

Biography and Abortion: Perception and Distortion of Reality in Accounts by Celebrity Aborted Mothers

Jeff Koloze

ABSTRACT: This study reviews criteria established by the scholarship on biographical literary criticism and applies those criteria and an additional one, the cathartic value of biographical disclosure, to the abortion narratives of three celebrities: Gloria Swanson, Amy Brenneman, and Nicki Minaj.

IN ACADEMIA, WHERE certain dominant literary theories are promulgated in an attempt to get more people to read books instead of mere headlines of online articles, and maybe even to write essays instead of brief but often insipid tweets, biographical literary criticism may not be as sexy as psychological literary theory, which seeks Freud's Oedipus or Electra complexes in innocent passages, or as contentious as Marxist criticism, which strives to explain the ideological bases of political controversies such as so-called white privilege, or as controversial as queer theory, whose practitioners seem to be interested more in promoting a gay and lesbian social agenda instead of understanding how persons or characters with same-sex attraction maneuver within their worlds. In contrast, those who use biographical material as a vehicle not only to understand the literature being studied but also to assess the impact of the ideas within that literature appreciate how biographical literary criticism is an essential tool to accomplish both objectives.

These purposes are especially relevant for obtaining insight into literature whose controversial nature still has significant impact on the culture, such as the narratives that address abortion, one of the three major life issues. One can argue that a biographical critical approach to abortion texts must be the starting point for any other literary exegesis, even preempting a formalist analysis. After all, one must start with the facts of a mother who aborted her child before one can discuss possible psychological interpretations of the killing, as in

psychological criticism, or ideological concerns surrounding the killing, as in Marxist criticism, or even the gay or lesbian contortions of sexuality that involve the killing, as in queer theory.

Review of the Scholarship

While some popular sources written from an anti-life perspective are more preoccupied with asserting that mothers who have aborted were justified in killing their unborn children, especially if they were celebrities,¹ some scholarly sources simply ignore biographical literary criticism as an independent technique to study literature. Significantly, Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, a resource almost universally recommended by college and university faculty, does not list biographical literary criticism under the category "Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism." Many other literary perspectives are identified instead, including: "Moral Criticism, Dramatic Construction; Formalism; Psychoanalytic Criticism; Marxist Criticism; Reader-Response Criticism; Structuralism and Semiotics; Postmodern Criticism; New Historicism; Cultural Studies; Post-Colonial Criticism; Feminist Criticism; Gender Studies and Queer Theory; Ecocriticism; Critical Race Theory." In fact, the site suggests that students who delve into biographical research may be veering dangerously away from their original intent, the explication of literature:

When your argument ceases to discuss the work itself and begins to focus on the personal (your own reaction) or the biographical (the author's life), you need to get back on track. Make no mistake: a sense of audience and information about the author can be important. When these details become central to the essay, however, you are no longer writing on literature.²

¹ These sources claim that the abortions were justified on the basis that celebrity mothers could not have a child because doing so would have sacrificed their careers, or that they were too poor to have a child, or for some other reason. Since these sources often merely assert unsubstantiated claims that happen to exist on an Internet platform, this research will not unduly concern itself with such compilations. See, for example, the *Classic Hollywood Beauties: Actresses Who Had Abortions* website written by "Elizabeth," accessed 19 May 2016, which claims that many famous actors ("actresses") aborted without providing any source material to substantiate the claims. As of 22 June 2016, an email to Elizabeth, asking about sources for the claims on the website, has not been answered.

² Allen Brizee, J. Case Tompkins, Libby Chernouski, and Elizabeth Boyle, "Literary

Moreover, three other recent works on literary criticism neither segregate nor mention biographical criticism as one of the many literary theories available. The 1991 anthology *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, edited by Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, merges formalist criticism (the most likely category under which biographical criticism would be included) with archetypal criticism.³ The 2007 edition of *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, edited by David H. Richter, also does not separate biographical criticism from the other perspectives. The only index entry for the criticism is a casual reference to the strategy.⁴ Finally, Pelagia Goulimari's 2015 monograph *Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to Postcolonialism* contains many current terms of contemporary criticism (for example, "alienation," "dissonant composition," "subaltern," and "hybridity") but neglects biographical criticism almost entirely. There is no index entry to the theory although there is a casual reference to New Critics' opposition to "authorial intention and against the relevance of the author's biography."⁵

Despite these problems of nomenclature, omission, and organization of the theories, the scholarship on biographical literary criticism has not been entirely neglected. Major tenets of this literary theory can be summarized succinctly. In their 2006 volume X.J. Kennedy, Dana Gioia, and Mark Bauerlein identify

Theory and Schools of Criticism", *Purdue Online Writing Lab*.

³ Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, eds., *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991). The author wishes to thank Leland Ryken, Emeritus Professor of English at Wheaton College, for his quick response to an email query about biographical criticism in the anthology he coedited. Ryken further stated: "Given the categories in our book, biographical criticism would be parallel to new historicism, but that would be 'new biography,' fueled by a political correct assault on traditional values, a revisionist impulse, and a hermeneutic of suspicion in which seemingly positive biographical data actually conceals something sinister" (e-mail to author, 27 May 2016).

⁴ The first and second editions also do not provide a separate chapter for biographical literary criticism. See David H. Richter, ed., *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989). See also David H. Richter, ed., *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. (Boston MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1998) and 3rd ed. (Boston MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007).

⁵ Pelagia Goulimari, *Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to Postcolonialism* (London UK: Routledge, 2015), p. 225.

three major aspects of biographical criticism, all of which sound cautionary more than descriptive. They begin with the important negation that such criticism is not biography, which “is a branch of historical scholarship [yielding] a written account of a person’s life.”⁶ A further negation is balanced with a declaration of the function of biographical literary criticism: “Biographical criticism, however, is not concerned with recreating the course of an author’s life. It focuses on explicating the literary work by compiling relevant materials from the life.”⁷ The connection between biographical criticism and formalism (also called New Criticism, dominant in the academy until the sixties) is evident in this first aspect since the term “explicating” is used, a term intimately connected with “close reading,” the standard method used in formalist criticism.

The second aspect of biographical literary criticism that Kennedy, Gioia, and Bauerlein identify is similarly admonitory: readers “must use biographical interpretations cautiously” since “writers are notorious for revising the facts of their own lives. They often delete embarrassments and invent accomplishments, trading the truth for a preferred image.”⁸ These critics amplify this admonition further in a third aspect:

An added danger, especially in the case of a famous writer...is that the life can overwhelm the work, leading critics to draw simple connections between this element in the work and that event in the life, with the latter taking priority. The texts are complicated and mystifying, but the real life events are (putatively) not, and so critics are tempted to invoke the latter to resolve the former. A savvy biographical critic remembers to base an interpretation on what is in the text itself. Biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text, not cover it with life episodes.⁹

As with the first aspect discussed in the preceding paragraph, the focus is on the text, where the connection between biographical literary criticism and formalism is obvious and probably functions as a safeguard against unfounded or perhaps bizarre interpretations of a literary work.

⁶ X.J. Kennedy, Dana Gioia, and Mark Bauerlein, *The Longman Dictionary of Literary Terms: Vocabulary for the Informed Reader* (New York NY: Pearson, 2006), pp. 16-17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Michael Meyer's 2013 summary of biographical criticism is simpler: "A knowledge of an author's life can help readers understand his or her work more fully. Events in a work might follow actual events in a writer's life just as characters might be based on people known by the author."¹⁰ Despite this, Meyer also recommends a cautionary approach:

Some formalist critics – some New Critics, for example – argue that interpretation should be based exclusively on internal evidence rather than on any biographical information outside the work. They argue that it is not possible to determine an author's intention and that the work must stand by itself. Although this is a useful caveat for keeping the work in focus, a reader who finds biography relevant would argue that biography can at the very least serve as a control on interpretation.¹¹

Finally, while authors can sometimes make it clear that their fictional work is inseparable from autobiography,¹² as Meyer asserts, "it is also worth noting that biographical information can complicate a work."¹³ Meyer considers the case of Kate Chopin, whose "marriage was evidently satisfying to her...[;] she was not oppressed by her husband and did not feel oppressed," even though many of her characters experience oppressive and unfulfilling marriages.¹⁴ Likewise, Kennedy, Gioia, and Bauerlein cite John Cheever (whose claim that his was a "sunny, privileged youth" belied the facts of "a childhood scarred by a distant mother, a failed, alcoholic father, and nagging economic uncertainty") as an example of how, "Once these facts came out, critics regarded Cheever's work in a different light."¹⁵

The Cathartic Value of Biographical Disclosure

An important feature of biographical literary criticism that this study examines and that literary critics seem to have ignored is the purpose of biographical (especially autobiographical or first-person) writing: the cathartic

¹⁰ Michael Meyer, *The Bedford Introduction to Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing*, 10th ed. (Boston MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013), pp. 2032.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2033.

