

Autobiography or *Autre*biography?

Master's thesis: a study of autobiographical elements in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Summertime* and *Elizabeth Costello*



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Abstract

John M. Coetzee is not generally known for confessional self-revelation or being open about his personal life. Yet Coetzee's first autobiographical work was published in 1997, under the title *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. Its sequel, entitled *Youth*, appeared 5 years later, followed by *Summertime* in 2009. In these works Coetzee plays with the generic boundaries of autobiography and by doing so Coetzee questions the notion of truth and the "convention of self-representation" in autobiography (Klopper 22). It is not surprising that Coetzee labels the periods of his life described in these works as "autrebiography".

This thesis investigates a number of theories on autobiography and self-representation in fictionalized and non-fictionalized autobiographies. Subsequently, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are discussed in the light of these theories and of recent Coetzee scholarship. Moreover, the connection between the autobiographical characters in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are explored; in order to investigate into what extent Coetzee discloses parts about himself in these works. Furthermore, this thesis looks into the relation between Coetzee and his character Elizabeth Costello in the novels *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*. Costello is seen by many critics as Coetzee's 'alter ego' and as such plays yet another role in the intricate interaction between Coetzee's own life and his work.

The findings of this thesis show that even though the autobiography has already been around for a long time, among critics the genre is still a much debated field. For instance regarding the themes truth and identity. This thesis shows that *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* by J.M. Coetzee play with autobiographical identity and truth. By introducing the third person narrator instead of the first person that is more frequently used in autobiography. *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are perfect examples of how Coetzee understands the concept of truth, where he mixes factual accounts of his past with fiction. Furthermore, this thesis shows that the autobiographical boundaries are especially difficult with

the character Elizabeth Costello Costello. By using Costello Coetzee can express certain opinions, while at the same time accomplishing to stay away from critique. However, it remains uncertain if Costello is voicing Coetzee's views, since there are also a few characters that challenge her arguments. During the discussions between the characters it seems the reader is witnessing Coetzee's own learning process.

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Introduction

Sharing stories about ourselves is part of everyone's life. Some tell stories while talking about work with their spouses at the dinner table; others reminisce about their teenage years with old friends. Still others write their stories down in diaries. A modern approach is to share stories in blogs or vlogs. Even though we all do it in different ways, it is considered perfectly normal to reflect on what we did and how we felt and to share those reflections with others. It might, therefore, be unsurprising to learn that people are equally interested in other people's lives—which explains why autobiographies are immensely popular.

As Nancy K. Miller explains in *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives*, it is because we “learn something about ourselves” that we like to read autobiographies (xiv). When reading an autobiography, a reader will automatically compare his/her life to the life that is depicted, bringing back memories and bringing forth the questions, “who am/was I?” and “why am/was I like this?”. Identifying with the story, according to Miller, comes to feel like a “rediscovery of [your] own life and memories” (xv). Miller maintains that it is the feeling of “identification that sends readers to the biography section ... in such large numbers”. On the other hand, she says it is the “author's wish to be encountered in this way, found on that particular shelf” (Miller 3).

So, is the genre of the autobiography clear-cut? One might think so upon looking up the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “**autobiography**: ... An account of a person's life given by himself or herself, *esp.* one published in book form. Also: the process of writing such an account; these considered as a literary genre” (“autobiography”, *Oxford English Dictionary*). However, upon studying the genre, it becomes clear that, among critics, the topic is still much debated. For example, in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, Leigh Gilmore suggests that there is a “weirdness” around autobiographies: that contradiction can be detected within works of an autobiographical nature. On the one hand, the autobiography is seen as

“insufficiently objective” because the author has undergone the experience and emotions himself; at the same time, however, it has been “spurned as insufficiently subjective” (Gilmore 6) because it can give a limited and sometimes distorted view of the experience. Therefore, she maintains, autobiographies do not fit a clear-cut genre; they are situated somewhere between fiction and history (Gilmore 6). In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin agrees with Gilmore and even describes the autobiography as “the slipperiest of genres” (2).

A number of J.M. Coetzee’s works—*Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*—are good examples of this slipperiness. While, on the one hand, Coetzee himself wrote these stories about his own life, he uses specific stylistic elements which makes it difficult for readers to truly feel that they are reading an autobiography. The implication is that, contrary to Miller’s believe that authors want their books to be found on the bookstore’s biography shelf, Coetzee does not share this wish. Indeed, in an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee agrees with Gilmore that autobiography does not fit one specific genre. Coetzee is even of the opinion that in a large sense, “all writing is autobiography”:

JMC: ... everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, the enterprise of self-construction ... does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself? (*Doubling the Point* 17)

Though Coetzee argues that “all writing is autobiography”, Derek Attridge in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* points out that the author is not “known for confessional self-revelation” (138). Yet the works mentioned above, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, are presented as autobiographical, and they are clearly fictionalized accounts of the writer’s life.

This poses the interesting question of the link between self and self-revelation in Coetzee's work.

This thesis will investigate a number of theories on autobiography and self-representation in fictionalized and non-fictionalized autobiographies. Subsequently, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* will be discussed in the light of these theories and of recent Coetzee scholarship. Moreover, the connection between the autobiographical characters in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* will be explored; in addition, the development of these characters will be examined, as will the degree to which they are consistent or inconsistent. Furthermore, this thesis will look into the relationship between Coetzee and his character, Elizabeth Costello, in the novels *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*. Costello is seen by many critics as Coetzee's "alter ego", and as such plays yet another role in the intricate interaction between Coetzee's own life and his work.

Theory

When browsing in a bookstore one cannot help but notice the numbers of memoirs, biographies and autobiographies there are for sale. This should not be surprising, according to Jill Ker Conway: “[People] want to know how the world looks from inside another person’s experience” (Maftai 49). Autobiography is not a new phenomenon; however, the word itself is relatively new. The word autobiography was used for the first time by reviewer William Taylor, who in 1797 mentioned it in the British *Monthly Review* in an article on diaries (“autobiography”, *Oxford English Dictionary*). As a genre, however, autobiography is much older; it had only been around under different names, such as apology, memoir and confession (Winslow 3). For example, Saint Augustine wrote his *Confessions of St. Augustine* between 397 and 398 AD; this is considered to be one of the first autobiographical works.

Even though autobiography as a genre has a rich history, and the word became established around the eighteenth century, scholars still have not yet managed to find a unified definition of autobiography as a genre. In her book *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson wonders whether it is not the case that all writing is autobiographical, for “if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical” (1). Paul John Eakin, in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, agrees that autobiography is the “slipperiest of literary genres” (2). He also states that a great deal of instructive and reflecting characteristic assumptions have been made about the autobiography (Eakin 2). Indeed, since the twentieth century numerous articles and books presenting theories on the autobiography have been published (Winslow 4), a number of which will be discussed below.

1.1 Autobiography and identity

While some struggle with seeing autobiography as a specific genre, Phillipe Lejeune has a clear image in mind as to the requirements an autobiography must meet to be considered as such. In *On Autobiography*, Lejeune first explains that it is difficult to define autobiography, since it has a close relation with biography and the novel. However, after seeking the boundaries between these relations Lejeune eventually defines autobiography as: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). The author continues by explaining that an autobiographical novel is considered to be “[a]ll fictional works in which the reader has reason to suspect, ... there is identity of author and protagonist, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it” (11). In addition, he stresses the importance of the author’s proper name in an autobiography. When one stays “on the level of analysis within the text” there is hardly any or no difference at all between autobiography and the autobiographical novel (Lejeune 13). However, when the title page is taken into consideration along with the text, the difference between the identity of the proper name shared by the author, narrator and protagonist becomes apparent. As Lejeune explains: “In order for there to be autobiography the author, the narrator and the protagonist must be identical” (Lejeune 4), which is not the case in the autobiographical novel. To further clarify, Lejeune states that “autobiography is not a guessing game”; the author has to identify himself, if necessary with the help of the title page, as the author, narrator and protagonist. When the writer does not, the work is not an autobiography (Lejeune 13). Thus, the autobiographical pact is the “affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover” (Lejeune 14).

