On the Complex Relationship between Memory and Morality and its Relevance to Historical Writing

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In historical writing; memoir, autobiography, oral history, and other such subjective primary sources and ‘self-histories’ very often serve as an important well from which historians draw critical information and construct complex and highly nuanced visions of the past1. However, how much of this information is reliable and accurate, and represents the ‘true’ nature of the past, and how much represents the potential biases on the part of the subject? That is, how does morality interact with memory, and how can we be sure that these memories are reliable? This is what my paper aims to examine. I will look at the manner in which memory is formed and recorded, as well as how it evolves over time through complex interaction between the changing social, political, economic, and technological circumstances2. Specifically, this paper will look at how morality evolves in reaction to these changing circumstances, and how moral standards may play an effect on what is recorded in these sources. It will also look at memory from a psychological perspective, and will examine the physical mechanisms of the brain in memory, discussing how these factors also play a crucial role in the recording of these self-histories3 4. In doing so, I hope to more fully understand how these circumstances effected not only what A. May chose to record in her memoir, but also what she omitted and what she chose to highlight. As well, my paper will discuss how current concepts of self also help to shape our memories of the past, and how these constructions are products of both past and present5. It will discuss the importance of individual subjective experience, and will highlight the importance of understanding A. May as an individual, and not merely as a representative of a certain time and place; a person rather than a collection of concepts6.

It is important I think to frame A. May’s own morality within the constructs of the prevailing social norms and widely held beliefs of the time in order to fully understand her motivations and the deeper meaning behind her memoir. A. May herself saw the importance of framing her life within this context, and dedicates a great deal of her own memoir to exactly this task. For instance, the first section of May’s memoir devotes a great deal to what May saw as the important happenings which proceeded her birth, and May talks extensively about not only her early life experiences, but also focuses on wider world happenings, such as the events of the Boer War, as well as Queen Victoria’s death and the subsequent succession of Edward the Seventh to the throne7. The mention of these world events indicates May’s understanding of the importance of the wider world as influencing her life story.

In order to frame A. May’s life within the context of morality, I believe it is important to first talk about the previous century and the influence of the industrial revolution in shaping widely held notions of masculinity and femininity. Prior to the implementation of factory production in north America, production depended largely on the work of the ‘master-apprentice’ system, wherein an ‘apprentice’ would work with and often life with a ‘master,’ learning the many skills needed to produce that which the ‘master’ was skilled in making. Such masters could be skilled at shoemaking, carpentry, tailoring, or any other number of productive jobs, and would pass on their knowledge to their apprentice. Such arrangements were mutually beneficial, and apprentices would often live with masters while learning their trade. In this situation, since production took place within the home, women often played a vital role in the family economy by also helping produce and therefore generating revenue for the household8. With the mechanization of production however, work more and more came to be considered an entirely separate endeavour from the home. Whereas in the previous ‘master-apprentice’ system production depended on the abilities of highly skilled individual producers, the shift to machine-dependant production also resulted in a great shift away from home-centered production and into factories. As a result of factory work becoming the dominant means by which goods were made, and as men most often were the primary breadwinners during this time, work and domestic life came to be considered more and more as belonging to ‘separate spheres.’ That is, domestic life and the responsibility of caring for the family and upkeeping the home became viewed as the responsibility of women in the ‘domestic sphere’, while men were relegated to the responsibilities of generating income for the family through their participation in the ‘public sphere.’ Through the development of the concept of ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, and the relegation of each sex to their prospective spheres, the prevailing concept of men and women at the time adapted to accommodate this new expectation. As a result, men came to be viewed as naturally more inclined toward participation in public goings-on, while women were viewed as naturally inclined toward domesticity and child rearing. The physical characteristics of either sex were therefore framed based on this concept, and as a result men were viewed as being more physically capable of public participation, while women were seen as the weaker or more vulnerable sex, and thus viewed as needing to be protected from the evils of the outside world by being confined to the duties of the home9.

