s *History of Plimmoth Plantation*, or *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*.

## **“Information to Those Who Would Remove to America” (1784)**

In this essay, written in 1784, Franklin tries to clear up some misconceptions about America for the sake of Europeans who consider coming to his country. He explains, for example, that neither the federal government nor the individual states generally provide immigrants with land or special privileges. He also presents an overview of American society, noting that it consists largely of middle-class people, and identifies the kinds of people, such as artisans, who can expect to succeed in America.

Franklin’s notes on his country provide a fascinating glimpse into one man’s perception and conception of American society and American values in the years after the Revolutionary War. In his eyes, the United States is largely a land of equality and opportunity for those who work hard. “The Truth is,” he explains, “that tho’ there are in

that Country few People so miserable as the Poor of Europe, there are also very few that in Europe would be called rich: it is rather a general happy Mediocrity that prevails.” He insists that his country has no place for people who wish to live off their names, noting that Americans “do not enquire concerning a Stranger, *What is he?* But *What does he do?*” In its emphasis on equality, opportunity, and industry, “Information to Those Who Would Remove To America” reflects some central themes in American culture. Indeed, one can find parallels for this work in Captain John Smith’s *Description of New England* and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*.

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Do you think Franklin’s conception of America was valid in his day? Is it true today? Defend your answer.

Compare the picture that Franklin paints of America with other pictures, such as the ones you find in Captain John Smith’s *Description of New England* and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*. Try to explain the similarities and differences in these pictures.

## **“The Ephemera” (1778)**

In 1777, Franklin took up residence in Passy, a community outside of Paris. As an American diplomat, he was in France to secure French assistance during the American Revolution, but he spent some of his free time enjoying the delights of France, particularly the company of some French friends. As a form of entertainment for them, he composed a handful of witty sketches, which he called “bagatelles.” In one of these works, “The Ephemera,” written in 1778, Franklin recollects a walk he took with one of his female friends, a married woman named Madame Anne Louise Boivin d’Hardancourt Brillon de Jouy. While lingering behind, he writes, he fixed his attention on some short-lived flies, called “ephemera.” The sketch then turns fanciful, as Franklin claims to have

overheard the conversation of some of these flies, who were discussing musicians, as well as a “soliloquy” by an “old gray-headed one.” Most of what remains of this short sketch is Franklin’s supposed transcript of this soliloquy, in which the old fly foresees his demise and laments the state of his race.

“The Ephemera” is a very simple example of a genre called “allegory,” in which figures such as people and things represent entities in the real world. In *Animal Farm*, a famous allegory by the English writer George Orwell, animals living on a farm represent human beings. In “The Ephemera,” Franklin, ostensibly writing about a group of flies, offers some commentary on human civilization. “Our present Race of Ephemeres,” the “old gray-headed” fly complains, “will in a Course of Minutes, become corrupt like those of other and older Bushes, and consequently as wretched. And in Philosophy how small our Progress!” (256).

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Why do you think Franklin used flies to discuss human civilization? Consider the attributes of these insects.

Do you think the “old gray-headed” fly represents any old man or a specific old man? Explain.

Write your own allegory. Explain your choice of characters and incidents. How did you use them to make a statement about the real world?

### **“The Elysian Fields” (1778)**

Like “The Ephemera,” “The Elysian Fields” is one of Franklin’s bagatelles. Written in French in 1778, it was addressed to Madame Anne-Catherine Helvetius, the widow of French philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvetius. After describing the frustration he felt because of her “barbaric resolution . . . to remain single,” he claims to have visited

“the Elysian Fields”—a kind of paradise in Roman mythology—where he met Madame Helvetius’s departed husband, known here simply as “H.,” who revealed that he had found a new romantic partner.