However, if Lejeune’s theory is taken into account, dilemmas about identity arise. For instance, Linda Anderson disagrees with Lejeune’s contentions, since they do not question the reliability of intention. How can Lejeune’s theory be applied when this identity of which he

speaks can never really be “established except as a matter of intention on the part of the author?” (Anderson 2). Can an author, for example, not use a pseudonym? However, within the critical discussion of autobiography, intention has been defined as an honest intent to guarantee the truth of the writing, implying the reader should trust the author (Anderson 2). According to Lejeune, the reader should rely on the fact that the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and protagonist are the same (12). Within this autobiographical pact between the author, narrator and protagonist, Lejeune works under the premise of the fact that there is one single stable identity, while Micaela Maftei does not consider this an accurate assumption. Maftei rejects the idea of one single identity, for multiple identities are to be found everywhere in personal narratives, even though these works are presented as a unified whole (59). An author has to wear different masks when writing an autobiography; he has to be able to place himself out of the story to record the event while at the same time being the protagonist experiencing it. Moreover, the author has to keep his audience constantly in mind and ensure the story remains interesting for them, even though he himself already knows the outcome (Maftei 59).

According to Maftei, an author is unable to have only one identity; he needs something as a “splitting of selves” in order to construct an autobiography (Maftei 59). Maftei maintains that people in general play different roles, for instance those of daughter, wife, mother, et cetera. All these roles change throughout our lives, something that the writer of an autobiography must accept. He should therefore work with these multiple identities (Maftei 60). By implication, Maftei disagrees with the notion of a stable identity. Lejeune expects there to be a lasting connection and identity between the author and the narrator; however, according to Maftei, this cannot be a stable unity due to the time that elapsed between the experience lived and the moment of writing. As stated above, any human being experiences constant changes throughout life; when more and more time elapses between the described

event and the time of writing it cannot be said that the author still shares a “complete identity with the protagonist of the written work” (Maftei 4). Furthermore, when writing an autobiography concerning moments of crisis, this experience can cause intense stress and emotions over time, or even while writing, which creates an unstable identity (Maftei 68) or a different identity before and after the event (Maftei 4). The time lapses and experiences can even cause the author who begins an autobiography to be rather different from the one who finishes the work. Consequently: “both selves can be distinct from the character in the text they are describing” (Maftei 69).

1.2 Autobiography and truth

As mentioned above, an element of the autobiographical pact is that the relationship between author and reader is based on truth (Anderson 2). Indeed, there are contemporary examples which show that readers trust authors; and when it turns out an author has not been completely true to his audience, the latter can become annoyed (Maftei 18). Take the author James Frey for instance, who in 2006 admitted he had lied about his work *A Million Little Pieces* being an entirely truthful account of his life. His confession resulted in angry television broadcasts on CNN and by Oprah Winfrey, who felt that Frey had “betrayed millions of readers” (“Author is Kicked out”). This conflict illustrates that many readers attach great importance to the fact that the story told in an autobiographical work is true.

The (naïve) reader’s expectation of an ‘honest’ work from an autobiographical author might be explained from a historical perspective. According to Leigh Gilmore, “autobiography is rooted in the confession” (59) and Saint Augustine’s 4th-century AD *Confessions* mentioned earlier, lies at that root (Anderson 17). The term *confession* is evidently derived from the act of a person confessing to a priest; that person is expected to tell the truth in order to receive redemption. Therefore, when looking at the history of the

autobiography, it is not surprising that readers expect the authors of autobiographical works to write a truthful story. However, the danger of a form such as confession is that the truth not being told can lead to “dramatic ... results” (Gilmore 59). This is exactly why Micaela Maftai is of the opinion that readers have a strong desire to believe an autobiographical work is truthful, for autobiography takes on a moral implication (Maftai 24). Hence, the readers’ emotional reactions when it turned out Frey had not been truthful. As Eakin explains: “When life writers fail to tell the truth [they] do more than violate a literary convention governing nonfiction as a genre; they disobey a moral imperative” (2-3). Maftai emphasises the fact that this ‘moral imperative’ is only present when it comes to works of an autobiographical nature (25). If a book, for instance, is labelled as a thriller, no reader would feel betrayed when the work does not keep him/her enthralled. According to Maftai, it is this ‘moral imperative’ that makes certain authors afraid of publishing their work as an autobiography: “Some authors whose writing contains clearly autobiographical elements prefer to release their work as fiction, rejecting associations and implications that come with the classification of autobiography” (25).

When it is assumed that there is an understanding between author and reader regarding the truth, again authorial intention cannot be overlooked, since the author’s intention is the foundation of this relationship. This is, however, in contrast with W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley’s ideas in “The Intentional Fallacy”. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley the meaning of a work should not be based on what the author’s intention was when writing; for it would, for instance, require the reader to take on the role of a cultural historian or a psychologist to truly understand the author’s intention at the time of writing (Wimsatt & Beardsley 472-3). To interpret a work one should not “[consult] the oracle” (Wimsatt & Beardsley 487), the reader should rather make up its own mind about the meaning of the work (Wimsatt & Beardsley 470). Maftai finds the concept of authorial intention fairly problematic

as well since the author's intention is highly unreliable. Not only is it possible the audience never know the author's true intention, the intention might even be unclear to the author himself (Maftai 25). Moreover, people who were also present at an experience the author is describing or who knew the person who is the subject of the book can change the author's view on the event or person. Maftai takes William Zinsser as an example, who wrote about his deceased grandmother in *Five Boyhoods*; and his own mother, after reading the work, disagreed with how Zinsser had portrayed his grandmother (Maftai 17). Had Zinsser taken other people's views into account, he would have achieved a broader perspective, which could have led him to a more complete truth, in contrast to portraying only his own truth. Whether an author does so is dependent on the author's intention; therefore, Maftai does not consider it useful to have authorial intention as the foundation of the relationship between reader and author (25). However, she maintains that there is no universal concept of truth; rather, everyone has their own perception of truth developed over the course of their lives. Therefore, Maftai differentiates between being truthful, and 'the truth.' She does not question an author's truthfulness; however, she does question whether the truth as represented by the author should be seen as factually accurate, since the story only reflects one person's recollection of an event (Maftai 98). Consequently, Maftai concludes, the understanding between author and reader should be based on the acceptance that there are various truths. In *The Art of Literary Autobiography*, John Batchelor agrees with Maftai on this point; even when an author has the intention to be completely truthful in his autobiography, during the writing process certain factors may come up which cause a distorted truth. For example, why is an author drawn to certain subjects that he portrays in his autobiography? The author chooses the subjects he writes about; some experiences make the book, others are left out even though they might have been essential to a truthful account of the author's life: "The picture lives only within the frame we have invented for it" (Batchelor 19). Furthermore,

according to Jurgen Schlaeger in “Cult as Culture”, autobiographers have to consider the image they would like to present to the readers, while at the same time staying true to themselves (59). Schlaeger holds it as almost impossible to “[reconcile] these two obligations,” which makes it difficult to write an entirely truthful work (59). He concludes that although the writer’s intention is truthful, finding one real truth is a myth: “[M]en/women as they appear in autobiography are always self-made, self-fashioned, the result of interpretative efforts, not real selves that have managed to appear on paper by some strange kind of magic” (Schlaeger 60).

Beyond the problem of authorial intention, the question remains whether absolute truth can be expected at all by the reader. Autobiographies are about events that happened in the (remote) past, written down from the author’s memory. Because of the passing of time, the concept of memory and truth is exactly what scholars feel is ambiguous. For instance, John Batchelor states that memory is “fallible”; therefore an autobiographer can never be sure he is writing the truth (17). William L. Howarth, in “Some Principles of Autobiography”, establishes that memories are essential to an autobiography; however, time is one of the elements which causes problems and alters memory (364). This view of a modified recollection and hence representation of the past coincides with Sigmund Freud’s major insights, according to Linda Anderson in *Autobiography*. Freud argued that people stored their history somewhere deep and kept it repressed or unconscious, making the past only enter the present as a “repetition or intrusive memory” (Anderson 58). Thus, a memory is suppressed for years and when it emerges it “[causes] people retrospectively to recast their sense of themselves and the life they have led” (Anderson 58). Therefore, the past cannot be thought of as a complete truth. It is constantly altered when more is remembered or released into the unconsciousness, resulting in the fact that at different times a person will think differently about the past and present. Anderson continues by saying that Jacques Lacan

agrees with Freud's theory. Where traditionalists see the memory as a mirror reflecting an authentic resemblance of the original, pre-existing self, Lacan sees a fractured mirror constructing itself (Anderson 62). He argues that an individual's perception of himself holds the mirror together; therefore, the reflection can never be a true one, yet, the person "fantasises [it] as real" (Anderson 62).