¹² See, for example, Sandra Spanier's commentary that Kay Boyle herself said that her novel *Process* (1924) was "autobiography pure and simple" ("Introduction," Urbana IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001, p. xxvi).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Kennedy et al., p. 17.

value of such disclosure. Certainly, a novelist may also engage in catharsis when he or she constructs a plot ostensibly unconcerned with his or her own life. When one reads biographies, however, the author him- or herself will maintain not only that his or her life is important enough to study but also that the expression of actions in the biography serve a confessional and therefore purgative effect. For example, the didactic value of biography is evident when Benjamin Franklin writes in his autobiography (1771-1789)¹⁶ that

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. They may also deem them fit to be imitated, should any of them find themselves in similar circumstances.¹⁷

He thus affirms at the beginning of the autobiography the importance of his own activity in his accumulation of wealth and in the founding of the United States.

The confessional function of biography becomes evident when Franklin discusses his thirteen virtues. Even though they are affirmed later in his autobiography, mentioning the virtues softens the impact of an earlier passage where he candidly admits his sexual escapades:

Having turned my thoughts to marriage, I looked around me and made overtures of acquaintance in other places, but soon found that the business of a printer being generally thought a poor one, I was not to expect money with a wife, unless with such a one as I should not otherwise think agreeable. In the meantime, that hard-to-be governed passion of youth had hurried me frequently into intrigues with low women that fell in my way, which were attended with some expense and great inconvenience, besides a continual risk to my health by a distemper, which of all things I dreaded, tho' by great good luck I escaped it.¹⁸

Thus, the revelation that one of the Founding Fathers of the United States was

¹⁶ Scholarship has determined that Franklin began his memoirs, later called the *Autobiography*, in 1771 and “continued writing through May 1789, a year before his death” (Isaacson, p. ix). See Walter Isaacson, “Introduction”, in Franklin, pp. vii-xv.

¹⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York NY: Signet Classics, 2014), p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 65.

simply just another oversexed young man prepares the reader for his assertion of chastity, the twelfth virtue, with its supporting imperative being: “Rarely use venery but for health or offspring.”¹⁹

Similarly, when Henry David Thoreau famously writes about chastity in the “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden* (1854), his commentary is couched in appropriate nineteenth-century language, yet his reader (and, for that matter, contemporary twenty-first-century readers, steeped in sexually-explicit literature) would understand that sexual temptation is something he experienced while sojourning in the woods. “The generative energy,” he writes, “which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us” clearly refers to the biographical event of his sexual temptation.²⁰ That Thoreau, nominal Protestant Christian that he was, is aware of the purgative effect of such confession becomes obvious when he clarifies a page later: “I hesitate to say these things, but it is not because of the subject – I care not how obscene my *words* are – but because I cannot speak of them without betraying my impurity.”²¹ In so doing, of course, the reader becomes aware that more occurred in the woods than merely hoeing beans, bathing twice a day in Walden Pond, or admiring the natural environment.

These passages are examples not only of the intersection of biography and literature but also of the confessional aspects of biography vis-à-vis a controversial topic. They involve dead white male authors, neither of whom can be appealing to a contemporary audience, more than half of whom are educated women, many of whom have had abortions themselves or who know of mothers who had aborted. What examples can be shown to illustrate the content of biographical messages about the abortion experiences of contemporary mothers? Can a literary analysis be made of their statements, consistent with the admonitions offered by scholars investigating biographical literary criticism as a tool for explicating the “literature” of their abortion experiences? To answer these questions, the abortion experiences of the following celebrities will be examined. Gloria Swanson’s extensive discussion of her abortions in the first decades of the twentieth century begins the study. The research progresses to biographical content of the abortion experiences of two twenty-

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 79.

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York NY: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 267.

²¹ Ibid, p. 268; italics in original.

first-century celebrities, the actor Amy Brenneman and the musical artist Nicki Minaj, both of whom discuss their abortions through Internet video presentations (one verbal, the other musical).