A man of his time, Franklin had an affinity for cleverness, urbanity, and humor—in a word, wit—a quality commonly seen in the literature of the eighteenth century. “The Elysian Fields” showcases Franklin’s wit. Here, for example, he cleverly suggests that one way to win over Madame Helvetius is to have one of her friends take up against his cause; after all, H. says, “when he advises her of something, she has a very strong penchant to do the reverse.” Franklin’s wit and polish are especially evident in the story’s conclusion. After revealing that H’s new partner is Franklin’s own deceased wife, he caps his argument for winning over his widow with a single word: “Revenge!”

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Describe Franklin’s tone. Is he being straightforward or ironic? How do you know?

“The Elysian Fields” is a kind of argument. What is Franklin’s thesis? How does he support this thesis?

Compare “The Elysian Fields” with another courtship argument, such as John Donne’s poem “The Flea” or Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress.” What is each persona’s goal? How does he seek to achieve it?

## ***The Autobiography (1771-1790)***

In 1771, at the age of 65, Franklin was among the most successful and most famous men in the world. After a prosperous career in printing and journalism, he had done groundbreaking work in the study of electricity, invented the lightning rod and the glass armonica, and served in the Pennsylvania Assembly. Now he was a colonial representative in England and, anticipating some free time, sat down to make a record of

this life for his son, William, then about 40 years old. “Dear Son,” he began, “I have ever had a Pleasure in obtaining any little Anecdotes of my Ancestors.” After reminding William of his own investigations into his family’s history, he wrote: “Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the Circumstances of *my* Life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with; and expecting a Weeks uninterrupted Leisure in my present Country Retirement, I sit down to write them for you.”

Known by different titles, including *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and simply *The Autobiography*, Franklin’s account of his life would eventually reach millions of readers across the world. He wrote the book in four stages. After beginning it in 1771, he broke off writing and then resumed the book in 1784 when he was a diplomat in Paris. Again, however, he stopped writing, not starting again until 1788. In 1790, having left the manuscript yet again, he wrote a fourth section. That same year, he died, leaving the book unfinished.

In Part 1, the longest of the four sections, Franklin described his ancestors and parents, his early love of books, and a number of episodes from his early life, including his arrival in Philadelphia as a poor adolescent. After initially addressing his autobiography to his son, Franklin clearly had another audience in mind when he picked up his pen again in 1784. Part 2 opens with letters from two friends who suggested that he write for a larger audience—specifically, the many young people who might benefit from reading his life story. This section contains what became one of the most famous portions of the entire book—that is, Franklin’s description of his “bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection.” Less often anthologized than the first two parts of his autobiography, Part 3 and Part 4 describe later incidents, including his study of



languages, his involvement in the French and Indian War, and his dealings with a variety of people ranging from the Rev. George Whitefield to English lords to Quakers to Native Americans.

Franklin's autobiography has become a classic of American and world literature. Popular in the nineteenth century, it is today one of the most commonly assigned literary works, providing high school and college students with an opportunity to study Franklin's selection of material and didactic approach to this material, as well as his maturation, values, style, and humor.

Selection of material is an important consideration in the composition of nonfiction narrative. This form of literature, often taking the form of journals and other forms of "life writing," was a popular genre in the English colonies in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. One of the first American literary works, Captain John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia*, narrates several of Smith's own adventures, including the famous episode in which Pocahontas supposedly saves his life. Later, the Pilgrim William Bradford wrote a history of his community, *History of Plimmoth Plantation*, and John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, kept a journal, known today as *The Journal of John Winthrop*. *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, *The Journal of John Woolman*, and Jonathan Edwards's *Personal Narrative* are all autobiographical narratives, as well. In fact, with the exception of Anne Bradstreet's and Edward Taylor's poems—which are themselves often autobiographical—much of the classic literature produced between the founding of Jamestown in 1607 and the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775 takes the form of nonfiction narrative, and much of this material belongs to the genre of life writing.