1.3 Autobiography in the Third Person

According to Leigh Gilmore in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, when thinking of autobiography and voice most people think of a singular effort to depict one's individual identity, using the first person perspective (79). It is true that most works of an autobiographical nature are written in the first person, for, as Philippe Lejeune describes in "Autobiography in the Third Person", using the 'I' in an autobiography feels more natural than using the second or third person (29). On the other hand, it seems contradictory when a third person is used in an autobiography, for then the 'he' or 'she' is meant to represent the 'I' (Lejeune 27). Nevertheless, according to Lejeune when using the third person none of the rules in autobiography is broken as long as the work fits the previous explained autobiographical pact and thus the 'he' or 'she' and the author share the same proper name (30).

It might not always be clear to a reader if the 'he' is actually the author of the work; therefore, Lejeune gives three ways of indicating the third person refers to the author, so the reader will not confuse the autobiography with an autobiographical novel. Firstly, the author can use "periphrasis to show the third person will fulfil the functions of the first" (Lejeune 33): 'he who is writing this autobiography...'. Secondly, the author can leave out all ambiguity and explicitly use the proper name in his work (Lejeune 34). Finally, the writer can use no "explicit reference"; nevertheless, the context should provide "identification between

the author and narrator” (Lejeune 34). Lejeune explains that the last is an insecure one and only happens in works which alternate between the first and third person (34).

Lejeune maintains there are three possible situations in which an author of an autobiographical work can use the third person. First of all, Lejeune describes the “exceptional use”; when the third person is only used once or for an exceptionally short time in order to distance oneself (39). Secondly, the “alternating use,” switching between the first and third person to avoid the restrictions of both presentations (Lejeune 39). Thirdly, the “systematic use”, when the entire work is written in the third person (Lejeune 38). However, according to Lejeune the final one is hardly ever used, for the reader then must constantly remind himself it is an autobiography he is reading and if the work is long it can be a risk that this fact shall be forgotten (Lejeune 38). Despite this risk, the author J.M. Coetzee does apply the “systematic use”. His autobiographical works *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* have been entirely written in the third person voice. With this systematic use Coetzee confuses the reader about the work’s generic nature, which has caused some reviewers to treat the works as novels (Attridge 156).

Lejeune explains that the usage of the third person in an autobiographical work is to help the writer distance himself from the work: “The author speaks about himself *as if* another were speaking about him or *as if* he himself were speaking of another” (29). In “Adding to My Life” the author Andrei Codrescu admits to having written his autobiography, *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius*, in the third person in order to create distance. This was needed for him to get a view of the “self under construction,” using the first person only in the conversational parts of the story (Codrescu 24). By using the third person the writer distances himself from the work; however, Lejeune argues the writer does not break the autobiographical pact. The writer has the same identity as the narrator and protagonist and therefore stays within the rules of autobiography. Lejeune explains it is only “*as if*” the author

writes about someone else, but in fact is not, otherwise the work would be an autobiographical fiction or even a novel (Lejeune 29).

1.4 The “Anti-Autobiography”

Identity, truth and voice as described above are all issues which both belong to and raise questions about autobiography. Probably the most famous work that plays with these elements is Roland Barthes’ autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. This book is a good example of using unlikely approaches to autobiographical writing. Therefore, it is not surprising that Phillippe Lejeune describes the work as “the anti-Pact par excellence” (131) and Linda Anderson calls it an autobiography “against itself” (66).

Regarding identity, Barthes immediately challenges Lejeune’s rule that author, narrator and protagonist must be identical. On page one the reader finds the following announcement: “Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman”¹ (Barthes 1). With this statement Barthes ensures the reader knows it is not him echoing through these words, but a fictional character, implying there is no personal connection between author and text. Maftei claims that Barthes is aware that he consists of multiple identities and, therefore, cannot represent his work as offering one relationship between author and narrator (64). Indeed, Barthes talks of having “[several bodies]” and agrees that his past and present self are like different people: “What right does my present have to speak of my past? Has my present some advantage over my past?” (Barthes 120).

In addition, the previous quote showcases Barthes’ views on autobiography and truth. By asking if the present self has some advantage over the past one, Barthes seems to shy away from the notion that the writer of an autobiography has authority over his past (Maftei 64). Like William L. Howarth, Barthes feels the present has no ‘right’ to talk about the past

¹ Translation: all this must be regarded as told by a character in a novel (translation mine).

because it knows and has experienced more. Moreover, it will give a modified view on the experience lived and, therefore, cannot give a true account of it. Nevertheless, Barthes does not see his work as “insincere”; he just acknowledges that people have a “different knowledge today than yesterday” (Barthes 120). In this regard Barthes’ work can be compared to Lacan’s mirror theory. Barthes acknowledges that throughout life a person consists of different selves whose own image can only be a fantasy: “What actually belongs to me is my image-repertoire, my phantasms” (Barthes 153).

According to Maftai, Barthes makes a real effort to disrupt any notion of a united author and narrator (64). The book is made up of fragments, arranged in alphabetical order instead of a chronological one. Moreover, the narrative voice is a collection of ‘he’, ‘I,’ and ‘RB’ constantly alternating each other. None of the perspectives is used long enough, which prevents the reader from building a “relationship with or an understanding of the narrator in any way” (Maftai 64). Linda Anderson sees this as Barthes’ “most salient break with tradition” (66). She agrees with Maftai that by using multiple narrative voices Barthes attempts to create an effect of distance between writer and text (Anderson 66): “I had no other solution than to rewrite myself – at a distance, a great distance – here and now. [I] remain on the surface” (Barthes, 142).

In *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime*, J.M. Coetzee plays with the generic boundaries of autobiography in a similar way as Barthes. In these works Coetzee, for instance, uses the third person voice, the present tense and distorts some facts. By doing so Coetzee questions the notion of truth and the “convention of self-representation” (Klopper 22) in autobiography. It is not surprising that Coetzee labels the periods of his life described in these works as “*autobiography*” (*Doubling the Point* 394). How Coetzee portrays his personal history and the effects of them in these works are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

J.M. Coetzee and *Autrebiography*

John M. Coetzee's first autobiographical work was published in 1997, under the title *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*². Its sequel, entitled *Youth*, appeared 5 years later, followed by *Summertime* in 2009. Coetzee is not generally known for being open about his private life (Attridge 138, Klopper 22); therefore, many were surprised when *Boyhood* came out. This is the book, according to the blurb, "many admirers have been waiting for, but never could have expected" (*Boyhood*). Nevertheless, in an interview with David Attwell five years before the publication of the book, Coetzee had already spoken about the period addressed in his first two autobiographies. In this interview, included in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee mentions he does not feel close to the person during this period and calls it "autrebiography" (*Doubling the Point* 394). The word implies a different take on autobiography and that is exactly what *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* demonstrate. According to Dirk Klopper in "Critical Fictions in JM Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*", Coetzee's works contest the "generic boundaries" of autobiography (23). Indeed, Coetzee plays with the genre by using the simple-present tense, the third person and even by presenting the narrator as an English biographer who is writing a book about a deceased John Coetzee. These elements have caused some critics to regard Coetzee's autobiographical works as autobiographical fiction (Lenta 157) or even novels (Attridge 156).

This chapter discusses *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* in the light of autobiographical theories and investigates the various aspects of these works to see how the labels of an autobiography, autobiographical fiction or a novel might or might not fit.

