

What Do You Think About What He Thinks?

A Primer for Analysis of Non-Fiction

A non-fiction article, essay, or book will likely make an argument, teach, or convey information. Of course, a work of fiction might also be an attempt to make an argument, teach, or convey information; but a non-fiction work presents the information and the author's perspective in a straightforward manner. The non-fiction piece might be in the form of a story; but it is a story from real life, as with a biography.

Part of education is considering perspectives other than your own and developing your response to them. In a persuasive work, a writer has something to say that he hopes others will at least consider and perhaps agree with. Even the author of a biography writes for a purpose, not only to inform but perhaps also to convince readers about something regarding his subject: that he was instrumental in a war, or influential in Congress, or had some other significant impact.

By reading a work of non-fiction, you might be confirmed in what you believe about something or you might be convinced that you need to change your opinion. You might obtain more information that helps you have a more realistic perspective on an issue. You shouldn't fear this process. You don't want to cast aside basic truth and fall for every new idea you hear, but part of growing and maturing is gaining a more complete understanding of truth. No one has a grasp of all truth or the perfect application of that truth in every situation. Everyone can grow in some areas of life, whether that means learning more truth or learning how to apply the truth you know to more situations. This process is part of growing in what the Bible calls discernment (see Hebrews 5:13-14).

A text can be any written material. We analyze every text that we read, whether it is an encyclopedia article, a book of political commentary, or an advertisement, even if only briefly and subconsciously. We don't want to lose the joy of reading by over-analyzing, but it is good to do serious and conscious analysis for several reasons. Analysis will help you understand the meaning and purpose of a text; you might even discern a meaning beneath the surface. It can help you connect the text with its background, such as the time in which it was written or something about the author. You can profitably compare the text with other texts to see which are more consistent and believable. Analyzing a text can help you prove a thesis. A summary of a text is a report of its content, but an analysis of a text is an evaluation of its meaning and significance.

In analyzing a work of non-fiction, you want to ask questions of the text. You probably won't address every question below about every text, but here are things to consider when analyzing non-fiction:

- What is the author's point or purpose?
- What is the argument he is making?
- What is the motivation for the piece? What problem does it address?
- What evidence or logic does he use to support his thesis?

- What is the context from which the author writes (time, place, point of view, background and experience)?
- What assumptions does the author bring to writing this piece?
- What words or ideas are repeated? These will often be clues to the author's point.
- What word choices seem significant? Does the author use any figures of speech to make his argument more persuasive?
- What is the structure of the text (for example, autobiography, memoir, or examination of a particular subject)? How does the author build his argument through the work? How does the structure help make the author's point?
- What are the key passages in the work, and why are they important?
- What is surprising, odd, or troubling in the text? (These parts are likely challenging your current understanding.)
- What contradictions and inconsistencies do you find in the text?
- What assumptions do you bring to the text?
- Is the text convincing to you? Why or why not? (It is entirely likely that you will agree with some things and disagree with other parts.)
- What questions do you have after reading it? What further study do you need to do?

When you write an analysis of a non-fiction work, gather your information, impressions, and answers to these questions, then write a coherent essay that responds to the piece. Depending on the length of your essay, you will probably want to summarize the author's purpose and argument, emphasize the central points as you see them, note where you think the author is correct and where he is mistaken, and where he is effective and where he could have expressed his ideas differently. Keep in mind the nature of your assignment, what the teacher expects from you, and what the reader of your analysis needs to understand about the work you are analyzing and about your response to it.

The author whose work you have read wants you to think. Show that you have thought. Expressing your thoughts on paper indicates how well you understand what he has said and, more importantly, how well you understand your own thoughts about the subject.

Literary Analysis

Mornings on Horseback

by David McCullough

A person is shaped by a complex set of influences that begins even before he or she is born. Ethnicity, faith, culture, economic status, education, birth order, health, values, parents, siblings, grandparents, and family history impact a person's life in a complex way that is somewhat impossible but entirely fascinating to explore. Who are your influences? What shapes you?

A standard biography includes the entire life of the subject, from birth to death. Why does *Mornings on Horseback* conclude just as Theodore Roosevelt really came into his own?