Unlike novelists and poets, autobiographers and other writers of nonfiction are supposed to “stick to the facts.” Indeed, a nonfiction writer who strays from the facts is liable to face intense criticism, as James Frey did when it became known that he had introduced fiction into his memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). Even if they do not invent characters or incidents, however, writers of nonfiction can shape their readers’ feelings and impressions through their selection of material. In writing his life story, Franklin could not describe every person he met, every action he took, and every thought he entertained. Such a book would contain thousands, even millions of pages. Instead, Franklin, like other nonfiction writers, had to make some choices. These choices reveal aspects of his personality and develop themes in his narrative. For instance, Franklin chose to include in his autobiography the story of his entrance into Philadelphia as a dirty, poor 17-year-old boy. He also selected several incidents from his professional life—his run-in with fellow workers after his refusal to pay a fee for alcohol, for example, and his composition of the “Silence Dogood” and “Busy-Body” essays—and omitted almost every detail of his family life, revealing almost nothing of his feelings for his wife and children.

A writer’s selection of material for an autobiography or other nonfiction work points to the themes that he or she wishes to emphasize. In Franklin’s case, his selection complements the strong didactic bent of his book. More than a mere recounting of some dramatic, interesting, and amusing incidents of his life, Franklin’s autobiography is a kind of argument designed to teach readers how to succeed in the world. Franklin hints at this polemical aspect of his project in the very first paragraph. After explaining that he thought his son might appreciate more information about his father’s life, he adds:

To which I have besides some other Inducements. Having emerg'd from the Poverty & Obscurity in which I was born & bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro' Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducing Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, & therefore fit to be imitated.

A large part of Franklin's mission, then, is to provide a blueprint for achieving success in the world. The incidents in which he hones his writing abilities, changes his approach to argument, and pays a shop fee for alcohol even though he does not drink—all interesting or amusing stories in their own right—have lessons behind them. His writing ability, for example, eventually contributed to his newspaper's success, as he notes, explaining:

“This was one of the first good Effects of my having learnt a little to scribble. Another was, that the leading Men, seeing a News Paper now in the hands of one who could also handle a Pen, thought it convenient to oblige and encourage me.” Even some of Franklin's mistakes in life provide lessons for readers. Borrowing a term from his printing trade, Franklin refers to these mistakes as “Errata,” which are mistakes that a printer finds in an edition that has already been printed. Referring to his relations with an acquaintance's girlfriend, he writes: “I grew fond of her Company, and being at this time under no Religious Restraints, and presuming on my Importance to her, I attempted Familiarities (another Erratum) which she repuls'd with a proper Resentment, and acquainted him with my Behaviour.” Franklin's didacticism becomes more explicit after he begins writing for a wider audience. In Part 2, he describes an ambitious plan he created for himself. “It was about this time,” Franklin explained, “that I conceiv'd the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection.” He then goes on to describe, in great detail, a set of 13 virtues, including order and industry, that he sought to adopt,

along with a methodical system he used in his attempt to achieve them. At least partly because of this strong polemical bent, *The Autobiography* does not provide a complete picture of Franklin's life. Indeed, scholars have noted that the Franklin that we see in the book is not exactly the real Franklin; rather, it is a kind of construction, which has become even better known than the real man who created it.

In describing his early life, Franklin not only provided a blueprint for young people to follow, but also provided some fascinating insights into the maturation of a young man. In Part 1, for instance, he explains how Governor William Keith failed to deliver on some promised letters of credit, leaving Franklin without the funds he was expecting to start up a printing operation. "But what shall we think of a Governor's playing such pitiful Tricks," he exclaims, "and imposing so grossly on a poor ignorant Boy!" As we read Franklin's autobiography, however, we watch this "ignorant boy" grow into a savvy man, learning lessons about business, people, and philosophy. After adopting the religious philosophy of Deism, for instance, he realized that some Deists actually practiced harmful behavior and "began to suspect that this Doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful."