2.1 *Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Summertime* as "Autrebiography"

Philippe Lejeune, in his work *On Autobiography*, stresses the necessity for the author,

² From this point *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* will be referred to as *Boyhood*.

narrator and protagonist to be identical in an autobiographical work (Lejeune 4). This pact is, as was suggested earlier, what leaves some scholars confused after reading *Boyhood*, *Youth* or *Summertime*. The works have been published as stories about the writer's life. However, by using the third person voice in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, Coetzee "[confounds] the relationship between protagonist, narrator and author" (Klopper 22). This makes it difficult to regard the works as strictly autobiographical. Already from the opening of *Boyhood* it becomes clear that Coetzee will not hold himself to Lejeune's pact. The work first describes the house and surroundings of the protagonist and his family, followed by the first reference to Coetzee's protagonist: "His mother consults her sister in Stellenbosch ..." (*Boyhood* 1). By using the third person Coetzee implies that the narrator is not the protagonist as well. This style does not change throughout the entire book and is also present in *Youth*. On the other hand, as Derek Attridge points out in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, the author is identical to the protagonist (149). The narrative voice that Coetzee uses brings to mind James Joyce's fictional autobiography *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this work Joyce uses the third person voice as well and blurs the lines of autobiography even further by calling his young self Stephen Dedalus: "—What is your name? Stephen had answered: Stephen Dedalus" (Joyce 6). In *Summertime* Coetzee also makes the relationship even more complex by presenting the narrator as Mr Vincent, a biographer who does research on the life of a deceased John Coetzee by interviewing people who were important to him: "I have been very open with you, Mr Vincent" (*Summertime* 82). Here the narrator is certainly not identical to the author; the subject, however, is.

In *Autobiography in the Third Person*, Lejeune states that when a work is written in the third person but the author and the 'he' are the same, the work can be considered an autobiography (Lejeune 30). However, when used throughout the piece, the reader might

forget the work is an autobiography (Lejeune 38). This explains the confusion mentioned above by Dirk Klopper (22) and Derek Attridge (156).

The reason an author would choose to write his autobiography in this manner is explained by Lejeune in “Autobiography in the Third Person”. He argues that an autobiographer chooses this form of narrative to distance himself from his work (29). Coetzee achieves this effect as well. According to Attridge, because the autobiographies are written in the third person one does not “[gain] a sense of intimacy” when reading them (140). Margaret Lenta, in “*Autrebiography: J.M. Coetzee’s Boyhood and Youth*”, agrees and states that, by choosing to write in the third person, Coetzee shows a “detachment” from the works (157).

The question is, why Coetzee would want to create this distance? Lenta is of the opinion that Coetzee establishes this space because his works depict a time in his life which is concerned with “separation” (162). Certainly, the works portray a protagonist who wants to detach himself from his native country South Africa and from his parents: “It was to escape the oppressiveness of family that he left home. ... Now that he has his own income, he uses his independence to exclude his parents from his life” (*Youth* 18). In addition, the works are about a boy growing up into a man, a “separation of [a] mature self from [a] young self” (Lenta 162). According to Lenta, Coetzee uses the third person narrative to “testify to this separation” (162). Furthermore, she argues that Coetzee uses the third person voice to maintain the “everyman quality” in these works (163). Many South Africans will be able to identify themselves with someone trying to build a new life away from apartheid, away from their family’s attitude towards race and class. They will probably recognise the loneliness which Coetzee illustrates that comes along with this. The “vividness” with which Coetzee describes South Africa and London, and the “detachment which the narrator shows towards the protagonist” creates this “everyman quality” (Lenta 163). The final reason Lenta gives for Coetzee using a third person voice is that there is a great time lapse between the depicted time

and the moment of writing. In the course of time the author has changed and is not the same person as the subject anymore. To put “emphasis on [this] distance in time” Coetzee writes his autobiographies in the third person (Lenta 159). Attridge concurs and says that by using the third person, Coetzee is telling us too much time has passed; therefore the work is about another person (143). Indeed, this reason seems most probable when reading *Doubling the Point*. There, Coetzee mentions in an interview with David Atwell, that he considers there are different “versions of the self” (*Doubling the Point* 17). Further into the interview he says that as he is growing older he sees “[his] childhood [self]” as the self he “once” was (*Doubling the Point* 29). Finally, Coetzee describes the period portrayed in his autobiographical works as an “*autre*biography” (*Doubling the Point* 294). Since the word *autre* is the French word for ‘other’ Coetzee is making clear he feels an actual distance between his present self and his childhood self; he implies that he considers this period as if it was the biography of an ‘other’, rather than his own.

The previous chapter explained that the autobiographical pact is based on the truth between author and reader (Anderson 2). Breaking the pact that narrator and protagonist should be the same and choosing to write the autobiographies in the third person, makes critics question the truth-value of *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. For Lenta, Coetzee’s use of the third person should lead the reader to expect the “possibilities of the work’s being part autobiography and part fiction” (160). Klopper keeps this option open as well, since in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee says the following on the subject of truth: “[In] a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction” (17). Klopper argues that, since Coetzee claims his criticism and fiction include autobiographical elements, it is also probable that Coetzee’s autobiographical works consist of “varieties of critical fiction” (23). This view of *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* as part autobiography and part fiction is enforced by the fact that the works present facts of Coetzee’s life (Lenta 160),

yet they also contain some factual inaccuracies. For instance, Attridge mentions that in *Boyhood* Coetzee has changed some historical names (149) and in *Youth* the protagonist is not married and does not get married, even though Coetzee was married in that period of his life (160). Moreover, in *Summertime* Coetzee has died which is obviously not true. Coetzee's works seem to provide evidence for Micaela Maftai's views in *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity*. She argues that one ultimate truth cannot be expected in an autobiographical work; the pact between writer and reader should rather be based on the acceptance of there being various truths (Maftai 98). Coetzee seems to agree with this idea for in *Doubling the Point* he argues that one can never really know the entire truth (105) and that there is "no ultimate truth about oneself" (392). Furthermore, in "A Fiction of the Truth" Coetzee argues that there is a difference between historical and poetic truth:

Getting to the core of yourself may not be feasible, ... perhaps the best you can hope for will not be the history of yourself but a story about yourself, a story that will not be the truth but may have some truth-value, probably of a mixed kind – some historical, some poetic truth. A fiction of the truth in other words. ("A Fiction of the Truth" 2)

Moreover, he argues that there are several reasons why a writer would not hold himself to the pact that truth should be told in an autobiographical work. An autobiographer, for instance, may leave elements out because he is ashamed of them, simply has forgotten them or considers them unimportant ("A Fiction of the Truth" 1). Coetzee claims that there is no "truth to fact" in autobiography, the writer will always choose certain facts and leave others out (*Doubling the Point* 18). According to Klopper, that is exactly what Coetzee demonstrates in his autobiographical works. Coetzee does not provide a complete account of his life; he gives fragments and "dwells" on some more than others (Klopper 24). Coetzee maintains that authors might also break the truth pact for more "complex" and "interesting" reasons, since the writer may decide that the truth about himself can be best presented as an "[invented]"

story (“A Fiction of the Truth” 1). It is not improbable that Coetzee applied this reasoning to his autobiographical works. As Attridge explains, the possibility should be considered that Coetzee “has woven fictional episodes into a framework of autobiography”, and mixing these two elements provide his works with an “aura of truth” (161); something which the young man in *Youth* is still trying to establish in his writings (*Youth* 138). This does not mean *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are not about Coetzee’s life; as said before the works are filled with facts of his life. However, in these works Coetzee mixes the “historical” and “poetic” truths that Coetzee mentions in “A Fiction of the Truth”; making *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* an autobiographical fiction (“A Fiction of the Truth” 2).

Boyhood, Youth and Summertime

Boyhood, Youth and Summertime tell the story of autobiographical character John Coetzee up until he establishes himself as an author and publishes his first novel, *Dusklands*. *Boyhood* portrays his life from early childhood until puberty; *Youth* maintains the same style and depicts Coetzee's life at university and his move to London. The style in *Summertime*, however, differs considerably from the first two works. *Summertime* begins and ends with fragmented entries of a notebook, which the reader later finds out are from the writer discussed in the rest of the work, named Coetzee. The middle of the book consists of interviews an English biographer conducts with people he considers were important to Coetzee. Coetzee himself cannot be interviewed by Mr Vincent, the biographer, since he has died.

The previous chapter established that *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime* are autobiographical fictions. As Coetzee chose to write his autobiographies in this style the question about how the self is addressed and self-revelation arises. *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime* all deal with a protagonist who struggles with himself as a person and as the artist he longs to be. All three works discuss this problem in the themes about the protagonist's parents, his descent and identity. The connection and differences between the autobiographical characters in *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime* are explored below, based on these recurring themes throughout the works. This may present an insight into what extent Coetzee discloses parts about himself in these works.