Gloria Swanson

Praise for Gloria Swanson is justly founded on her extensive film, radio, and commercial success. Her close-up final scene in *Sunset Boulevard* alone guarantees her position as a cultural icon. Swanson's accounts of her abortion experiences further add to her stature as a pioneering woman, this time as one of the first actors not only to discuss her abortions but also to express regret for them.²²

There are two significant abortion passages in Swanson's autobiography, one an involuntary and another a voluntary abortion. The second of these must be considered in light of an abortion forced upon her by her first husband, Wallace Beery. When she complained to him about "terrible pains" that she was experiencing during her wanted pregnancy, Beery "said he would go and try to find a doctor or a druggist."²³ The abortion forced upon her is related thus:

Wally came into the room and put a bottle of medicine on the table beside the bed. He said he had been lucky to find a drugstore nearby that opened early. If this stuff didn't make me feel better in a couple of hours, he would get a doctor to come and see me. Then he went and got some water from the kitchen.

"How many shall I take?"

"Four or five capsules, the druggist said. Take five."

I saw Wally's mother standing in the doorway watching me take the medicine.

²² Although the large number of passages in which she regrets her abortions will be discussed later, Stephen Michael Shearer disagrees, saying in his study that Swanson had "no regrets." *Gloria Swanson: The Ultimate Star* (New York NY: St. Martin's, 2013), p. 132. Richard Dyer MacCann suggests otherwise, since he includes Swanson's abortion passage in which she expresses her regret in his 1992 work on silent films. Furthermore, MacCann argues that her sincere disclosures contributed to the huge success of the autobiography: "Its frank revelations, along with later descriptions of her six marriages and several liaisons, helped to make it a best seller for many months after Random House published it in 1980. But any objective reader of star memoirs must surely put it among the ten best such books in the history of Hollywood. Although she credits several people with some assistance, her personal voice and labors are apparent." *The Stars Appear* (Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow, 1992), p. 152.

²³ Gloria Swanson, *Swanson on Swanson* (New York NY: Random House, 1980), p. 72.

Then she disappeared. I began to feel very sick after that. My stomach ached and I started gagging. The pain was awful. All of a sudden I felt too weak to stand up, and I could feel myself start to topple.

When I came to, everything smelled different. A nurse was wiping my forehead and wrists and telling me I was doing fine.... "There's nothing to be down in the mouth about, honey," she said. "You're young. You're pretty. You've got all the time in the world to have another baby."

Oh, no, oh, no, I thought, sobbing. Wally brought me here. He stood right there and told me to take that poison, and when I was unconscious he brought me here so they could finish the job.²⁴

On the ruse that she wanted a refill of the prescription for indigestion, Swanson learned from the pharmacist that the pills she had been given were abortifacient. Thus ended her less than two-month marriage with Beery.

If Richard Dyer MacCann is correct that "her personal voice and labors are apparent"²⁵ throughout her autobiography, then this passage is remarkable as a prelude to Swanson's voluntary abortion, discussed 160 pages later, especially since a battery of "could have" propositions are entertained. She could have agreed with the nurse that she could have children later. She could have simply acknowledged Beery's forced abortion as an attempt to secure her film career. She could have resigned herself to the forced abortion and stayed married with the man responsible for the chemical abortion of her child. She could have ignored the emotional impact of this event and resumed her career in silent film-era Hollywood. The biographical facts, however, are that she did not exercise these possible options.

That is, Swanson did not choose abortion until later in her career. The circumstances behind her decision to have a voluntary abortion of her child by Henri, the Marquis de la Falaise de la Coudraye, are described thus:

By having Henri's child under the terms of my present contract, I would forfeit the chance to become one of the highest-paid performers in history. I would also, probably, lose Henri, because we had both gone past the stage where we could be happy in a garret.

By not having the baby, on the other hand, I could be in *The Coast of Folly* on schedule and complete my contract in a year. I could be free to dictate my own terms after that or leave Paramount altogether, and I could provide a rich, happy life for Henri and me.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 73.

²⁵ MacCann, p. 152.

[She explains the situation to André Daven.] When I finished, I told him I thought I had to have an abortion.