David McCullough's purpose in writing *Mornings on Horseback* was not to produce a biography of the 26th president, but to show how Roosevelt came to be who he was. The book's subtitle says it: "The Story of an Extraordinary Family, a Vanished Way of Life, and the Unique Child Who Became Theodore Roosevelt." This is a worthwhile task because Roosevelt was such a fascinating and complex person. *Mornings on Horseback* is a book about influences.

The expectations, standards, and values of the privileged, aristocratic Roosevelt clan and the well-established, highly respected Bulloch family were the foundations of influence in Theodore Roosevelt's life. The fact that the Roosevelts were longtime New Yorkers while the Bulloch family came from Deep South Georgia brought complex influences to Roosevelt's life.

Theodore Roosevelt's immediate family shaped one another. The Roosevelt siblings were close as children and into adulthood to an uncommon degree. His long-unmarried sister Bamie felt she had a special claim and a special responsibility on her famous brother. How do you think she influenced his decisions? Roosevelt's sister Corinne, his brother Elliot, and he were the best of friends and companions. How did they help to make him into the man he became? How do you think Elliot's waywardness and failures in his adult life influenced his brother?

The Roosevelt children had few influences from outside their "set," not even from a school setting. They were surrounded by extended family, even within their home. Their playmates and friends were relatives and other members of the wealthy class. How did these people shape them?

Though raised in the city, Roosevelt was well-informed and enthusiastic about the natural world. How did his family provide for and encourage this passion? The very different locations in which young Roosevelt lived—New York, his family's vacation spots away from the city's bustle, the wilderness of Dakota Territory—each deeply influenced the values and priorities of Theodore Roosevelt. How would the family's long leisurely tour of Europe's great cities and later the Nile shape a young man?

Wealth and privilege influenced Roosevelt's life. He never wondered where a meal was coming from. He probably never worried about his father losing his job. His world was soaked in luxuries. What perspective does that upbringing give a person?

Roosevelt was forever changed by his battle with asthma. His intermittent but intense asthmatic flare-ups were traumatic. As a boy he was small and sickly. He wanted to take his place in the world as a strong, healthy, capable man; but for years his physical weakness held him back. His father exhorted him and gave him the tools and opportunity to do all he could to improve his health. How do you think Theodore Roosevelt was different as an adult because of these struggles when he was young?

Theodore's desire to make his father proud shaped his entire life well beyond wanting to follow his father's instructions for building up his body. Theodore Sr.'s influence reached to

every corner of his son's world. The entire family adored Theodore Roosevelt Sr. They regarded him as a truly great man, almost as one regards a "saint." Theodore Sr. had every success that their privileged set desired, yet he had uncommon drive, intelligence, and kindness to those in need. After Theodore Sr. died when the younger Theodore was still in college, the son longed to live a life that would have made his father proud.

These complex influences poured into one man's life and changed history. From fighting in the Spanish-American War, the building of the Panama Canal, the creation of national parks, a long and eventful presidency, and the raising of a large, boisterous family, Theodore Roosevelt led "the strenuous life" he desired. He is known for his energy, passion, and strong opinions. He is one of the most interesting and colorful characters in American history.

Note about the Author

David McCullough is the most widely-read historian of our day. His books have sold millions of copies, have remained in print for years, and have been the basis for television programs and miniseries.

McCullough majored in English literature, not history, at Yale. He originally wanted to be a novelist, but he found his passion in writing history. He decided that he wanted to write books that he would enjoy reading, on subjects he wanted to learn about. He grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, so his first book was about the Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood of 1889. McCullough then became interested in how the Brooklyn Bridge was built. McCullough had walked across the bridge many times when he lived in New York.

His editor suggested a book on the Panama Canal, which was his next project. An offshoot of his study of that period was this book about Theodore Roosevelt. Moving to other presidential biographies, McCullough wrote *Truman* and then spent seven years writing *John Adams*. McCullough won the Pulitzer Prize for biography for both of these books. His research into John Adams helped lead to his book *1776*, which focused on George Washington and the difficult early days of the American Revolution. McCullough also wanted the book to encourage the nation after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He has written several other books.

