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## Literature Review of John F. Kennedy

The life of John Kennedy has been the subject of hundreds of authors throughout the last four decades. When studying the life and death of Kennedy, it is important to consider a vast wealth of writings that are contained in articles, books, and Internet resources. In reviewing a limited number of the literary works on John F. Kennedy, it is most helpful to study writings from a wide spectrum of time. Throughout this brief literary review, the attempt has been to summarize several different works from various decades, 1960s (primary sources), 70s, 80s, 90s, 00s, in the effort to come to a conclusion about a deeper understanding of the life and events leading up to the death of John F. Kennedy and the impact he had on the world around him. The primary approach that will be taken in this writing will be an attempt to understand the person of John F. Kennedy as described in different literary sources. In order to be able to better understand his death and assassination, one must understand the life he lived and what he accomplished. Yet, before Kennedy's life and death can be discussed, it will be helpful to take a brief look at the life of his infamous assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. This review will be concluded with a summary of the various works that have been researched.

The most interesting approach that was came across during researching these resources about John F. Kennedy and his death was a work written by Norman Mailer. In *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (New York: Random House, 1995), Norman Mailer took an interesting approach to discussing the Kennedy assassination. Mailer's approach

was not to ask, “Who killed Kennedy?” but “Who was Oswald?” for only through answering the second question did Mailer believe the first question could be answered. Mailer sought to understand who Oswald was and therefore make conclusions about Kennedy’s death based on this understanding. Of course, Mailer’s sources were often brief personal accounts and reflections of several different persons and points of view. Mailer not only discussed Oswald’s dysfunctional childhood years, but he shed light on relationships closest to Oswald such as his mother, Marguerite, as well as other contacts that he had throughout his life and military service. Mailer’s portrayal of Oswald broke the molds of a lot of conclusions of who Oswald was, and often brought a new character to life than the filthy loner that many considered him.

Mailer in his approach asserts that Oswald was much different than most viewed him and was certainly capable of murdering John Kennedy. Yet, the question was...did he do it? Mailer argues that Oswald most likely was a part of the assassination, but he agrees with other sources that more than likely it was a result of several persons together. Mailer does not endorse the idea of a government or soviet conspiracy; however, but rather a dissenter’s effort to voice himself and bring about change through his own means.

Now that a look has been taken at Oswald, one must also ask, “Who was Kennedy?” to fully understand the dynamics of the life that he lived. In *A Hero For Our Time* (New York: MacMillan, 1983), Ralph Martin did an excellent job of presenting the essence of who Kennedy was and the manner in which he lived his life. Martin discussed the ascension of the “playboy prince” who took the heart of the nation captive. Martin opened up by sharing the background of what it was like to grow up in the Kennedy household amidst a mass amount of wealth and resources as well as being the son of the famous

Joseph Kennedy, Sr.. Martin talked about the challenges and rivalries that were present in the Kennedy household both internally and externally as brothers respected one another and competed with one another. Martin brought understanding to the stigma of being a Kennedy, and marrying the “most desired woman of our time.” He helped to paint a picture of the “royalty” that John and Jacqueline were in the eyes of their followers. Martin did an excellent job in showing the personal side of the Kennedy’s by sharing not only about the political prowess, but also more importantly the family moments of excitement, celebration, humor, and crisis. He showed the transition of John and Jacqueline’s marriage from estranged expediency to a deeper more compassionate love.

In the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents: From George Washington to George Bush* (New York: Random House, 2002), William DeGregorio gives a brief, yet factual account of the life and presidency of John F. Kennedy. DeGregorio began by giving basic features of John Kennedy such as who he was named after, a description of his physical appearance, the manner of his personality, his ancestral heritage, descriptions of his mother, father and siblings, as well as his wife and children. DeGregorio made sure to include what life was like for Kennedy as a child by describing his physical disabilities, education, religious involvement, his interests and hobbies, as well as his early romantic interests that he quite avidly pursued before Jacqueline. He made sure to describe the encounter and relationship with Jacqueline, as well as the extramarital affairs that John engaged.

