

***The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative: Autobiography, Sensation, and the Literary Marketplace (2019), by Sean Grass***

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In this masterful analysis of autobiography's place within, and influence on, the literary marketplace of the 1860s, Sean Grass combines book history and close reading to explore the financial realities of writing about one's life. At the centre of *The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative: Autobiography, Sensation, and the Literary Marketplace* is, in Grass's words, a reminder "that Victorian autobiographies were economic as well as discursive transactions and that they belonged – like *The Pickwick Papers*, gift books, illustrated newspapers, and sensation novels – to the wondrous complexity of the Victorian literary market" (5). Not only can such texts reveal much about identity construction and the lived experiences of the working class, women, or other oft-marginalised groups to readers and researchers of auto/biography, but their popularity (as measured here through factors such as sales, reception and distribution) has implications for how we read other mid-Victorian texts. Taken as a body of work, the cultural and ideological impact of autobiography in the mid-Victorian period was vast and wide-ranging.

The salient reminder that autobiography is not only a kind of mediated subjectivity enacted for moral or personal reasons but also a financial undertaking is Grass's starting point. There are two distinct but overlapping projects at work within this monograph: firstly, in the three sections of chapter 1 ("Autobiography in the Literary Market 1820-1860," "Autobiography and the Cultural Field," and "Autobiography and Anxiety"), Grass provides a comprehensive overview of autobiography as a publishing genre from 1820-1860, a period in which life writing exploded into the literary marketplace and caused an anxiety about the transformation of identity into text that bled into other literary forms (as the subsequent chapters demonstrate). The quantitative approach is impressive and is used to argue that the commodification of identity led to, among other things, a fragmentation of the self. Grass identifies nearly 2,500 autobiographical works published between 1820 and 1860, justifying a focus on the mid-Victorian period by showing that there was an enormous increase in autobiographical publishing in the 1840s and 1850s, unmatched in the preceding or

subsequent decades of the century. Grass's approach is driven by a 'distant reading' of autobiography, the author basing his analysis on reviews (beginning with John Gibson Lockhart's essay in the 1827 January *Quarterly Review*) and his own augmented database of titles drawn from the *Nineteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue* rather than close reading of autobiographies themselves. It is particularly helpful to see Grass outline how he searched and compiled his list in the appendix to the volume, and we can also look forward to perusing the dataset, which will be made publicly available. Transparency of method is vital when applying computational analysis to literature on this scale, and Grass models this in a way which is rarely seen in literary studies, confidently integrating distant and close reading to create a convincing and compelling narrative without overloading readers with technical detail.

Secondly, in chapters 2-6, Grass conducts a series of close readings of novels of the 1860s including *Great Expectations*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Silas Marner*, *Hard Cash*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Moonstone*. The selection of texts in these chapters allows for consideration of genres (particularly sensation fiction), gender, and loss, and through them Grass explores the imaginative impact of the capitalist realities of the literary marketplace. There is, perhaps, an incongruence between the introduction and first chapter's discussion of so many once popular, now obscure autobiographical texts and the following chapters' sustained close reading of some of the novels of the 1860s best known to modern readers. However, this pairing effectively shows the potential of such analysis of life writing in conjunction with other forms, demonstrating how it might offer new entry points, even to novels and authors that have already received such expansive critical attention in the field of Victorian studies. There is certainly scope for further research into the ways in which the trends in autobiography identified by Grass, and the ramifications of the commodification of subjectivity, manifest in other genres and in the works of other writers. Further research might also conduct the kind of nuanced close reading enacted here on the body of autobiographies identified in creating the dataset.

The study is bookended with two short case studies which offer differing perspectives on the question of identity commodification: Lord Thomas Cochrane's *Autobiography of a Seaman* (1860), and the Tichborne Claimant. The former sets the tone for the book; in it, Grass demonstrates how Cochrane's autobiography, now virtually unknown

but popular in the 1860s, worked on multiple levels. Not only was it an opportunity to exonerate himself from charges of conspiracy and fraud in relation to a Stock Exchange scandal (and more broadly to redeem his damaged character), it was also a platform for his ongoing calls for financial compensation from the Crown and a money-making scheme of its own. In the closing case study, Grass demonstrates how the fragmentation of identity exacerbated by the popular taste for autobiography can be traced in the case of the Tichborne Claimant, and the transmutation of human lives into commercial properties. Overall, the book offers readers a snapshot of the kinds of autobiographies that flooded the market in the mid-Victorian period and their place within the public consciousness, giving a detailed overview of autobiographical publishing which will be helpful to any students and researchers of Victorian literary tastes, followed by a series of deft readings which not only offer new insight into the specific texts discussed but show how greater attentiveness to the cultural impact of autobiography might change our approach to the literature of the period.