McCullough has composed his books on a 1941-vintage typewriter that he bought second-hand in 1964. He likes to say that he is not working on a book, but he is working in a book: getting to know the people and places, entering as personally as possible into the story he wants to share with others. He loves to do research, and he visits places he writes about so that he will have a better feel for his subjects.

Questions on *Mornings on Horseback*

Write about one page total to answer questions 1-3:

1. What are other influences in Theodore Roosevelt's life that we did not mention in the literary analysis?
2. What influences in Theodore Roosevelt's life can you relate to? How do similar influences impact your life?
3. List five values of Theodore Roosevelt's family that you think shaped him into a passionate leader.

Write about one-half to one page:

4. Write a summary and review of *Mornings on Horseback*.

Literary Analysis

The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge

Calvin Coolidge has received unfair treatment by the press, by most scholars, and in the understanding that people generally have of him. The usual perception of him is “Silent Cal,” a man of few words who was merely a tool of big business and who stood by and let corporations ruin the country. This is grossly unfair, and it does not do justice to who he really was. His autobiography reveals Coolidge as a straightforward, hard-working public servant who had many wise insights into life and government.

What do you think was Coolidge’s motivation for writing his autobiography? Surely he was ready for rest and privacy after his long years of public service, culminating in the presidency. Why would he choose to publish his autobiography right after leaving office? He must have had some specific reasons.

Wisdom. Writing in his late fifties, Coolidge had wisdom to share that he had gleaned from life experience. He skillfully navigated a path from a remote community in Vermont with a set pattern of life and a minimum of outside influences to Washington, D.C., a confluence of cultures and powerful people. His life experience was wide, yet he remained humble and unpretentious, always able to tell it like it is. The wisdom gleaned from such a life and such a man is worth giving and worth listening to.

History. Coolidge’s autobiography reveals his sense of the history of which he was a part. He took the time to explain the roots of his family tree and their part in his making. He describes the world of his childhood, a simple yet rich way of life that he must have known was on the verge of disappearing. He shares his own memories of the historic events he was part of, from the police strike in Boston to the sudden death of President Harding in office. History carries depth of meaning from the viewpoint of a person who lived it.

Truth. The constant feed of information, true and false, about prominent people was a dynamic in the 1920s and has only increased since. Public service is so very public. People will have their opinions. To add their own voice to the swirl, many public servants and celebrities have written books with the purpose of informing the public, “OK, this is how it really was.” The faintly defensive tone on certain topics reveals that Coolidge wanted his autobiography to set the record straight.

Honor. In telling his story, Coolidge took the time to honor the people who were important shapers of his life: his grandparents who read the Bible with him, the members of the community in which he was raised, his loving mother that he missed, his stepmother who was a blessing to him, his educators, his mentors in law and politics, his faithful wife, the son he lost at age sixteen, and above all, his father. In beautiful, grateful passages, Calvin Coolidge expresses his love for his father and the love he felt from his father. Not all “great men” become famous. This farmer/shopkeeper/public servant/president’s father who lived his life in a tiny Vermont village had an important impact in history by the way he taught and cared for his son.

Exhortation. Through his wisdom, the stories he tells, the philosophies of life and government he shares, Calvin Coolidge exhorts his readers. Between the lines, he has some lessons he wants us to hear: Honor the quiet life of the country. Be grateful to the people who help you. Value education. Work hard. Don’t be puffed up. Family is important. Serve your country. Do the right thing.

Story. Calvin Coolidge had a story to share, and those of us who read it are the better for it. Who doesn't love a story where the boy helping his dad in the barn in a remote village grows up to become the great man in the seat of power? Calvin Coolidge is the quintessential American success story. His life, like every life, is an important story. We can be thankful that he recognized the value of putting it on paper.

Wisdom from Calvin Coolidge

The silences of nature have a discipline all their own.

Country life does not always have breadth, but it has depth.

It seems to me that it is almost impossible for those who have not traveled that road [to learn about the ancient world] to reach a very clear conception of what the world now means.

[On the Constitution] No other document devised by the hand of man ever brought so much progress and happiness to humanity.