André said, “You are absolutely right. The situation must be regularized. It is easier perhaps in Paris than in New York or California. You and Henri are both very young. You have all the time in the world to have another child.”

The words went through me like an electric shock. They’d been said to me before, by the nurse in the Hollywood hospital after Wally gave me the awful medicine to take, when I was seventeen. I had judged Wally harshly at the time and had held that judgment against him ever since. I had thought he had done the most monstrous thing in the world, and now I was preparing to do it myself. Furthermore, I was doing it for the same reason Wally had, probably – to save my career.²⁶

As if the above were not enough, as if relating the circumstances of the momentous choice to abort the child were not already rhetorically significant, in what may be a literary first for autobiographical writing, Swanson continues her account of the voluntary abortion a page later with a passage where the child him- or herself speaks. Continuing her conversation with André Daven:

“There’s no other way, is there?” I asked.

“Of course not, Gloria,” he said.

His voice was reassuring, and I smiled feebly at him in gratitude. Then I heard another voice speaking very clearly. “Don’t do this,” it said.

The voice, I knew, was inside me. It was the voice of my unborn child. I tried not to listen.

“Your heart is pounding,” the voice said. “I know you hear me. Listen to me. I want to live. I am frightened of the sewers.”

I shuddered and started to sob convulsively....

When he had left, I pulled back the taffeta curtains in my bedroom and stared into the gray, foggy Paris dusk. A face was looking at me from the darkness. It was not a baby’s face. I could not have stood that. It was the face of death, beckoning or warning, I couldn’t tell which.²⁷

Even though the 519 pages of the autobiography highlight her many artistic and commercial successes, Swanson’s regret over this abortion is a compelling theme throughout the rest of the work. She has “nightmares about the child I had killed” even though she wanted to hold others responsible “for making me destroy my baby.” Her price for her success was that she had to “sacrifice a child.” The first chapter thus begins and ends with abortion. She

²⁶ Swanson, p. 233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

wanted to have children to compensate for the aborted one. What would now be called post-abortion syndrome is evident in her reaction to a movie advertisement that implies that one of the characters would need to sacrifice “your throne or your baby,” a choice that Swanson applies to herself. Pregnant again, she chooses not to abort. Another columnist, whose commentary she includes in the autobiography, notes that the stamp that Swanson designed for the United Nations Decade of Women had “a vague, roughly formed foetus.”²⁸ Swanson’s elaboration on this stamp in a stand-alone paragraph is clearly life-affirming:

My painting on the cachet showed the earth in a trail of light streaking across the black infinity of space toward the viewer. I had painted the continents and oceans to suggest an embryo, and in the lower right-hand corner I had written: “Woman, Like Mother Earth, Has an Eternal Rendezvous with Spring.” If ever there was a statement obviously made by a female Aries, that was it, and I was pleased with it because I believed it.²⁹

Her final comment about her voluntary abortion is significantly written on the last page of the autobiography when, while traveling in Japan, she participates in the Buddhist ritual of atonement using the *mizuko jizo*, the miniature statues representing aborted children: “the greatest regret of my life has always been that I didn’t have my baby, Henri’s child, in 1925.”³⁰ Nothing in the whole world is worth a baby, I realized as soon as it was too late, and I never stopped blaming myself.”³¹

How can the above passages be illuminated further using biographical literary criticism? Can the scholarly tenets discussed above be considered in relation to Swanson’s abortion experiences to assist the reader to understand the literary function of the narratives? Certainly, the first cautionary criterion that Kennedy, Gioia, and Bauerlein offer poses an immediate problem, for there is a one-to-one correspondence between Swanson’s life and the depiction of the abortion episodes. On their second criterion, however, the literary treatment of the abortion episodes is heightened. Swanson does not deflect the

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 5, 11, 245, 277, 419, and unnumbered page 493.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 495.

³⁰ The reader must remember that the *Autobiography* was published in 1980, fifty-five years after the abortion.

³¹ Ibid, p. 519.

embarrassment of saying explicitly that she sacrificed her unborn child for her career, nor does she invent a martyr-like persona to mitigate the choice to kill the unborn child in the voluntary abortion. Even in the narration of the coerced abortion, Swanson does not depict herself as a victim, for her actions afterwards denote a woman who can retaliate well against her opponent, in this case, leaving Beery and ending her marriage with him. Meyer's caution that focusing on the texts themselves serves to prohibit unwarranted interpretations restricts interpretation to meanings that can be corroborated by Swanson's personality: that of a strong-willed, imperious woman unafraid to assert herself in difficult circumstances.

