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“All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is  
autobiography”

Autobiography and the Theme of Otherness in J.M. Coetzee’s

*Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*

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### Abstract

*Boyhood: Scenes from provincial life* by J.M. Coetzee tells the story about John Coetzee from the age of ten until thirteen. Since many details in the story point to the idea that the protagonist might be the author, it is often said to be an autobiography. However, it is not a conventional one. A third person narrator tells the story in the present tense, which is rather different from the autobiography's conventional first person narrator speaking in the past tense. The definition used in order to define the genre to which *Boyhood* belongs is Lejeune's criterion author=narrator=protagonist. According to this theory, *Boyhood* is a biography. However, Lejeune does not take the connection author=protagonist into consideration, but focuses only on the connection narrator=protagonist. Thus an additional description of the text's generic style must be used.

Furthermore, the theme of otherness is analysed. A close reading of the novel shows that the protagonist often feels different from his family and peers. He makes a distinction between two kinds of different – a good and a bad kind. The good means that he is better than his peers, and the bad kind means that he has failed to accomplish something he thinks is important.

Although the author wrote the story about his boyhood in a rather unconventional style and the protagonist perceives himself as different, the otherness in the two do not parallel each other. What they might have in common is perfectionism. Thus, the theme of otherness is only to be found in the protagonist, whereas the author's style of writing is merely unconventional.

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## 1. Introduction

*Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, henceforth referred to as *Boyhood*, is the story about John Coetzee, a South African boy, whom the reader can follow from the age of ten until thirteen. The story is written by J. M. Coetzee, a South African writer, born in 1940 and the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2003. When the author and the protagonist are presented in this way, it becomes obvious that the two are strongly connected. In fact, *Boyhood* is said to be Coetzee's autobiography. The book is about his life as a young boy, thus it has some autobiographical traits. However, it is not a traditional autobiography when read from a narratological point of view. Told by a third person narrator in the present tense, this story of Coetzee's life differs notably from the majority of other autobiographies. In the same way, the protagonist of *Boyhood* perceives himself as alienated from the other boys his age, as well as from other people in general. He, too, is an outsider compared to the rest of the boys of his age in his neighbourhood. John, the character's, way of being different could be reflected in the way Coetzee, the writer, chooses to narrate his autobiography in an unconventional way.

The story takes place in the small city of Worcester, outside of Cape Town, in the 1950's. John Coetzee is ten years old and lives with his family: his father, his mother and his younger brother. Although the family is an Afrikaner one, the children are taught to speak English as their first language. John attends an English school, but speaks Afrikaans when conversing with Afrikaner people. He is a very determined young boy, with strong likes and dislikes. It appears as if he is not a very popular, or even liked, boy, with the exception of his mother, who loves him very much. John has a very complex relation to both his parents: the father is presented as an ordinary man, but rather absent which leads to a weakened bond to his eldest son. The mother, on the other hand, has a very strong bond to John, and the text tells how awkward this is to him. He is about to break free and become fully separated from his mother, as he suspects that her love will engulf him. However, he does not seem to be completely ready to fully separate himself from his mother.

There has already been research made on the topic of autobiography and *Boyhood*. The striking difference of this book might develop a reaction from the reader; either a delighted reaction or one of dislike. The unconventional style leads to difficulties in placing the book in one single genre. This essay will aim to sort out and explain how *Boyhood* fits in and does not fit in to the genre of autobiography, and also how the otherness of the book parallels the otherness of the protagonist. In order to separate the protagonist and author by name, I will henceforth call the protagonist John and the author will be referred to as Coetzee.

## 1.1 Aim and Approach

As previously stated, *Boyhood* is a book with autobiographical traits when it comes to the content. It does not, however, follow the same narratological pattern as the majority of autobiographies. When put into the genre of autobiography, it becomes the odd man out. Within the narration, the protagonist – John – reveals his difference from the people in his surroundings. The theme of alienation and being an outsider is present on two levels: in the character and in the narratological structure. An analysis of how “different” is portrayed in this story will be presented. Also, the breaking of traditions and crossing the borders to the unconventional will be discussed, both concerning John, the character and how *Boyhood* is written differently from traditional autobiographies. The aim of this essay is to look into how the theme of being an outsider is reflected in the relation between author and character.