It is a great advantage to a president and a major source of safety of the country for him to know he is not a great man.

Questions on *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*

Write about one page total to answer questions 1-3:

1. Why do you think the perception of Coolidge is so different from how he reveals himself in this book?
2. What contrasts do you see between Coolidge and the popular mindset of the 1920s?
3. What messages other than the ones we listed do you think Coolidge wanted the reader to take away?

Write about one-half to one page:

4. Write a summary and review of *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*.

Literary Analysis

Born Again

by Charles Colson

Born Again is a book about power: the power of a president to do good and to do evil, the jockeying for power among his aides, the utter powerlessness that Charles Colson felt as the weight of his wrongs descended on him, his powerlessness in the world of prison life, the power of Christ to change a person's life, and the power of the fellowship of believers to help a struggling brother through the most difficult period in his life.

Colson achieved a high political position and had great influence in a presidential administration, but he lost all that and as a result took a very different course with his life. He went from working in the White House as a close adviser to the president to serving time in a federal prison with hardened criminals. Yet God used his life to accomplish much good after he lost worldly power and gained Christ.

The book is something of a history of the Nixon Administration. It describes the web of advisers who served under a complex man, who was capable of gentle kindness, brilliant diplomacy, visionary leadership, sheer dishonesty, dirty politics, and paralyzing paranoia.

When the book was published in 1976, the great majority of Americans knew about the trials of the Vietnam War followed by the catastrophe of Watergate. These events and many of the names of the people involved had been in the news every day for months. The narrative of *Born Again* had great immediacy for its first readers. They would have absorbed the detail of Colson's memories and his perspectives on the Watergate situation. He did a good job in the book of untangling the complex story. The people involved in the disasters of the Nixon Administration have faded from public awareness as a new generation has arisen; some details are not so important now. However, the central message of *Born Again*—in Christ is the power of salvation—is timeless. The setting of that message within a specific historic context demonstrates its vibrancy and credibility.

Colson's narrative begins with the 1972 election, with Nixon at the pinnacle of power and Colson about to leave his position as special counsel to the president. The scene sets the tone for the narrative that follows. Colson then uses flashback to tell about his earlier years and the pridefulness that guided his life. At one point he says that he didn't think he had failed at anything.

After serving in the Marines, Colson became an attorney and got involved in Republican politics. At the age of 38 he took the position of special counsel in Nixon's White House. This meant that he carried out various assignments for the president. He was what some people (including Colson himself) called Nixon's hatchet man. This meant that he used his position to get things done, sometimes hurting other people in the process. In print, Colson was described as being willing to run over his grandmother to get Nixon re-elected. Many people assumed that Colson himself had actually made that statement.

During his years with Nixon, Colson was involved in an attempt to discredit Daniel Ellsberg, who had made public secret documents known as the "Pentagon Papers." These documents showed a pattern of deceptive government practices from before Nixon became president. Colson's actions were all part of the dog-eat-dog political climate Colson knew well.

In the last year of Colson's service in the White House, the Watergate burglary took place. The men who broke into Democratic Party headquarters worked with contacts in the White House and on Nixon's re-election staff. Colson did not have anything to do with Watergate, but what he had done reflected the same kind of corrupt politics. Colson left the White House in early 1973 to return to private law practice. His ruthless actions and tense experiences in the Nixon Administration had left him empty and searching.

Back in legal practice, Colson became reacquainted with Tom Phillips, president of Raytheon Company and a legal client. Tom had changed since Colson had last seen him—he had come to faith in Christ. Phillips gave Colson a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, which convicted Colson of his pridefulness and pointed him toward the loving Savior and Lord. Colson soon accepted Christ.

An important theme in the book is the support Colson found in the fellowship of other Christians who stood by him in his newfound faith and through the trials he endured. Senator Harold Hughes became one of his best friends and staunchest supporters. Politically, Hughes had been a sharp critic of Nixon and Colson, but their brotherhood in Christ transcended the past.