Keeping Meyer's cautionary note in mind, the cathartic value of both abortion episodes is evident in the diction, the characterizations, and even the punctuation that Swanson uses. Beery is not depicted as a purely evil character, for she acknowledges in the subsequent abortion episode that his ulterior motive may have been intellectually sound but immoral (the preservation of her career). Even the repetition of exclamatory utterances with pauses after each term ("Oh, no, oh, no,") conveys an element of pathos that is convincing to the reader, consistent with Swanson's knowledge of the histrionic effect of such repetition. Moreover, the coerced abortion episode reads as a well-balanced narrative of logical events: one action leads to another. It is stated simply, and the effects of that action are recounted with minimal use of highly connotative diction. For example, taking the five capsules leads to "pain" and "gagging." Since the passage reads logically, the reader can trust that what is being communicated is valid.

The cathartic effect of the voluntary abortion episode becomes evident only in the last paragraph. After she offers logical reasons why she should abort (to advance her career and to secure her financial future), and after a simplistic affirmation by the friend who agrees to her abortion, Swanson makes the credible assertion that she knows that she is complicit in the killing of her unborn child and is no better morally than Beery, who aborted her involuntarily. Such a startlingly honest confession must have been a liberating event in her life, so much so that Swanson could progress in her film and acting career until her late years, even though her autobiography frequently mentions her regret for the abortion.

Amy Brenneman

In contrast to Swanson's abortion narratives, that of contemporary actor

Amy Brenneman illustrates how a life-denying perspective can pose challenges for the biographical literary critic, albeit surmountable ones. Although the video presentation contains an almost identical account of the Internet text version of her abortion experience, there are some aspects that deserve attention.³² First, the video contains many “cuts” – sudden shifts from one set of lines to another. The astute twenty-first-century viewer would wonder why the cuts are necessary in what should be a continuous, mellifluous narrative of an abortion experience meant to be viewed positively. That Brenneman uses “um” and “ah” vocalizations frequently does not add to the confidence that the viewer should obtain from such a performance. These may, however, be stylistic items designed to appeal to an audience used to such jerky movements and halting speech in inferior acting.

More importantly, while the video purports to be a personal account of a mother who aborted and feels no regret about her having killed the child, Brenneman’s language focuses excessively on the legal condition of abortion policy in the United States, thus deflecting attention away from the emotions that she felt and still feels about the action taken. The brief personal details (she had “been with a boyfriend” and was “not ready to be a mom”) are overcome by frequent appeals to legal authority. Abortion (the controversial nature of which as being legal throughout the nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever is not acknowledged) is simply the “law of the land.” She compares it to the non-controversial “right to vote.” Overall, Brenneman is content with her abortion because “I get to choose” and could “celebrate the basic law of the land.” Further deflection from her own experience occurs when Brenneman argues that, if one were pressed, one would know “a woman who’s terminated a pregnancy.”

Finally, regarding any post-abortion effects, Brenneman claims that “it didn’t scar me for life.” The ambiguous language of this final assertion would make the twenty-first-century reader wonder: If abortion did not scar her entire life, did it scar her initially, periodically, or in some other way? While her video presentation may have overused a logical appeal, it suffers from the absence of two other important elements of persuasion: first, a sense of pathos, the emotional component that is evident, for example, in Swanson’s abortion episodes; and, second, an affirmation of the credibility of the speaker, the ethos

³² Center for Reproductive Rights, *Amy Brenneman: My Abortion Story*, YouTube, 29 Feb. 2016, accessed 26 Mar. 2016.

factor in Aristotelian argumentation. The summary effect of this Internet performance of Brenneman's recounting of her abortion experience is not only unpersuasive but insipid.

The written version of the abortion experience is just as tasteless in its lack of convincing personal details and unconvincing in its reliance on legal grounds in support of abortion:

I had an abortion. I am simply one of millions of women who have exercised this constitutionally protected right, and according to recent data, I am part of the 95 percent of women who do not regret their choice.

So here is my story.