Usefulness, or practicality, in fact, is one of the dominant themes of Franklin's autobiography and is intimately connected with two other major themes, industry and success—particularly success measured by the accumulation of wealth. Throughout the book, he returns again and again to these themes, showing how concrete actions can lead to concrete results and implying that, by controlling one's actions, one can control one's future. By working hard and acting practically, for example, one can succeed and

become wealthy. Franklin's experience as a budding young printer shows how these three themes come together. He explains:

In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the Contrary. I drest plainly; I was seen at no Places of idle Diversion; I never went out a-fishing or shooting; a Book, indeed, sometimes debauch'd me from my Work; but that was seldom, snug, and gave no Scandal: and to show that I was not above my Business, I sometimes brought home the Paper I purchas'd at the Stores, thro' the Streets on a Wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem'd an industrious thriving young Man, and paying duly for what I bought, the Merchants who imported Stationary solicited my Custom, others propos'd supplying me with Books, and I went on swimmingly.

For Franklin, the world was not an impenetrable mystery, but a vast machine, whose levers were accessible and powerful. This emphasis on practical matters and money would offend later readers, such as D.H. Lawrence. Practicality, industry, and financial success, nevertheless, have become major themes in American culture at large and have pervaded works by a number of other writers, including Captain John Smith, Horatio Alger, and William James.

Franklin's style of writing may hinder some first-time readers in search of these themes. Part of the challenge lies in the conventions of eighteenth-century prose. Unlike modern writers, Franklin and other writers of his time often capitalized common nouns, not just proper nouns, and contracted words that we do not contract today. Modern readers also will sometimes encounter different spellings of words, as well as some commas in unexpected places. Furthermore, Franklin, like most accomplished authors, also tended to use elevated diction, employing words not often found in everyday conversation. His narration of a tour of trades he took with his father illustrates all of these differences:

He therefore sometimes took me to walk with him, and see Joiners, Bricklayers, Turners, Braziers, &c. at their Work, that he might observe my Inclination, & endeavour to fix it on some Trade or other on Land. . . . My Father at last fix'd upon the Cutler's Trade, and my Uncle Benjamin's Son Samuel who was bred to that Business in London being about that time establish'd in Boston, I was set to be with him some time on liking. But his Expectation of a Fee with me displeasing my Father, I was taken home again."

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of Franklin's style has to do with syntax—the way that a writer or speaker combines and orders words in a sentence. As the passage above shows, Franklin was particularly fond of the participial phrase, a kind of modifier that begins with a verb in its “-ing” or “-ed” form. In this passage, for example, “being about that time establish'd in Boston” and “displeasing my Father” are both participial phrases.

Confronted with Franklin's challenging vocabulary and syntax, many readers may overlook the humorous side of his autobiography. For all of its serious discussions of his rise to prominence and his involvement in civic affairs, Franklin's account of his life is full of comical incidents and wry remarks. In Part 1, for instance, he explains that he made a deal with his eccentric boss with the hope of watching the man suffer:

Keimer wore his Beard at full Length, because somewhere in the Mosaic Law it is said, *thou shalt not mar the Corners of thy Beard*. He likewise kept the seventh day Sabbath; and these two Points were essentials with him. I dislik'd both, but agreed to admit them upon Condition of his adopting the Doctrine of using no animal Food. I doubt, says he, my Constitution will not bear that. I assur'd him it would, and that he would be the better for it. He was usually a great Glutton, and I promis'd myself some Diversion in half-starving him.

Even Franklin's generally serious plan for self-improvement has a humorous side.

Although it may strike some readers as evidence of hubris, Franklin probably intended some humor in his statement that he was seeking “moral Perfection.” After all, he clearly was aware of his own pride; indeed, he admitted that he added his thirteenth virtue,

“HUMILITY,” on the advice of a friend, who told him that some people had found him proud.

More than two centuries after its composition, Franklin’s autobiography still has much to offer modern readers. Whether they find it humorous or serious, instructive or pedantic, inspiring or infuriating, Franklin’s autobiography presents readers with opportunities to study a nonfiction writer’s selection of material, to consider strategies for succeeding in the world, to contemplate themes such as industry and wealth, to tackle some challenging prose, and even to enjoy some good laughs.