3.1 Family in *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime*

It's a good thing that we should grow fond of the self we once were ..., we should not be too strict with our child selves. ... Nevertheless, we can't wallow in comfortable wonderment at our past. We must see what the child, still befuddled from his travels,

still trailing his clouds of glory, could not see. ... Forgivingness but also unflinchingness: that is the mixture I have in mind, if it is attainable. First the unflinchingness, then the forgivingness. (*Doubling the Point* 29)

This quote is taken from an interview conducted by David Attwell with J.M. Coetzee, a few years before *Boyhood* was published. In this work, Coetzee certainly does not flinch. He especially does not hold back on the relationship between the character portrayed in *Boyhood*, a young boy named John, and his parents. The relationship between the young boy and his father is presented as a rather troubled one. John yearns for the “strong father” that he reads about in books (*Boyhood* 46). However, his father is nothing of the sort. According to the boy, the father does not stand at the head of the household, he cannot even figure out why he is in the house at all: “[I]t is the mother and children who make up the core, while the husband is no more than an appendage, a contributor to the economy as a paying lodger might be” (*Boyhood* 12). The boy feels his father might as well be a lodger; by contrast, he sees himself as the “prince” of the house (*Boyhood* 12). His father is thus considered beneath him; he lists all the things he hates about him and the boy comes to the conclusion that he cannot be his father’s son: “He is her son, not his father’s son. He denies and detests his father” (*Boyhood* 79). This feeling of hatred only intensifies when the father gets into debt, loses his job and becomes an alcoholic. By the time the young boy turns into a teenager he calls his father “that man”, since the boy is “too full of hatred to give him a name” (*Boyhood* 156).

The relationship between the boy and his mother is more complex, for his feelings for her are rather contradictory. On the one hand, he sees his mother as a “rock” (*Boyhood* 116), someone without whom he would be nothing (*Boyhood* 35). He wants to be her everything and even tries to have her admit she loves him more than his brother (*Boyhood* 13). On the other hand, his mother’s love burdens him. For example, his mother takes him and his brother to the circus, only to find out she does not have enough money with her. She decides to buy

tickets for the boys and wait for them outside. These acts that show her “self-sacrificial love” are exactly what the boy cannot bear:

Never will he be able to pay her back all the love she pours out upon him. The thought of a lifetime bowed under a debt of love baffles and infuriates him to the point where he will not kiss her, refuses to be touched by her. When she turns away in silent hurt, he deliberately hardens his heart against her, refusing to give in. (*Boyhood* 47)

To harden himself against her, he treats her as an “inferior” as well (*Boyhood* 13). He makes fun of her when she wants to ride a bike (*Boyhood* 13), calls her “stupid” (*Boyhood* 105), and makes hurtful remarks towards her: “[H]e needs to say things like this to his mother, needs to watch her face tighten in hurt and outrage. How much more must he say before she will at last round on him and tell him to be quiet?” (*Boyhood* 163). His mother, however, never tells him to be quiet and continues to love him, in spite of his behaviour: “his mother loves him . . . , that is the problem” (*Boyhood* 122).

In *Youth* the autobiographical character is still named John Coetzee. However, the young boy has grown up into a young adolescent; a student living on his own. He left home to “escape the oppressiveness of family” and he is now trying to “exclude his parents from his life” (*Youth* 18). However, this plan does not entirely work out for his mother writes him a letter or sends him a package each week (*Youth* 98). He is annoyed by this, since he wants to forget them and be free, yet “as long as she is alive, his life is not his own” (*Youth* 99).

In *Boyhood* and *Youth* the protagonist does not show any remorse about how he treats his parents and since the author has chosen to write the works in the third person the reader does not get an idea of how the writer now feels about the boy’s behaviour. For Derek Attridge, Coetzee does not want to confess his actions and look back on them; he would rather leave the reader to “speculate on the possible effects upon the author” (154-155). However, in *Summertime* the reader does get an idea about the feelings towards his parents

later in life. *Summertime* is set in the 1970s, when the autobiographical character John Coetzee is in his thirties and he is living with his father again. John's mother has passed away, yet John does not choose the freedom he longed for in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Instead, he chooses to take care of his father, for "he needs looking after" (*Summertime* 14). Remarkably, in *Summertime* the relationship with his father is not described as hateful anymore. Instead John writes in his notebook about the "(overriding) similarities" (*Summertime* 6). In addition, the first person interviewed, John's former lover Julia, explains that John and his father were alike: "They were both loners. Socially inept. Repressed, in the wider sense of the word" (*Summertime* 20). At the end of the book, the reader finally gets to know that over the course of the years John has become milder in his feelings for his father and regrets how he has treated him:

Above all he wanted his father to forgive him. *Forgive me!* he wanted to say to his father. *Forgive you? Heavens, what is there to forgive?* he wanted to hear his father reply. Upon which, if he could summon up the courage, he would at last make full confession: *Forgive me for deliberately and with malice aforethought scratching your Tebaldi record. And for more besides, so much more that the recital would take all day. For countless acts of meanness. For the meanness of heart in which those acts originated. In sum, for all I have done since the day I was born, and with such success, to make your life a misery.* (*Summertime* 250)

3.2 Search for identity in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*

The discussion about any identity is a complex one, let alone that of the South African identity, seeing as the country's entangled history makes it a particularly complicated one. As J.U. Jacobs explains in "(N)either Afrikaner (n)or English: Cultural Cross-Over in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*", when seeking to define the South African national identity, there is a

need to “acknowledge the deep racial, cultural and linguistic divisions between, and also, within groups as a result of the country’s colonial and apartheid history” (40). As a result of this complex situation, Jacobs chooses Leon de Kock’s metaphor to look at South African identity. This metaphor is that of a seam, which represents the “site of both difference and convergence” that is present within the South African identity (Jacobs 40). In *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* the autobiographical characters struggle with this seam, in order to discover John’s identity. As Jacobs states, in Coetzee’s autobiographical fictions the subject’s search for identity is problematic and full of “unravelling contradictions in the context of a culturally racially conflicted society” (43). This feeling of contradiction becomes immediately apparent in *Boyhood*. The young boy explains that his family “‘is’ nothing” even though they live in South Africa they cannot be considered as “proper South African” (*Boyhood* 18). This “set[s] him apart” from the other boys (*Boyhood* 7), something which he does not want, for he wants to be normal (*Boyhood* 9). At school he is confronted with being different when the teacher asks him what his religion is. Since his family is not religious he panics, not knowing which religions there are to choose from and what would be the “right answer” (*Boyhood* 18). After saying he is a Roman Catholic he soon finds out he has “made a mistake,” for all the other boys are Christian and bully him (*Boyhood* 19). Moreover, the difference is emphasised when the Christian boys go off to assembly and he has to stay behind: “Twice a week the separation of sheep from goats is repeated” (*Boyhood* 19).

The young boy blames his parents for not fitting in within a group: “he is angry with his mother for not [making] them live a normal life” (*Boyhood* 8). The boy has an Afrikaans surname, however his parents decided to bring up their children speaking English as their first language (*Boyhood* 124). According to Lenta, by making this choice his parents force the boy “to define himself by difference, not as an Afrikaner child [but] as an outsider to all groups” (165). Indeed, the young boy does not pass as “truly English” and his surname and white skin

labels him as Afrikaans (*Boyhood* 129). However, he does not feel Afrikaans, the thought of being an “Afrikaans boy makes him quail” (*Boyhood* 126). Klopper argues that the boy’s struggle with being Afrikaans or English is reflected in his attitude towards the two languages (25-26). On the one hand the boy is extremely proud of being so good at English in school, therefore he could never “pass for an Afrikaner” (*Boyhood* 124). Moreover, he sees the Afrikaans language as “filthy” (*Boyhood* 57) and he is thankful he does not have to speak it “like a whipped slave” (*Boyhood* 49). On the other hand, he speaks Afrikaans with his relatives and when he does “all complications of life seem suddenly to fall away” (*Boyhood* 125). Being in a constant conflict with these two identities he is most happy at the Voëlfontein farm in the Karoo, when a mix of English and Afrikaans is spoken among his family: “he drinks in the happy, slapdash mixture of English and Afrikaans” (*Boyhood* 81). Since the boy does not feel he belongs to any distinct group in a country which is built on labelling people, he feels lost and “whoever the true ‘I’ is that ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood, is not being allowed to be born, is being kept stunted” (*Boyhood* 140).