In the spring of my junior year at Harvard, my period was late. I had been in a relationship for almost two years with a loving and supportive boyfriend. We used birth control, but it malfunctioned. When I learned I was pregnant, I knew immediately and without question that I wanted an abortion. I had no desire to be a mother at that time. I wanted to finish college and start my career.

We found a doctor in the yellow pages. We went to his clean and respectable office. I had the procedure done with no pain; my boyfriend was with me the whole time. Afterward, I breathed huge sigh of relief [sic] and thought to myself, I get my life back! I was grateful that I lived in a country where forced birth was not the law of the land and where motherhood was not a lifelong consequence for a contraception slip.

I have never, not for one moment, regretted my abortion.³³

Reviewing this passage from the criteria established by biographical literary critics generates some interesting insights, many of which were probably not Brenneman's intention in producing a video for the anti-life Center for Reproductive Rights. The admonition that a biographical literary critic should not equate a work of literature as pure biography is well-avoided in this passage. The persona in the passage cannot be equated with Amy Brenneman herself, even though it purports to be her abortion experience. That is, the stiff syntax of various sentences indicates a robot-like testament to the efficacy of abortion, not an account from a human being with a full range of emotions.

Furthermore, the astute (if not jaundiced) twenty-first-century reader would read certain terms critically and challenge their denotations. Words and phrases that designate the speaker as "simply one," knowing something

³³ Amy Brenneman, "Amy Brenneman: Why I'm Sharing My Abortion Story; The Actress Opens up About Why She Decided to Terminate a Pregnancy at Age 21 and Why It Was the Right Decision," *Cosmopolitan.com*, 29 Feb. 2015, accessed 26 Mar. 2016.

“immediately and without question,” having a procedure done “with no pain,” and benefitting from having the father of the child being aborted “with me the whole time” are incredible statements. Contemporary readers are well aware that an aborted mother should not be lumped together in the category of “millions of women” since each aborted mother has her own story to tell about her abortion experience. Most aborted mothers find an abortion choice agonizing. They ruminate over available options for a significant amount of time before deciding to kill the child. Virtually every abortion account, even those written from the anti-life perspective, note that an abortion generates physical, psychological, or spiritual pain. The last claim, that the father of the child steadfastly supported the mother at the time of the abortion, is either a distortion of what Brenneman perceives as her reality or simply ridiculous. As the abortion experiences of millions of women suggest, the fathers of the children being killed have either separated from the mothers long before the abortion or abandoned their erstwhile lovers to experience the abortion procedure alone. Thus, the persona created is unreliable as a credible authority.

One could argue that Brenneman invents an environment suitable for her rhetorical purpose (to justify the killing of her child) when she describes the abortionist’s office as “clean and respectable.” One can understand the first adjective, since that directly counters the charge that abortionists’ offices are customarily unsanitary. The second adjective, however, strains credulity. What mother would think of the nature of an abortionist’s office as “respectable” when she enters it to kill her child? Although she may be correct in her assertion that she felt a “huge sigh of relief” (most mothers do so, thinking that their “problem” has been resolved), similar invention probably occurs when Brenneman asserts that she had “my life back!” The terminal punctuation is indicative more of a teenaged girl writing in her diary than a mature woman recounting a serious episode in her life. The question here is an epistemological one: how does she know that she “has her life back”? How can she be certain that her life is more fulfilled being an aborted mother? After all, as she asserts in the video presentation, she eventually married and had children. If abortion is so instrumental to restore a woman’s life, why would any woman have any child in the future? The astute twenty-first-century reader would conclude that Brenneman aborted simply for convenience’s sake, as Swanson did to secure her career. The difference is that Swanson was able to acknowledge both the reason for aborting her child and the regret in having done so.

Finally, Brenneman’s abortion episode suffers from a lack of the cathartic

value that is essential for biographical disclosure. After asserting that she has “her life back,” the reader is deflected to political considerations, both of which are faulty. She should not be “grateful” that she “lived in a country where forced birth was not the law of the land” because that is not the law of the land. There is no statute in the U.S. Code stipulating “forced birth” for mothers. Brenneman’s contention that “motherhood was not a lifelong consequence for a contraception slip” should rankle even the most contraceptive-aware woman. As research suggests, even “unwanted” children, such as those conceived through “a contraception slip,” can become loved. Why Brenneman cannot see such love at work may testify to her own hard nature brought about by her current obsession with promoting abortion. This may, however, be an unwarranted interpretation of a passage that, as biographical literary critics suggest, should be controlled by biographical details.