Highly influential from a moral standpoint at the time of May’s birth and carrying over well into her life, was the concept of Victorian morality, which emphasised sexual restraint, intolerance for crime and vagrancy, and a strict code of public conduct. Victorian morality was highly influential, and during this time sexual modesty, thrift, and the strict adherence to the ‘norms’ of public conduct were widely followed10. Reflective of this ideation of the royal family, and an indication of Victorian morality playing an essential role in the life of A. May and her family, is May’s mention of the royal family in the first half of her memoir, in which she chronicles the passing of Queen Victorian and the subsequent succession of Edward the Seventh to the throne. The mere mention of this event is an indication of May and her family’s interest in the royal family11. As well, although May`s memoir talks very little about sexuality, in the brief blurb in which she does choose to talk about sexuality, May recants a story of her sister Beth abandoning her babysitting duties to entertain a gentleman caller. While not outright admonishing Beth`s behaviour, May`s recollection does seem to approach the subject of sexuality from a standpoint of restriction as a norm, whether this is truly a reflection of the climate of Victorian morality or simply a reaction to being abandoned in favor of a man is difficult to distinguish12.

As well, this shift from home-centered to factory-centered work most often resulted in increasingly harsh working conditions, and factories were often dank, dingy, and dangerous places, where workers would be required to work long hours for far less earnings then they enjoyed previously under the master-apprentice system. In reflection of this shift, many individuals began to idolize this agrarian past; simple, quiet, farming-oriented living became an idealized symbol of family and righteousness, while the declining conditions of factory life and the capitalist interests that this shift reflected became increasingly demonized, as many believed that the adverse conditions created by industry reflected the moral deplorability of capitalist pursuit13.

The demonization of capitalism too came to be associated with religious affiliation, and as a result the religions of Protestantism and Catholicism became to be seen as in incompatible conflict with on-another. This too was a reflection of Irish, French, and English influence in early Canada14. As noted in May’s memoir, resulting from this conflation, the Fenians, a group of Catholic Irish nationals, were waging attacks on early Canada in an effort to gain Irish freedom15. Although the major influence which fueled this rebellion was an effort to blackmail Britain into granting Ireland freedom, the efforts of the Fenians became conflated with religious differences. From a moral perspective, it is important to observe that this conflict was not simply a reflection of differing religious or national affiliations, but was also a rejection of industry and of capitalism, fueled by an extreme ideation of the agrarian past. A major influence to this rebellion was a fundamental rejection of the implications which followed the concept of the ‘protestant work ethic,’ a term coined in 1905 by Max Weber to describe the widely held and religiously affiliated belief that hard work, discipline, and thrift through religion are the keys to success, happiness, and salvation, and that good things come to those who work for them, and by implication that bad things befell those who did not share these characteristics16. This concept was also majorly influential in helping form what is known as the ‘just world hypothesis.’ While not formerly named until the early 1960s by Melvin Lerner, the just world hypothesis proposes that the universe is just, motivated to doll out reward and punishment as deserved17. This belief, while not formerly named and discussed in such terms until well after, was a fundamental moral motivator during this time, and was highly influential in shaping common perceptions, influencing greatly the demonization of the new capitalist-based economy, as well as the shift from an agrarian, subsistence-based farm culture, to a capitalist-based economy which relied on the production of factory work. So, while the Fenians may have been fighting for their religious freedom and autonomy in Ireland, they were also in many ways responding to the horribly adverse conditions in Ireland during this time, rather than the relatively much better conditions seen in Canada during this period. And so, when May talks about the ‘great friend’ of her mother’s family, the Irish politician D’Arcy McGee, who was murdered by the Fenians for his disapproval of their actions, it is not a great surprise that a successful Canadian politician would admonish the actions of the Fenians, having little reason to see any affirmation of their complaints in Canada18. Thus, the surplus capital and resources available in North America helped fuel the concept of the ‘American dream,’ or success through the pursuit of capitalist endeavour. Yet as the years rolled on, shifts in the economic success in Canada, notably during the Great Depression, fueled shifts in thought regarding the idea of this ‘American dream’ through capitalist pursuit. That is, as the economy became much less prosperous, belief in the concept of a ‘just world’ in which any determined individual can find financial success greatly declined. As well, the harsh conditions of the Depression for many individuals fueled a resurgence in the ideation of the agrarian past as the failure of the capitalist economy was regarded as the major factor in triggering the Great Depression19.