In *Youth*, the autobiographical character John has moved away from his small hometown Worcester; and the sense of being put in a box and labelled as Afrikaans is felt by him more and more acutely. Laws that suppress the blacks even more are passed and in response parties like the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC) march through Cape Town chanting: “Drive the whites into the sea” (*Youth* 37-38). The laws “sicken” him. However, since he is white he is considered to be in the same box as the government (*Youth* 37). Therefore, he decides to “flee” and leaves for London (*Youth* 40). Initially, when John arrives in London he is relieved to have left South Africa; he hopes he can now be “free of politics” (*Youth* 85) and “leave his South African self behind” (*Youth* 62). However, he soon finds out that he cannot escape his background. J.M. Coetzee explains in *Doubling the Point*: “I had left South Africa to be part of a wider world. But I discovered that

my novelty value was that I came from Africa” (336). Indeed his South African heritage keeps haunting him in London:

It is not a good time to be a South African in London. ... They would be content if South Africa would quietly vanish over the horizon. They certainly do not want forlorn South African whites cluttering their doorstep like orphans in search of parents. (*Youth* 86-87)

Consequently, the people in London do not accept him, for he does not “belong there” (*Youth* 103) and begins to feel “miserable” (*Youth* 47) surrounded by “loneliness” (*Youth* 52).

Finally, in the British Museum John discovers *Watt* by Beckett, a fellow exile of sorts, and relishes in the freedom language provides. Moreover, he begins to read about South Africa and comes to find out that it is “his country, the country of his heart” (*Youth* 137).

While in *Youth* John begins to warm up to the idea of having South Africa as a cultural identity, in *Summertime* he has returned to South Africa and the struggle between identities seems worse than ever. *Summertime* covers a period in the 1970s, the “heyday of apartheid” (*Summertime* 21). Although he wants to “live outside politics” (*Summertime* 12), he is white, so he cannot escape politics and feels “soiled” (*Summertime* 4). In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee explains: “The masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born in to the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with, ... you cannot resign the caste” (96). Nevertheless, John does try to escape the caste and wants to prove he is not like other white people by doing all manual labour himself: “What he finds himself doing is what people like him should have been doing ever since 1652, namely his own dirty work” (*Summertime* 7). However, by doing so he does not lose his white skin or get accepted by black people, rather he places himself outside the group of Afrikaners: “For a white man to do manual labour, unskilled labour, ... work you paid

someone else to do, ... it certainly let the side down, if you know what I mean" (*Summertime* 23).

Furthermore, he does not fit in with his family anymore. He tries to speak Afrikaans with them, however, his "Afrikaans is halting" and he mixes it with English words (*Summertime* 93). When he is around his relatives he talks about himself as being an Afrikaner, yet his cousin Margot "does not know many real [egte] Afrikaners who would accept him as one of the tribe" (*Summertime* 95; word in square brackets in the original). More and more, John gets stuck between identities and, as Jacobs argues, does not seem to get "hitched together" as a seam (Jacobs 50). In the last interview with Sophie, an ex-colleague and former lover, it becomes clear that John had accepted he did not belong in any set identity group: "He longed for the day when everyone in South Africa would call themselves nothing" (*Summertime* 233). The loss of identity as it is portrayed in *Summertime* is precisely what Coetzee describes when in *Doubling the Point* he talks about his own identity:

No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner. ... I am one of many people in this country who have become detached from their ethnic roots, whether those roots were in Dutch South Africa or Indonesia or Britain or Greece or wherever, and have joined a pool of no recognizable *ethnos* whose language of exchange is English. ... And, as the pool has no discernible *ethnos*, so one day I hope it will have no predominant color, as more "people of color" drift into it. A pool, I would hope then, in which differences wash away. (*Doubling the Point* 341-342)

Elizabeth Costello and Her Creator

J.M. Coetzee is a writer who “disrupts conventional notions of genres” (Wright 196). In *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime* for example, Coetzee plays with the boundaries of autobiography. The works present the protagonist ‘Coetzee’ in the third person, a device which allows the author to distance himself from the story. In *J.M. Coetzee and the Public Intellectual*, Jane Poyner points out that by writing in the third person Coetzee “denies responsibility for the protagonist’s actions” (4). Even though she later affirms that in fiction readers should never associate the author with the character he or she created, Poyner admits that Coetzee “resembles many of the fictional characters he portrays” (5). Especially in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) the readers gets the feeling, in terms of ‘author-character relationship’, that the relationship between the author and his character Elizabeth Costello is an extremely close one. The book consists of a collection of lectures once given by Coetzee. In them, Coetzee again disrupts boundaries, for he gives the audience a fictional story with Elizabeth Costello as the protagonist. According to Laura Wright in “A Feminist-Vegetarian Defense of Elizabeth Costello: A Rant from an Ethical Academic on J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*”, because the texts were once delivered as lectures the reader starts to wonder if these texts are really works of fiction or if it is Coetzee’s “argumentative truth presented in the guise of an analysis of the sympathetic imagination” (196). This question becomes even more difficult to answer when reading Roy Robins sum up the similarities between author and character in his article “Alter Ego”:

Costello and her creator [J.M. Coetzee] have much in common: both reside in Australia (Coetzee emigrated from South Africa in 2002), both are vegetarians, both are atheists, both are classicists, both speak German and have considered at one time or another, becoming professional translators. Costello’s son, John, has the same first

name as Coetzee, and the author's last name is embedded in that of the protagonist Elizabeth Costello. (50)

This chapter discusses why some critics consider the character Elizabeth Costello as Coetzee's alter ego, paying close attention to how the two voice their opinions, the difference in the level of intensity between them and what Coetzee seems to be accomplishing with this. Furthermore, this chapter analyses how the character of Elizabeth Costello has changed from its appearance in *Elizabeth Costello* to its recurrence in Coetzee's novel *Slow Man*, published two years after *Elizabeth Costello*; and what her function in the latter work seems to be.

4.1 Coetzee and Costello

To the outside world J.M. Coetzee is known as a serious and reserved person who does not convey his opinions easily, both in his private and public life. In a profile on Coetzee, the author Rian Malan is quoted: "A colleague who has worked with him for more than a decade claims to have seen him laugh just once. An acquaintance has attended several dinner parties where Coetzee has uttered not a single word" ("The New Statesman Profile – J.M. Coetzee"). In addition, Coetzee rarely gives interviews or talks to the media and, on the rare occasion when he does, his replies are "characterized by his evasiveness and circumspection" and he can make the "... questions of his interviewer look vaguely ridiculous" (Poyner 4). Coetzee is aware of his reputation. In *Doubling the Point*, he says that the outside world sees him as an "evasive, arrogant, generally unpleasant customer" (65) as a result of how he acts in interviews. He explains his behaviour by the fact that he never wanted to be a "public figure," whose "private space" got disrupted by journalists (*Doubling the Point* 65). Furthermore, Coetzee compares an interview to a "courtroom interrogation" in which a journalist expects him to share "truths unknown to his waking self" (*Doubling the Point* 65). Coetzee, on the other hand, feels truth lies in writing rather than in speech (*Doubling the Point* 65-66).

Coetzee is of the opinion that in contrast to an interview writing is not a “simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it” (*Doubling the Point* 18).

Rather, writing is a process which takes time, it will reveal itself to the writer and can be quite different from what the writer thought he wanted to say: “Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing” (*Doubling the Point* 18).