DeGregorio was quite descriptive in shedding light on Kennedy’s military service during World War II. He then went on to describe Kennedy’s career of being a journalist before the six years as a U.S. Representative, which he gave great detail about. He then

included Kennedy's eight years as a senator in great detail along with information regarding the nomination, opponent, and campaign of the 1960 election. He doesn't stop describing the election without giving facts about the popular vote, electoral vote or even the states he carried. DeGregorio then listed and described the Supreme Court appointments, cabinet, and vice president holders of Kennedy's administration, as well as all the major events that faced them. Many of these events he described in brief, yet helpful detail.

His work included such resources as quotes made by Kennedy, his critics, and his supporters. He gave a list of valuable resources about Kennedy that can be found in other written works. He also gave a concise, yet thoroughly factual description of the assassination of John Kennedy, and the events following.

DeGregorio's research is not exhaustive on any one area of Kennedy's life and death, but rather a collage of the "wholeness" of every major part so as to give the reader an educated background the many facets of John F. Kennedy. This work alone would not be good for doing an extensive research project, but was helpful for adding the facts and details of the events and people discussed in the other works on John F. Kennedy's life and death.

In *John F. Kennedy* (New York: Twayne, 1974), Peter Schwab and Lee Schneidman gave a great biography of John F. Kennedy's family history beginning with his great-grandfathers', John Fitzgerald and Patrick Joseph Kennedy, journeys from Ireland. Schwab and Schneidman were very thorough in giving the lineage of J.F.K. as well as describing some of the family confrontations that took place with other competing families. On page 33, they made a bold statement, "The ideas, attitudes, policies and

political philosophy of John Kennedy the President cannot be separated from John Kennedy the man.” By studying the philosophies and attitudes of John Kennedy, along with facets of his life give us a better understanding of how he lived and why he died. In this work, the authors did a very good job of describing the factors of family, political, and social experience that helped to shape John Kennedy into the man that he became, eventually being the chief player of the free world.

Herbert Parmet added insight into the shaping of John Kennedy, in *Jack, The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1980), as a result of his older brother’s death, experiences in World War II, and the Kennedy family expectations for him as he sought to figure out his future purpose all the while attempting to overcome his physical limitations. Beyond the driving forces that led Kennedy’s life were his policies that were influenced by the motivations he faced. Likewise, Schwab and Schneidman gave further detailed descriptions of the basic foreign and domestic policies and secret activities that Kennedy had, as well as giving some insight into the assassination of Kennedy, although limited at best. This work dealt more with the life and formation of who John Kennedy was rather than the death that brought an end to that life.

Arthur Schlesinger, in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965), also gave an insightful memoir into the personal accomplishments of John Kennedy’s tenure of three short years in the White House, leading to a conclusion that although much was accomplished, much was left unfinished.

Lewis J. Paper, in *John F. Kennedy: The Promise and Performance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), assesses both strengths and weakness of Kennedy’s administration, as well as highlighting some of the great achievements and deep failings of their three years in

office as well as how those events impacted the United States and the world around it. Paper gave great insight into what influenced Kennedy's decisions and the pressures he faced as President. He also gave a foundation of how some policies of the administration were based on his predecessors.

Paper even quoted Robert Lovett, taken from an excerpt of William Manchester's *Portrait of A President* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), "[Kennedy] possessed an extremely intelligent mind whose quickness seemed sharpened by an intuitive quality. He had a real thirst for knowledge which was wide ranging and engaging in its keenness" (Manchester, 20; Paper, 131). This was one of the few personal descriptions of the characteristics of John Kennedy that not only helped the readers to understand the man, but to see the motivations behind his impeccable desire to know everything that was "going on." Hugh Sidey, in *John F. Kennedy, President* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), that Kennedy often would be persistent and tenacious in his quest for knowledge yet would rush out of the room as soon as he got the gist of what his informant was saying (119). Often he and Robert had linked minds, thus this rushing off to take action happened often before the informant was finished speaking.

Paper does an impeccable job of describing how the crises that faced Kennedy's administration affected the nation and the rest of the world, and he was very thorough in his attempt to describe all the effects of Kennedy's responses to these crises. Paper even brought to light the great humility that Kennedy showed after the Bay of Pigs Crisis where he claimed sole responsibility for its failure. Such personal character evaluations gave insight into the hidden thoughts and emotions that went on in Kennedy's head and often trickled out into his actions. Paper's work was very helpful in understanding the man

behind the Presidency, and ultimately the life that was taken at such a young age. Paper helps to highlight the achievements of John Kennedy that many remember today, as well as unfinished business that resulted from a presidency cut short.