May’s memoir itself hints greatly at this ideation of the agrarian past and the shift to industrialization as an influence for this ideation. For instance, May talks at length about the world prior to her birth, and emphasises the influence of Canadian industry such as the lumber industry20. May discusses the coming of the railway, telegraph, and postal service21. May also hints at the ideology of separate spheres, talking about her grandfather’s work as a stonemason22, a skillset and career ‘built’ no-doubt by his own participation in the previous master-apprentice system. At the same time, May declines to comment on any work her grandmother may have had, presumably because she was occupied caring for her six children, and was not expected to work outside of the home23. Also indicative of this ideation of the agrarian past is May’s intense focus on farm living in the second half of her memoir. When discussing her early life, May delves into vivid detail about the many barns and their uses on the farm, chronicling every element of farm living, from the many critters that occupied the surrounding swamps and springs24 to various livestock that her family raised such as cattle25, horses, and pigs26; and the varieties of fruits, vegetables27, and crops that her family grew. While her attention to the details of her life on the farm does not necessarily indicate that May strictly idealized this place and time, clinging to the agrarian past perhaps as the Fenians had, it is interesting that May devotes such a large portion of her memoir to describing her childhood farm in vivid detail. Rather than this inclination toward idealizing past subsistence-based life, it may simply be that May has chosen to focus on the details of her early farm life because she found that portion of her life to be the most enchanting or interesting, and assumed that any reader of her memoir would be most interested in the early years of her life since she was quite old at the time of the writing of this memoir. Thus, May’s early memories may be seen by herself as more valuable or critical than her later ones.

It is critically important to address the nature of memory from a psychological perspective when attempting to evaluate A. May’s memoir based on the details she chose to include and the aspects of her life she chose to focus on. For instance, May spends a great deal of her memoir discussing these early years of her life on the farm, yet she talks only very briefly about the Great Depression, and makes very little mention of any effect of it on her life28. She also devotes almost none of her memoir to discussing her experiences once she entered the military in 194429, yet talks extensively about her contributions to the war effort previous to her enlistment30. While the dis-inclusion of great detail regarding these two periods in time in May`s memoir could feasibly reflect mere modesty on the part of May, it is also entirely likely that the trauma generated by these adverse experiences may also have influenced thein non-inclusion in May`s memoir. That is, perhaps the experiences of the Great Depression or of war were just too painful for May to willingly recall, or perhaps they did not fit the overall positive and hopeful narrative that May was attempting to write. It could also simply be that rather than having so many negative experiences during the Depression, May may have had a relatively easy time during those years, and thus chose not to delve into great detail out of embarrassment. This may well have been the actual case, as May’s writings indicate that her family was rather well-off, owning enough land to tend to many varieties of farm animals and grow many different crops. May even specifies that her family assumed “upper crust” status in their community based on the technological marvel that was their indoor plumbing system in May’s first home31.

In attempting to understand May’s motivations for including or failing to include the potentially painful memories of her past, is also important, when discussing memory and trauma, to look at the manner in which the brain may interpret a traumatic episode, as is in the case with victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a neurological disorder which is brought on by stress. Overactivation in the Amygdala, the area of the brain which is most highly associated with the subjective experience of stress, and which is located closely in physical proximity and linked inexorably to the formation of memory. Overactivation in this region of the brain causes a chain reaction which concludes in recurrent dreams or recollections of the event, feelings that the traumatic event is reoccurring - ‘flashbacks’, and intense psychological stress33. Overactivation of these areas of the brain therefore in many ways bind these traumatic memories to those who experience them, and as a result cause a great deal of psychological stress as victims re-live the traumatic events they previously survived. And so, perhaps it is not that A. May has blocked out these traumatic memories or chosen to not focus on the out of humility, but because the traumatic experiences of war were still much too fresh for May to relive willingly. Or perhaps it was that her time in the army truly was unremarkable, and thus May chose not to delve into it in great detail.

In light of this revelation regarding the potential reasons why A. May may or may not have chosen to incorporate certain details and events of her life in her memoir, it is also essential to discuss the influence of subjective personal interpretation as a major influence in the construction of personal memory. As Jocelyn Bartkevicius argues in her article “ ‘The person to Whom Things Happened’: Meditations on the Tradition of Memoir,” memory is not merely an infallible record of the past, but the expression of the complex interaction between the individual and their experienced reality. Memory, according to Bartkevicius, is not the passive recollection of past events, but the expression of a deliberate reconstruction of these same past events, allowing the author to re-imagine and re-create themselves by constructing a narrative which is created with the specific purpose of conveying a very specific message33. Therefore, when we read and attempt to interpret A. May’s memoir, it is important to ask the question of what social, cultural, and moral constraints which may have impacted its writing, and what the goal or meaning behind the construction of such a piece might be.