Nicki Minaj

Nicki Minaj, whose current estimated net worth is \$60 million, revealed her abortion in the 2014 song “All Things Go.” A more compelling account of the effects of her abortion occurs in a music video posted three years earlier, “Autobiography.”³⁴ Sung in a stream-of-consciousness style, commentary on the abortion occupies a significant portion of the song, at least 30% of the entire work:

Please baby forgive me mommy was young mommy was too busy trying to have fun now I pat myself on the back for sending you back cause god knows I was better than that to conceive you then leave you the concept alone seems evil I'm trapped in my conscience I ad-hear [sic] to the nonsense listened to people who told me I wasn't ready for you but how the fuck would they know what I was ready to do and of course it wasn't your fault it's like I feel you in the air I hear you saying mommy don't cry can't you see I'm right here I gotta let you know what you mean to me when I'm sleeping I see you in my dreams with me wish I could touch your little face or just hold your little hand if it's part of god's plan maybe we can met [sic] again.

The errors in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling in the above passage are retained, and the two “sic” notations are made only after presuming that the errors thus identified may have been the artist’s intention. There may be

³⁴ Nicki Minaj, *Nicki Minaj: Autobiography Lyrics*, YouTube, 29 Feb. 2016, accessed 26 Mar. 2016.

another reason to account for such a profusion of grammatical problems. If the artist is discussing the disorganizing and disastrous effects of her abortion, then the words themselves and the manner in which they are conveyed should illustrate those effects. Having grammatical order, therefore, would frustrate the artist's intention to show how much the abortion has affected her.

As is typical of most rap artists, Minaj's song combines biographical details with intense self-reflection. On this point biographical literary critics must yield to a staple criterion of rap music: that it is necessarily autobiographical and often confessional to such an extent that the topics that would be filtered or censored by most individuals become suitable subjects for musical development. An outrageously famous example of this criterion is Eminem's "Kim" song, which relates his persona's desire to kill his girlfriend by slitting her throat. Minaj's song is consistent with this autobiographical rule.

Similar to Swanson and in opposition to Brenneman's testimony, however, Minaj does not invent an unrealistic environment for herself after the abortion. The persona in the song occupies a landscape where the aborted child is constantly around her ("it's like I feel you in the air"), and the only place that they occupy together is the commonly accepted location of rest ("I see you in my dreams"). The twenty-first-century reader would know that this illusion is not necessarily psychotic, but a customary expression for wishing to "see" someone who has died.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Minaj's abortion sequence is the cathartic value of the song – both this 2011 video version and the later "All Things Go," which may be deemed a second effort at striving to achieve peace after the abortion. The logical conclusion here is that the artist herself is still not at peace with the killing of the child. Again, like Swanson and unlike Brenneman, Minaj has the benefit of a fan base that loves her music, idolizes her actions and style, and gives her the necessary validation to continue her music career despite the agony of having killed an unborn child. That the child is always present to Minaj to the point that she can wish to "touch your little face or just hold your little hand" depends on a religious principle unexpected from a rap artist. She defers to the Divine Being ("if it's part of god's plan") regarding a possible reconciliation. The final independent clause ("Maybe we can met [sic] again") thus constitutes not merely the final line of the abortion account in the song, but a prayer. Through her prayer Minaj has accomplished what Swanson obtained and what Brenneman still has not: getting beyond herself and loving other human beings, even those unborn or aborted.

Admittedly, the autobiographical content of a famous star of yesteryear, a politicized and otherwise sterile account of an abortion experience by a contemporary actor, and an abortion passage replete with grammar and punctuation errors may not qualify as great literature. That biographical literary criticism can, however, be applied to these works could assist contemporary students to understand how one of the more enduring literary theories maintains its potency in an academic world where currency is valued more than time-proven classics and where the fluidity of what counts as “literature” excludes the masterworks of even fifty years ago, let alone those from previous centuries.

Beyond the claim that it should be reconstituted for a younger generation of students, using biographical literary criticism can help all readers, young and old, to understand and appreciate the words offered, in this case, by three human beings who shared their abortion experiences. The opportunity now is to accept those biographical disclosures, praise where merited, and recommend a life-affirming perspective where warranted.