Much like Coetzee, his character Elizabeth Costello is also seen as someone to whom other characters find it difficult to get close. Even her own son, John, has difficulties with this. When John looks back on his childhood he remembers feeling “lonely and unloved” (*Elizabeth Costello* 4). Even though as an adult he has respect for her as an author, he still cannot see her as a lovable person. When he expresses his feelings about his mother he struggles with this fact. John makes it clear he cannot compare her with a predator, like a shark; nevertheless, he cannot see her as a seal either, for she is “not amiable enough for that” (*Elizabeth Costello* 5). He rather thinks of his mother as a cat, though not a cuddly one; he sees her as “[o]ne of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim and, across the torn-open belly, give you a cold stare” (*Elizabeth Costello* 5). Furthermore, similar to Coetzee, Elizabeth is not extremely fond of the media and does not like going to public meetings either. Even though she feels too tired and wants to “keep out of the limelight” (*Elizabeth Costello* 157), *Elizabeth Costello* consists almost entirely of Elizabeth giving interviews and public speeches. During these events Costello is, unlike Coetzee, unafraid to show her opinions and sometimes even takes up controversial positions. Since the Elizabeth Costello texts stem from an array of lectures on ethical issues which Coetzee gave in the US, it becomes clouded whose opinions Coetzee actually portrays. Poyner, for instance, considers Costello as Coetzee’s “alter ego” and, since he performed his lectures as Costello, it is difficult for critics to “untangle Coetzee’s and Costello’s points of view” (2). Wright agrees and explains that when Coetzee gave the lecture *The Lives of Animals* at Princeton University,

literary critics either stated “[Elizabeth Costello] is not Coetzee, or they conflate[d] author and character, attributing [the arguments] not to Costello but to Coetzee” (196). Wright maintains that it is the fact that Coetzee performed Elizabeth Costello which makes the separation between the two so challenging. She claims that a speech is a “bodily act” which can never be fully separated from the “force of the performative” (199). According to Lucy Graham in “Textual Transvestism: The Female Voices of J.M. Coetzee”, it is the unclear boundary between Coetzee’s and Costello’s opinions which made the *Times Literary Supplement* feature a cartoon of Coetzee standing at a lectern dressed as Elizabeth Costello, “encapsulating the notion of Costello as [an] alter ego” (217). Animal-rights philosopher Peter Singer struggles with the fact that Coetzee might use Costello as an alter ego, for it makes it uncertain if one is reading Costello’s or Coetzee’s thoughts. After reading *The Lives of Animals*³, Singer expresses his confusion over Coetzee’s lecture. Singer describes the lecture as a “serious problem” for him since he cannot work out what is truth and what is fiction (*The Lives of Animals* 85). Therefore, he constantly asks himself: “[A]re they Coetzee’s arguments?” (*The Lives of Animals* 91).

Because it is unclear whose opinions are being read in *Elizabeth Costello*, the reader is left wondering why Coetzee would use such an unconventional way for a lecture. Poyner asks herself if Coetzee wants “to have his cake and eat it?” (5), for on the one hand Coetzee shies away from publicity yet with his Costello lectures he “makes controversial public interventions” (5). They can indeed be considered controversial. Costello sometimes expresses rather extreme opinions and she does this in such a persistent way to get the message across that some people see her as a “preacher” who wants to “foist her preferences on to other people” (*Elizabeth Costello* 113). For instance, in the chapter “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals” Costello is asked to give a speech at a formal

³ In 2003 *Elizabeth Costello* was published, however, Coetzee’s lecture “The Lives of Animals” had previously been published in 2001.

dinner at the college where her son teaches, and she clearly does not tone down her opinion when she gives a speech on the treatment of animals. She even stresses her passion for this topic by beginning her speech saying she is an old lady and, therefore, says what she means (*Elizabeth Costello* 62). Indeed, in no way does she try to be politically correct and she speaks her mind on the subject of animals by comparing the slaughtering of animals in modern time to the Holocaust:

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbit, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them. (*Elizabeth Costello* 65)

Although Coetzee is a vegetarian and supports the animal-rights movement, he has never made such controversial statements, at least none which have been documented. In the book, Costello not only addresses animal-rights in an unconventional way, other lectures are dedicated to the discussion of the humanities in South Africa and theorizing realism, all subjects which Poyner explains are of great concern to Coetzee as well. The similarities between Costello and Coetzee and the fact that it is Coetzee who gave the lectures, may suggest that Coetzee uses Costello as a spokesperson for his feelings on these topics and at the same time allows him to stay clear from critique since the opinions are voiced by a fictional character and not himself. As Poyner explains: “She enables him to have his say on certain matters” (37). However, the extent to which Costello voices Coetzee’s views cannot be ascertained. Moreover, Costello’s opinions are fiercely challenged by other characters, especially by her sister Blanche, who repeatedly tells Costello during discussions that she is “missing the point”, and her daughter-in-law Norma (*Elizabeth Costello* 131-132). The latter is frustrated by Costello’s beliefs on vegetarianism and the fact that Costello refuses to eat at a

table when meat is served, forcing her to serve the children's dinner at a separate table in a separate room (*Elizabeth Costello* 60). Therefore, Norma "sighs" and "snorts" during Costello's lecture on animals (*Elizabeth Costello* 77). Afterwards she cannot keep her opinion to herself and challenges Costello's belief while they are surrounded by important people from the university:

'So perhaps it's just a matter of what you learned at home, of what your mother told you was OK to eat and what not.' 'What was clean to eat and what was not,' his mother murmurs. 'And maybe' – now Norma is going too far, he thinks . . . , – 'the whole notion of cleanness versus uncleanness has a completely different function, namely, to enable certain groups to self-define themselves, negatively, as elite, as elected. We are the people who abstain from A or B or C, and by that power of abstinence we mark ourselves off as superior: as a superior caste within society, for instance. Like the Brahmins.' There is a silence. 'The ban on meat that you get in vegetarianism is only an extreme form of dietary ban,' Norma presses on; 'and a dietary ban is a quick, simple way for an elite group to define itself. Other people's table habit are unclean, we can't eat or drink with them.' (*Elizabeth Costello* 87)

According to Margaret Lenta in "Coetzee and Costello: Two Artists Abroad", the opinions of other characters must be considered as "schemes contemplated by Coetzee" (117). It could be argued that Coetzee is in debate with his own views and the Costello texts are the product of these conversations. In "As a Woman Grows Older", a short story that is not included in the novel, Costello admits that she needs other people for the sake of argument; otherwise she only has these kinds of arguments in her head ("As a Woman Grows Older"). Lenta claims that this must be "part of the answer" to the question of which position Coetzee holds in the texts: "Coetzee has himself faced the questions which Costello confronts and to which she and others offer or imply answers" (117). In addition, it was Coetzee himself who consciously

decided to divide the novel in chapters using the word ‘lessons’ instead of simply using ‘chapters’, which implies that the texts symbolise Coetzee’s own learning process or aim to teach the reader.

In light of this argument, the position of Costello’s son, whose name, interestingly enough, is John, could be wondered about. As mentioned above, John is not extremely close to his mother. When Costello expresses her opinions on the treatment of animals, John questions why she cannot just “stay home and open [her house] to her cats? ... Why can she not be an ordinary old woman?” (*Elizabeth Costello* 83). Moreover, when John observes his mother sleeping he concludes he cannot be his mother’s son: “No he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it” (*Elizabeth Costello* 33-34). Graham states that the relationship between the characters Costello and John can be read in terms of Coetzee “splitting authorial identity, between the author figured by Costello ... and the man, John” (219-220). She maintains that the relationship between Costello and her son represents John expressing his refusal of what “J.M. Coetzee, the author and public figure, has made of [John, the man]” (Graham 220). Nevertheless, John does not get into discussions with his mother or tries to intervene when his wife does. In this perception John represents Coetzee the person who does not enter public discussions. Similar to Coetzee the person, John is a character who seems to have “no opinions” (*Elizabeth Costello* 61). However, the women in the story, as Coetzee’s critics in real life, do want John to take part in the dialogues: “it is time for him, the good son, to speak”; however, just like Coetzee, “[John] does not” (*Elizabeth Costello* 88). It is only in Coetzee’s role as an author that he addresses certain issues as represented by the fictional character Elizabeth Costello.