In order to find out what is unconventional, one has to define conventional as well, both concerning the genre of autobiography and the behaviour of the protagonist’s peers. Concerning the genre, there are some conventions of how a traditional autobiography is written. These conventions will serve as the norm of autobiographical writing. On the other hand, it is not very easy to define conventional behaviour when it comes to people. The protagonist claims to be different from his peers, and the portraying of this claim and evidence of it will be mediated. I will try to find a link between the otherness in Coetzee’s writing and John’s perception of himself compared to other boys.

The theme of alienation as it is portrayed by John, the character, will be retrieved with the help of an analysis of the novel. The rules of a conventional autobiography will be presented, with a comparison to the narratological structures used by Coetzee. Here it will become clear to what degree *Boyhood* is an autobiography, judging only by narratological aspects. In order to have a better understanding of narratology, some basic facts about it will be presented.

Thus, this essay will first look into the generic conventions of autobiography, with a few explanations of important narratological terms. After that, it will be investigated how Coetzee follows or breaks these rules when writing *Boyhood*. The last part will state how the protagonist states his role as an outsider and how that is connected to Coetzee’s way of writing an unconventional autobiography and thus differs from traditional autobiographers.

## 1.2 Previous Research

The primary source of this essay is *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* by J. M. Coetzee, published by Vintage, London in 1998. Furthermore, I will use Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* from 1989 considering the theoretical chapter about autobiography and narratology.

As a complement to this, *Autobiography* (2001) by Linda Anderson will be used. This book discusses autobiography as a genre, but also looks into how different well-known autobiographies fit into this description of the genre. I will use it to prove the important connection between author and protagonist. Along with Lejeune's book, it will provide information about the rules of autobiographical writing. A third source treating autobiography is the article by Leigh Gilmore: "The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre", which is found in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, edited by Ashley, Gilmore and Peters, in 1994. This article deals with how postmodernism and autobiography are connected, and also how autobiography is used as a genre. The latter theme will be useful in my essay. All three books will be used to pinpoint the conventions of autobiography in distinction to other closely related genres, such as memoirs or biography.

*Memory, Narrative, Identity* by Nicola King treats different ways of telling memories. This book, which was published in 2000, has the sub-heading: *Remembering the Self*. This is exactly what autobiographical writing is about, but King does not treat this sort of writing as a genre, but investigates the connection between personal memories and narrative as such. King's theory will provide examples and important ideas about truth and how truth and autobiography are connected.

In order to present the theory of narratology, I will use H. Porter Abbot's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2002, which gives a brief overview of narrative structures. Especially useful will be the two chapters about "Narration" and "Character and self in narrative". This book explains what narrative is, how it is constructed and how it changes when the context in which it is written changes. This book will mainly be used as the base of my brief explanation of certain narratological tools and terms which will be discussed in this essay.

The most common theme about *Boyhood* is the one of autobiography. Several scholarly articles treat this subject with different conclusions. Derek Attridge has written "J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, Confession, and Truth". This article treats the narrative of the story, compares it to other novels by the same author and how it affects the credibility of the narrator and its version of the truth. Attridge suggests that this form of narrative is used to

distance the author from the narrator, and by that increase the credibility as a narrator. This article will be used both in order to find out possible reasons for why Coetzee chose to write the story of his childhood in an unconventional style, as well as point out how the reader must be aware of the fact that it is the subjective truth of the ten-year-old protagonist which is told in *Boyhood*.

Sheila Collingwood-Whittick's article "Autobiography as *Autrebiography*: the Fictionalisation of the Self in J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*" discusses how *Boyhood* is narrated and especially to what genre it can be allotted. The term *autrebiography*, with its French prefix meaning "other", implies that it tells someone else's story, but seems to merely be a play with words, because of its similarity to the word "autobiography". According to Derek Attridge, Coetzee himself uses the word *autrebiography* about his two novels *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Collingwood-Whittick also writes about the consequences of Coetzee's choice of narrative, and what reasons may have lead to the choice. She states that this form of narrative in an autobiography is rare. According to Collingwood-Whittick, only two other examples are provided in Lejeune's *The Autobiographical Pact*. Nevertheless, she provides a number of suggestions to why the third person narrator is used and what consequences it has. For instance, she believes that it separates and decreases the responsibility of the author. In order to categorize *Boyhood* and state some of the problems with autobiographical writing, Collingwood-Whittick's article will serve as a source of stating conventions of genres closely related to autobiography, in particular *autrebiography*. This is not an established genre, but since Coetzee himself used it to describe *Boyhood*, it will be presented in this essay.