Of vital consequence to perceptions of male and female roles, and subsequently to the deterioration of the conceptualization of separate spheres, was the influence of World War I and II in altering concepts of masculine and feminine ideals. While women were not permitted to participate significantly in the first world war, their efforts at home to help compensate for the lack of manpower overseas was greatly influential in helping shape the concepts of female and male traits in North America, and, as noted in May’s memoir, women in Canada gained the vote in 1918, largely in response to their contributions during the first World War34. In contrast to the first World War, women played a much more vital a role in the second World War, and many women during this period gave their part to the war effort through their work in army production plants and overseas during the war. In their participation in these roles, women largely contributed to an eventual breakdown of the outdated concept of separate spheres35. However, and as Helen E. Smith et al. note in their article “Regulating Body Boundaries and Health during the Second World War: Nationalist Discourse, Media Representations and the Experiences of Canadian Women War Workers,” the participation of women in the second World War did not simply obliterate this previously well-entrenched concepts of women as naturally inclined toward domesticity and caregiving and men as bold participants in the public realm. Instead, women’s participation in the war effort during this period was framed within the context of their roles as nurturers and caregivers. Women, shows Smith et al., necessarily had the roles and opportunities available to them expanded, yet women were still widely expected to tend to the health and morale of their male counterparts. As a result, following the war women began to enjoy far greater autonomy and became increasingly included in careers previously reserved only for men36. A. May herself is an excellent example of how the influence of war significantly effected the shift in thinking about sex-determined characteristics and in prescribed careers. For instance, during World War I, as “the army (had) scooped up all the young men in the countryside”, May assisted her father in helping to tend to the family farm by caring for sheep, pigs, cows, and chickens37. As well, during World War II, May exercised this newly available autonomy through her participation in such professional endeavours as constructing Tiger Moths, helping to interview male recruits38, and in working for the Red Cross in handling cards from prisoners of war39. Through her participation in these previously male-only careers, May herself also helped in deteriorating outdated notions of separate spheres.

Vitally important in understanding A. May’s internal motivation is understanding May as an individual. As Sally Alexander notes, morality is formed through the interaction of the wider world and the individual, that is to say that concepts of decency, gentleness, and empathy are actively constructed through individual interaction between those lives which were available to those recording memory and their individual subjective interpretations. That is to say, that in a given social climate, there are only so many available possible subjective interpretations of one’s individual experience, and through challenging the well established social norms, each subsequent generation is able to fight for and challenge the prevailing social constructs of their time, and work toward a more inclusive future40. Thus, through A. May’s own participation in previously male-only spaces, May helped in her own way to establish the freedoms that subsequent generations of women have been able to enjoy.

As well, Alexander also draws attention to the role that language plays in constructing our reality. Specifically, Alexander points out that in the early years of the 20th century there were no easy words for “pregnant”, “sexual intercourse”, or for women’s body parts. Thus, this limitation of language may have both reflected and perpetuated the limited constructs of sexuality which were most prevalent during this period41. While these specific instances of linguistic restriction may not necessarily reflect the experience of A. May herself in principle at the time of her writing in 1984, in practice we do perhaps see a shadow of this early language restriction in A. May`s description of her sister Beth`s romantic encounter with a gentleman caller. Rather than speaking frankly about what May believes to have happened that evening, May describes her memories of this night in extremely vague terms. Herself and her brother Rob banished to their room, May recalls:

“It wasn’t long, however, before Rob and I, our ears cocked for anything we could hear, heard ‘one-two-three and a kick; one-two-three and a kick.’ Much intrigued, we lay on the floor and squinted as best we could through the considerable aperture between the floor and the bottom of the door – the keyhole presented much too limited a vision. We could see little, but the refrain kept repeating itself and the feet kept moving slowly from one position to another, always in close proximity.”42

This passage is interesting because May does not directly state whether or not she believed Beth to be having sex, she only strongly implies this. Whether May’s failure to speak frankly on this matter is an actual reflection of this previous language restriction, a lack of ability on the part of May to make an accurate judgement of what happened, or an attempt on May’s part to portray her sister favorably, still remains unclear. It is also important to understand the major principle of Alexander’s argument. That is, through the confining world in which May or any other individual may live their life, any given individual will necessarily have only a finite amount of available thoughts and actions, which may be regulated by social norms, economic influences, or by the very language through which an individual understands and interprets the world; language both constructs and is constructed by outside realities43.