Colson's conversion to Christ shocked many and met with widespread skepticism. Many didn't know what to make of it. Imagine hearing about someone famous for dirty political tricks (supposedly willing to run over his own grandmother) suddenly confessing faith in Christ. You might feel skeptical, too. Colson endured much ridicule in the press. He made headlines for his involvement with Nixon (including false charges regarding Watergate) even as he made headlines about his newfound faith. (Remember: just because you read or hear something in the media doesn't mean it is true.)

The Nixon Administration fell apart. Many advisers went to prison, the vice president resigned because of a different scandal, and Nixon himself resigned in August of 1974. Colson's attorney believed that he could get Colson off without going to prison, but Colson's great crisis of conscience occurred when he became convinced that he had to confess his guilt in the Ellsberg case and take whatever consequences came. His punishment was harsher than he expected, but he accepted it and went to prison.

Colson's fall from power was complete; but in prison he found strength in his faith and in the fellowship of other believers, and he tried to help other prisoners. The harsh conditions, the hardened attitudes of many inmates and jailers, and the trials of his fellow prisoners broke his heart and led to his founding Prison Fellowship, a discipleship ministry that brings help and hope to thousands of prisoners who want to start over.

Colson's later life demonstrated the genuineness of his conversion. He gave himself to Prison Fellowship, reaching out to people few others in society cared about. *Born Again* was the first of over thirty books that Colson wrote about faith, the Christian life, and apologetics. Reading any of his other books will be a blessing also.

Colson had a significant influence on evangelical Christianity and in encouraging a Christian worldview. Colson's personal and professional downfall led to his giving his life to the service of God and helping others in immeasurable ways. His life is an example of God's power to bring good out of something bad.

Note: A handful of times in *Born Again*, Colson refers to African Americans in a way that could be taken as demeaning. These references have no bearing on the story. We find these references offensive and unfortunate. Charles Colson genuinely embraced fellowship with other people, regardless of color. His narrative reflects a different time in American history, though that does not excuse disrespect. Hopefully Americans have made progress in attitudes and understanding toward people who are different, and in using respectful, honoring language. We should be sure that our references to a person's race or ethnicity are appropriate and do not come from an attitude of prejudice.

Questions on *Born Again*

Write about one page total to answer questions 1-3:

1. What did you learn about the political realm in *Born Again* that surprised you?
2. After reading about Colson's prison experiences, what do you think about the prison system? Do you think prison is effective as a punishment for crime?
3. What do you think Colson wanted the reader to come away with after reading his story?

Write about one-half to one page:

4. Write a summary and review of *Born Again*.

Literary Analysis

God and Ronald Reagan

by Paul Kengor

Ronald Reagan was an important and influential president. He has also generated a publishing industry. One estimate holds that writers have produced over one thousand books on Reagan. Is there anything left to say? Are all these books attempts to capitalize on a great American's career? Surprisingly, one topic that writers have not examined extensively is Reagan's personal religious faith.

Paul Kengor has contributed to this collection of Reagan books with several of his own. He has also written about the faith of George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton and about other topics. Kengor is a professor of political science at Grove City College (GCC) in Pennsylvania and the director of the Center for Vision and Values at GCC. He has written numerous scholarly and popular articles and has appeared on many television news programs.

Kengor relates in *God and Ronald Reagan* that he was researching for a book about Reagan's policy toward the Soviet Union when he realized the depth and breadth of the president's faith in God and how that played a part in Reagan's thinking. The more he dug, the more he realized how all-encompassing Reagan's faith was. Rather than finishing the book he was planning, Kengor reversed the topics. He instead wrote this book about Reagan's faith, a major portion of which involves the role that his faith played in his policy toward the Soviet Union.

One must understand the faith of Ronald Reagan to understand Reagan as a person and as president. Kengor shows how Reagan's faith influenced his entire life. He notes how it informed Reagan's views on abortion, but the main point of the book is that Reagan's beliefs deeply affected his outlook on Communism. Reagan's approach was not simplistic. He condemned the U.S.S.R. as an evil, atheistic empire, and he built up American military strength; but he also showed a willingness to negotiate with the Russians. Reagan believed that the United States had a "rendezvous with destiny" to be a beacon of political freedom and the gospel of Christ. The cumulative effect was a weakening of the Soviet empire, which resulted in its downfall during the presidency of Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush.