William Manchester even gave greater understanding into the hesitancy of John Kennedy about venturing to Dallas. Manchester describes the mixed emotions that both the President and Mrs. Kennedy had about the dangers of being in such an elevated position as well as the conflict of trying to please his supporters in the midst of his own inconvenience (545). In *Death of A President* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), Manchester quotes an exchange between John and Jacqueline shortly before the November 1963 assassination concerning his attempt to persuade her not to worry about him, because of the ease with which an assassin could carry out the plot to kill the President and the fact that neither he nor Jacqueline could stop it (552). Manchester even quotes Charles Roberts' *Newsweek* article about the ease of assassination anywhere and at anytime, as long as that person was willing to give up his own life he could easily assassinate John Kennedy (541).

Manchester gave great descriptions of the timeline of events taking place in and leading up to the trip in Dallas. He also quotes some supporters of Kennedy who sought to prove critics of Kennedy's accomplishments wrong by stating that Kennedy was profoundly more successful than his predecessor Eisenhower (510).

In *The Taking of America* (Voxfux 1983), Richard Sprague goes into great detail of the conspiracies surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This work is full of valuable links to how the different characters played out in the events leading up to November of 1963. Sprague's strength was very helpful, because it provided greater detail

into how the individuals were related, especially those interacting with Lee Oswald. Sprague went about the task of not only explaining some of the conspiracies that many had of the involvement of Lyndon Johnson and other government agents in carrying out and covering up the assassination. His work proved helpful to fill in the details of persons involved, but certainly was most effective when studying beside other hard-copy resources. As discussed in the article by Mark Holland, *After Thirty Years: Trying to Make Sense of the Assassination* (Reviews in American History, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 1994), many felt that the Soviet Union may have been involved in the conspiracy as well (206), although no one can be certain who the conspirators were—assuming there were any at all. Holland made a deeper argument that having theories is one thing, but it is much more important to “come to grips with the assassination” (209). He concluded that it was rather intriguing that “80 percent of the American people disbelieve or cannot accept their own history, and when the questions they ask about the past are based on palpable, manufactured falsehoods” (209). His insightful conclusion was not as pretentious as it may sound, but rather a profound statement of the aftermath of such uncertainty surrounding the death of an American idol.

The life and death of John Kennedy is a mystery to so many, which has led to much speculation about conspiracy and motivations. The combination of these ten resources has led to a better understanding of Kennedy’s background ancestry, his childhood and struggles faced, his motivations and values, as well as his political and social strategies that were derived from his upbringing in a wealthy family and his experiences throughout his extensive education. The many different viewpoints challenge the reader to pull together the many facts and make conclusions based on the available evidence. The authors seem to complement one another’s works as many of them had access to the writings prior to their



own; for example, many used William Manchester's writings as a resource. Some authors even present different ways of considering arguments and challenge the traditional thinking on the topic of Kennedy's assassination. Norman Mailer and Richard Sprague both took the approaches of attempting to give a deeper insight into the conspiracies and explanations of who Oswald was, as well as who all was involved, whereas the other authors sought to describe the life of Kennedy more fully. Both of these approaches were extremely helpful when seeking to put together an deeper understanding of Kennedy's life and death. Without understanding the life he lived, the struggles he faced and all the events and persons involved in his life, one cannot begin to understand his death or the impact it had on the world.

All of the authors who discussed John Kennedy's childhood basically had the same approach to him growing up in a wealthy family and being a "prince," yet only a couple of them touched on the pressures that he faced as being in such an elite family. There were also differences in how the authors handled the discussion about his death. A couple felt there were possible conspiracies, however the others were defiant that Americans must accept the fact that John Kennedy was assassinated and believe their own facts which point to the lone Oswald.

Overall the resources made a good evaluation of Kennedy's life and death and the people involved. Some authors differed about minor aspects of his life or death, but mostly the authors agreed with one another. The major differences came in that different authors discussed things that were left out by other works. There seems to be more speculation about Kennedy's death in the later works, and thus leads one to believe that as time goes by, the Kennedy death will only grow into more mystery of conspiracies and disbelief.

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