While A. May may have, through her actions and increased participation in previously male-only roles, worked to help break down the ‘separate spheres’ ideology, May does not strictly reject this construction of women as naturally more emotional caregivers or domestically inclined beings. For instance, May’s recollections often hint at this ideology of separate spheres. As mentioned earlier, May talks in her memoir of her grandfather’s work as a stonemason44, while failing to mention any career her grandmother may have had. As well, we see this same, highly regulated relationship also carries over to her mother and father, and there is nearly no mention of May’s mother performing any type of work other than domestic work, while May easily talks about her father’s role as a farmer in helping to support the family.

Important to our interpretation of A. May’s memoir is the concept of historicizing reality as a tool for democratizing the past. That is, through reinterpretation and reconstruction of past events, those subjugated groups which in previous times would have been ignored or persecuted gain greater and greater representation in historical writings, and as a result the plights endured by these previously subjugated or ignored individuals become all the more blatant. As Sasha Mullally argues in her article “Democratizing the Past? Canada’s History on the World Wide Web,” through thorough and repeated re-evaluation and increasingly complex reading of the past, historians are able to delve into and understand the true injustices of history, and in doing so are able to give voice to those who for so long had remained voiceless45. Thus, and as is in the case with an individual such as A. May, the reinterpretation of the past not only serves to chronicle historical events, but also helps to give voice to those who would otherwise remain silenced, and give those who were previously silenced the chance to represent their own specific life in a way which may help individuals of similar circumstance to overcome their conditions in the future. Therefore, by the mere act of recording her own memories in light of the revelations of the present, A. May has in a very real sense helped to free women from the constrains previously imposed on them. Though May may not literally speak for all women or even many, her act of attempting to understand and interpret her own past works to help liberate women from previously imposed concepts of separate spheres. In any case, the act of recording her memoir serves as a democratizing tool merely by giving May herself a voice, and therefore through the recordings of personal histories individuals may shed light on the potentially unjust conditions of the past. Historians and individuals such as A. May help to shape current concepts of reality and morality through their reinterpretation of the past using the lens of the present. As argued in Cecilia Morgan’s book “Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s- 1990s,” historical writing has both shaped and been shaped by economic, social, and technological developments. Activism on the part of marginalized groups such as Aboriginals and women has shaped current historical works, and therefore morality and memory are a reflection of individual experience as a response to a specific moral and cultural climate46. Individual experiences, and their subjective interpretations, both create and mirror the specific social and cultural climate which spawned them.

Relevant to A. May’s memoir, and as Martin L. Davies argues in his article “Disobedience Reconsidered: History, Theory, and the Morality of Scholarship,” non-compliance with social norms is defined as the opposition and challenge to an apparent unassailable order of the world. Through disobedience, argues Davies, historical fact is challenged and a given state of the world is examined for its arbitrary rules and norms47. Ideological concepts of ‘separate spheres’ therefore become challenged through memoir such as A. May’s and through rigorous historical analysis. Davies conceives of history as an abstract tool for capitalism, which documents the past and uses that data to successfully pursue capitalist endeavour. According to Davies the writing of History “academicizes, which means it historicizes, which means it neutralizes”48. That is to say, the mechanism by which history works is through disobedience, or by challenging perceived social norms, conclusions, and dominant thought. By challenging these perceived unassailable norms of reality, historical work and memoir both reflect and shape current concepts of morality. And thus, through portraying her own subjective experience of the past, A. May’s memoir works to both shape and reflect current and past realities.

When attempting to understand the changing nature of morality, it is essential to realize the importance of understanding history, context, and individual bias and their basis in the construction of memory, and subsequently of story. Thus, when looking at a memoir such as A. May’s, it is essential to interpret her story within the context of any potential biases she may have. And so, when we analyze May’s memoir, it is of the utmost importance to attempt to understand how moral standards may play an effect on what has been recorded. The many changing and interacting circumstances effected not only what A. May chose to record in her memoir, but also what she omitted and what she chose to include. As we have seen, current concepts of self also help to shape our memories of the past, and these constructions are products of both past and present. Memoir and history can be seen as both an expression of individual subjective experience, and also a reflection of the world in which that individual’s subjective experience occurs.

Endnotes

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