4.2 *Slow Man*

Two years after *Elizabeth Costello* was published, Coetzee presented the novel *Slow Man*, the first novel he wrote after his move to Australia. The story is about an older man, Paul Rayment, who has a cycling accident that results in the amputation of his leg. Out of nowhere, Elizabeth Costello arrives on Rayment's doorstep and comes to play a major part in his life, and in the novel. It is striking that in *Slow Man* Costello seems to have undergone a change and is no longer the same person as in *Elizabeth Costello*. As mentioned above, in Coetzee's previous work Costello was portrayed as a grim character. However, in *Slow Man* it is Paul Rayment who is the reserved character and not Costello. Rayment is a retired, divorced man in his sixties, who has no children and hardly any friends. After his accident and the amputation Rayment enters in an even bigger isolation, for he decides not to get a prosthesis, and to take care of himself. This results in him hardly ever going outside. In addition, he does not accept any help or companionship from his friends since he does not want to be seen in his "new, curtailed, humiliating, and humiliated state" (*Slow Man* 14). This cuts him off from the outside world even more. Next to Rayment, Costello appears to be the sociable person who has no problem connecting to people. For example, Rayment's nurse, Marijana, and her family immediately accept Costello and take a liking to her. It is Costello, for instance, who takes care of Drago, Marijana's son, when he is wandering the streets. Even though Rayment makes an effort for Marijana's children to like him as well, they distrust his intentions and take advantage of him:

When he invited Drago to stay, there was, behind the invitation, nothing that he would deem – he picks up the primly disapproving word of the day, weighs it, tests it – *inappropriate*. [But], Drago brings in friends; soon the flat has become as noisy and confused as a railway station. The kitchen is a mess of take-away cartons and dirty plates; the bathroom is forever occupied. None of the quiet growth in intimacy that he

had looked forward to has come about. In fact, he feels that Drago is pushing him away. (*Slow Man* 180)

Despite Costello being depicted in this novel as a more amiable character, she has not lost her will to impose her opinion on others. From the moment she walks through Rayment's door she tries to dictate his life: "And here she is preaching to him, telling him how to run his life!" (*Slow Man* 82). Which bring us to the question: why does Elizabeth Costello come back in this novel? In the article "Coetzee's Estrangement," David Attwell argues that, by bringing Costello into the story, Coetzee is exploring the "relationship between authorship and its creations" (7). In "She's Back," John Banville agrees and points out that Coetzee uses Costello as a literary effect to bring himself into the story: "Coetzee [brings] himself into the book in the shape of a dowdy, aging Australian female who takes over and directs the plot" (Banville 33). It is an effect which Coetzee does not seem to conceal. For instance, she knows everything about each character in the novel and even knows what they are thinking:

'Do you happen to know a woman named Elizabeth Costello, an elderly woman, a professional writer?' Jokić shakes his head. 'Because she seems to know you. She told me some of the same history you have just been telling me – how you and Marijana met, what the two of you did in Dubrovnik, and so forth.' (*Slow Man* 145)

Moreover, when Rayment first meets Costello she recites the thoughts Rayment had during the crash, which are identical to the opening lines of the book:

'Do you know what I asked myself when I heard those words for the first time, Mr Rayment? I asked myself, *Why do I need this man?* Why not let him be, coasting along peacefully on his bicycle ...? Who is Paul Rayment to me?' (*Slow Man* 81).

According to Attwell, the answer to Costello's questions is that Coetzee needs her to take over control and let Paul Rayment be "written into being by Elizabeth Costello" (7). Since

Rayment gets isolated after the amputation, he literally turns into a slow character, or a “tortoise”, as Costello calls him (*Slow Man* 228). Coetzee needs Costello to make Rayment “push the mortal envelope” (*Slow Man* 83). Or as Banville states, Coetzee needs Costello to “bring [Rayment] to life” (Banville 33), to lead him down the path Coetzee wants him to go:

... you sniff the air for ages before you stick your head out. Because every blessed step costs such an effort. I am not asking you to become a hare, Paul. I merely plead that you look into your heart and see whether you cannot find means *within* your tortoise character, *within* your tortoise variety of passion, of accelerating your wooing of Marijana ... So that someone might *want* to put you in a book. Someone, anyone – not just me. So that you may be *worth* putting in a book. (*Slow Man* 228-229)

However, Rayment does not surrender to Costello without a fight; at one point he even evicts her from his home: “I am not under your control, not in any sense of the word, and I am going to prove it. I request you to kindly return my key – a key you took without permission – and leave my flat and not come back” (*Slow Man* 129). Costello leaves, but is back in the house within twenty-four hours, proving to Rayment he has no say in the matter: “she issues instructions, [he] follows” (*Slow Man* 111).

Conclusion

The genre of autobiography appears to be very difficult to pin down. Scholars constantly adapt the genre to new insights and developments. Philippe Lejeune in *On Autobiography* tries to present a transparent definition of the genre, by arguing that the autobiography is characterized by an autobiographical pact in which the “author, the narrator and the protagonist must be identical”, and have one and the same identity (Lejeune 4). In addition, the reader should be able to rely on the author of an autobiography to tell the truth about (the identity of) the protagonist (12).

However, various scholars have difficulties with Lejeune’s approach to autobiography. In *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity* Micaela Maftei points out there cannot be just one single and stable identity or truth. For instance, people have different roles in their lives, those of colleague, friend, husband et cetera; roles that change constantly. Moreover, when writing an autobiography time has passed between the depicted event and the moment of writing. Thus, it is unlikely for the author to have the exact same identity as the protagonist and, therefore, the author has to work with multiple identities in order to create an autobiography (Maftei 60). The same goes for the perception of truth in an autobiography. The author’s view of what and how something happened in the past might be altered by the passing of time and influenced by others. An autobiography cannot reflect a complete true self, for it is the author’s perception of himself at that time. Therefore, the understanding between reader and author should be based on the acceptance that there are various truths (Maftei 98).

This thesis has shown that *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* by J.M. Coetzee play with autobiographical identity and truth. By introducing a third person narrator instead of the first person that is more frequently used in autobiography, Coetzee immediately creates a distance from the work, emphasising that in the course of time the author has changed and is

not the same person as the protagonist anymore. In addition, Coetzee choosing the third person may make readers question if they are reading a true autobiography. However, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are perfect examples of how Coetzee understands the concept of truth, for in “A Fiction of the Truth” he establishes that he considers there to be a “historical” and “poetic” truth, presenting a mix of these truths in his own autobiographical works (“A Fiction of the Truth” 2).

Indeed, as Dirk Klopper states, in the three novels Coetzee does not provide a complete account of his life but only fragments, and “dwells” on some more than others (Klopper 24). Two recurring themes on which Coetzee dwells in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are family and the search for identity; something which the autobiographical character, John, struggles with growing up as a white South African male. These themes give an insight into J.M. Coetzee’s personal struggles as a boy and young man. Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* describe John’s relationship with his parents and the yearning to find an identity in which he feels comfortable. In *Youth*, John, being in his early twenties, tries to break free from his smothering family and complicated South African identity by moving to England. His attempt is unsuccessful when he has to conclude that he is unable to escape either of them. It is in *Summertime* that John becomes milder on both themes. Being in his thirties he now recognizes the similarities between him and his parents and regrets his “meanness” towards them (*Summertime* 250). Concerning identity John seems to have lost the urge to belong to a group and accepts that he does not fit into any fixed identity. John has joined the “pool of no recognizable *ethnos*”, something which Coetzee himself describes to be a part of in an interview with David Attwell (*Doubling the Point* 341).

In the light of autobiographical boundaries, Coetzee’s relationship with the character Elizabeth Costello has been shown to be a complicated one. Coetzee confused his audience when he introduced the character Elizabeth Costello, with whom he shares many similarities.

The character was first used when Coetzee gave a lecture and presented a fictional story regarding Elizabeth Costello. The confusion grew when it turned out the texts were about how Costello gives lectures on, or has discussions about, ethical subjects. Since it is Coetzee himself that performed these texts, the boundary between Coetzee and Costello's opinions become unclear. Roy Robins and Jane Poyner, for example, therefore regard Costello as Coetzee's 'alter ego'. By using Costello Coetzee can express certain opinions, while at the same time accomplishing to stay away from critique. However, it remains uncertain if Costello is voicing Coetzee's views, since there are also a few characters that challenge her arguments. During the discussions between the characters it seems the reader is witnessing Coetzee's own learning process. The character that does not take part in these discussions, however, is Costello's son, John. He stays on the sidelines and claims he "has no opinion" (*Elizabeth Costello* 61). Similar to J.M. Coetzee, John refuses to enter into the discussion, even though others want him to do so.

Due to practical constraints, this study does not include J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. For further research on Coetzee's usage of autobiographical characters it might be interesting to take this title into consideration since the protagonist, called señor C, bears many similarities with the author. Moreover, the present study points out that some scholars are of the opinion that Coetzee resembles many more of his fictional characters. For additional investigations one can look at other protagonist(s) with whom Coetzee might have a significant autobiographical relationship.

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