Throughout most of the book, Kengor emphasizes that Reagan's faith was genuine. Reagan's mother Nelle taught and modeled for her son a deep and active faith. Her strong faith made a huge impression on Reagan. He had other influences, including ministers he knew and the reading of the novel *That Printer of Udell's*. The Christian faith became his own. Because of his father's alcoholism and inability to hold a job, the Reagans moved frequently. Kengor suggests at one point that Reagan's faith filled an inner hole of loneliness that the young man felt because of this rootlessness. However, God was much more than a stopgap for Reagan. The author shows through many examples the importance of prayer for Reagan. After the attempt on his life early in his presidency, Reagan resolved to live whatever days he had left to honor God. Some have found it confusing that Reagan seldom attended church services while he was president. He was motivated out of concern for others. After the assassination attempt, he feared that going to church would put others at risk. Reagan missed attending services and resumed after he left office.

Kengor traces Reagan's anti-Communist stance from the post-World War II period when Communists infiltrated the movie industry, through his days as a spokesman for General Electric, and into his years in elective office. Reagan sprinkled his speeches with references to

God. His opposition to Communism centered on the political system's atheism, its destruction of political and personal freedom, and the determination of Communists from the time of Lenin forward to wipe out capitalism and religion around the world. The author notes that for Reagan, the conflict between democracy and Communism was nothing less than the conflict between good and evil. Kengor notes the impact of the book *Witness* by Whittaker Chambers on Reagan. (This is a large and challenging book that you might want to take on as an adult but probably aren't ready for yet.)

Reagan's 1983 speech in which he referred to the Soviet Union as the evil empire is a major point of the book. Reagan said exactly what he wanted to say and what he believed he needed to say. Liberals criticized the speech mercilessly. As it turned out, information that became available many years later revealed how evil the Soviet government was. Many in Russia at the time and later agreed with Reagan and were glad that he said it. In sum, Reagan was absolutely right in what he said and in the decision to say it.

The last major section of the book concerns Reagan's visit to Moscow in 1988. There the president spoke freely about God and expressed his desire for freedom and faith to blossom in the Soviet Union. His visit opened the door even further for the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union that occurred over the next three years.

One matter that Kengor leaves unresolved is the faith of Mikhail Gorbachev. As leader of the officially atheist Soviet Union, Gorbachev kept a public distance from religion but made occasional comments suggesting an openness to God. Later, in other settings, Gorbachev has declared that he is a Christian and that he believes he was God's chosen man to lead the Soviet Union out of Godless Communism once a leader arose in the United States who would not take advantage of Russia's collapse.

In his book, Kengor makes some astute observations about Reagan's life. He says that Reagan had a pretty typical youth but anything but a typical adulthood. He parallels Reagan's growing-up years with events taking place in the Soviet Union at the same time, a literary device that prepares us for the dramatic confrontation between Reagan and the Soviets during Reagan's presidency. He says that Reagan's faith was the most active and meaningful at the "bookends" of Reagan's life, meaning his boyhood years and in his last public role as president. Kengor reveals a good grasp of the Disciples of Christ movement and the influence of Alexander Campbell.

Notes: The book never explains the origin of Reagan's nickname Dutch. The story is that when Ronald was born, his father said that the baby looked like a fat little Dutchman; and the nickname stuck. On page 20 the author refers to Philippians 4:8 as Christ's words, but Paul wrote Philippians.

Reagan was convinced that God has a plan for the world, for the United States, for his own life, and for all lives. This inspired and motivated Reagan. May we be motivated and inspired by the same faith.

Questions on *God and Ronald Reagan*

Write about one page total to answer questions 1-3:

1. How would you describe Reagan's faith?
2. Describe the ways you think Ronald Reagan is a positive example for those in public office.
3. Reagan saw the Cold War primarily as a spiritual conflict, not a political, economic, or military conflict. Do you think this applies to issues in our world (such as the war on Islamic terrorism, the decline of marriage, and the acceptance of same-sex relationships) in the same way--as at root spiritual issues that require spiritual answers?

Write about one-half to one page:

4. Write a summary and review of *God and Ronald Reagan*.