### **Questions for Discussion or Writing**

Consider Franklin’s selection of material. What do his choices say about his outlook? How do they shape some of the themes of his autobiography? Compare Franklin’s selection and emphases with those of another nonfiction writer, such as Captain John Smith, William Bradford, Mary Rowlandson, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Truman Capote, or Maya Angelou.

Imagine that you are writing your own autobiography. Select an incident you think is important or revealing and describe it. What does this incident, as well as your description of it, reveal about your personality or outlook?

Although it is a work of nonfiction, Franklin’s autobiography shares some characteristics with the bildungsroman and the story of initiation, two fictional genres that tell of the maturation of a young man or a young woman. Compare Franklin’s story of his development with similar accounts of maturation in a bildungsroman such as Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a story of initiation such as John Updike’s “A & P,” or an autobiography such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Make sure to focus on specific incidents. What kinds of lessons and epiphanies do the characters experience?

Does this work belong to any genre other than autobiography? Could it be considered a self-help manual? Compare Franklin’s autobiography with a modern self-help book, such as one by Stephen Covey or Dr. Phil McGraw.

Read Mark Twain’s humorous essay “The Late Benjamin Franklin” and D.H. Lawrence’s chapter on Franklin in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Summarize each writer’s argument. Do you side with Franklin or with his detractors? Explain.

How does Franklin's autobiography reflect specific principles of the Enlightenment?  
Discuss particular incidents and comments from various parts of his book.

Write your own plan for "arriving at moral Perfection." What virtues would you include? What method would you use for achieving them?

Do you think Franklin was serious about becoming morally perfect? Defend your answer.

Pick up where Franklin left off. Choose an episode of Franklin's life, such as his editing of the Declaration of Independence, and write an account of it. Try to adopt Franklin's style and perspective.

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## Further Questions for Reading and Writing

Biographer Esmond Wright wrote that Franklin "worked in the light." What do you think Wright meant? Consider themes you have encountered in his writings,



particularly *The Autobiography* and “The Way to Wealth,” as well as the basic principles of the Enlightenment.

What aspects of Franklin’s outlook, themes, and style seem “American”? Do you think that America shaped Franklin, that Franklin shaped America, or that the two shaped each other? Defend your answer by referring to specific features in his works, as well as incidents or ideas outside the works.

In Franklin’s opinion, how much control does an individual have over his or her life? Defend your answer by referring to specific passages from *The Autobiography* and other writings. Compare Franklin’s perspective on free will with those of other American writers, such as Henry David Thoreau, Stephen Crane, and Eugene O’Neill.

Like Washington Irving, Benjamin Franklin sometimes invented personae to be the “authors” or “speakers” of his works. Why do you think Irving, Franklin, and other writers used personae? How does a persona affect the meaning or effect of a work, such as Irving’s *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* or Franklin’s “Speech of Miss Polly Baker.”

Look up the term “style” in *A Handbook to Literature* or another glossary of literary terms. How would you characterize Franklin’s style? Consider, for example, the way he forms his sentences. How does his style complement or undermine his content? Defend your answer by referring to specific stylistic features. Compare Franklin’s style with that of another writer, such as Mark Twain or Ernest Hemingway.

How should an individual balance his or her individualism with responsibilities to the community? In defending your position, consider what Franklin has to say in *The Autobiography*, as well as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s position in “Self-Reliance,” Stephen Crane’s conclusion to “The Blue Hotel,” and perhaps other works.

Because many of Franklin’s writings, such as “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” and “The Speech of Miss Polly Baker,” did not appear with his name, we cannot be certain that he wrote them. What kinds of evidence do you think modern scholars use when determining that Franklin did or did not write a particular essay? Compare your answer with information in the headnotes for specific works in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*.

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