*Autrebiography* is also treated in Margaret Lenta's article "*Autrebiography*: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*". The theme of separation is the starting point, and from that, Lenta studies how the relation author/narrator is separated, as well as how Coetzee separates himself and his autobiographical writing from those written according to tradition. This article will be particularly useful in order to pinpoint Coetzee's breaking of generic conventions.

An article without autobiography as a theme is "Two Self-Portraits by Two South African Writers – Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* and J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*" by Cristiana Pugliese. As the title suggests, self-portraying is treated, but not autobiography. Instead she compares the two protagonists in the stated stories and how they are portrayed. Alienation, in this case with the meaning not belonging or fitting in, is one trait they both have in common, thus Pugliese discusses it rather thoroughly. All articles will be used to prove how Coetzee

differs from traditional autobiographers and also provide suggestions of the author's reasons for the unconventional narrative in *Boyhood*.

## 2. Theoretical overview

This section will present the tools used for the imminent analysis. The generic conventions of autobiography stated in Philippe Lejeune's *On autobiography* will be presented and important narratological terms will be explained, in order to get a better understanding of the autobiographical conventions.

### 2.1 Autobiography

Philippe Lejeune 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). This definition suggests that an autobiography follows the formula author=narrator=protagonist and is told in the past tense. However, this definition leads to a number of questions and objections. The major problem is how the author, narrator and protagonist should be proved identical, the "identity" as Lejeune refers to it. Here the voice must be recognised. Abbott defines voice as the person who is telling the story. The identification of the voice is made by looking at which pronoun is used to refer to the protagonist. In addition to voice, the terms focalization and diegesis may appear. Focalization means through whose eyes the story is told and diegesis explains the narrator's position within the narrative. A homodiegetic narrator is also a character in the narrative, whereas a heterodiegetic one is positioned outside the narrative. The most obvious way is to write an autobiography with a voice in first person and a homodiegetic narrator, that is using the pronoun "I" to point out the connection between the three roles author, narrator and protagonist. However, some fictional novels are written in the first person. With this, the issue of truth becomes more important. A fictional novel does not have to tell the truth, but an autobiography has to. Nevertheless, "truth" is often problematic, as it is a highly subjective phenomenon. The reader must find out if the story he or she is reading is telling the truth, i.e. if it is fictional or not. If it is an autobiography which is being read, the reader can suppose that it tells the truth. However, it is also possible that the author changes, adds or leaves out parts or aspects of the whole story. If so, is the truth told or not? One has to evaluate the authors/narrators credibility and by that decide if one wants to believe that the truth is told or not. In an interview in *Doubling the Point*, made by David Atwell, Coetzee talks about two different sorts of truth. The first one, which he calls "truth to the fact" (17) is relevant for



autobiographical writing. Coetzee argues that this truth is problematic, as telling the story of one's life means choosing certain memories "from a reservoir of memories" (17). By choosing which memories to tell, a number of untold memories still remain. Furthermore, the responsibility to tell the truth is limited by the fact that the truth would mean all the facts of history, which are too many to be told. Coetzee argues that "You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose" (18). Hence, Coetzee states that it is impossible to tell the entire truth because of the reason that the truth contains too many facts. He also suggests that there are different levels of importance concerning facts. Some facts need to come into light, others do not. When choosing which memories to tell, the importance of the facts must be valued with the purpose of reaching a story telling a sufficient level of truth.

In order to find a tool to apply autobiographical texts to his definition, Lejeune states four criteria. The first one deals with the form of language. The two options here in which to place a text are narrative and prose. The option here which fits into the definition of autobiography is narrative. The second criterion is the subject which is treated in the text. In order to be an autobiography, it should deal with the author's life and personality rather than that of other people. The third criterion is the connection between author and narrator, which Lejeune refers to as "*situation of the author*" (4). This criterion deals with the importance of the author's name, which should correspond to a real person. The author should also be identical with the narrator. The last of Lejeune's criteria is the link between narrator and protagonist. Here two options are given. The first one is identical narrator and protagonist, and the second one emphasises the "retrospective point of view of the narrative" (4). All of these four criteria must be fulfilled, except for the option concerning prose as the form of language, in order to place a story in the genre of autobiography.

Linda Anderson points out that some critics argue that the rules of autobiographical writing are too strict, and that there must be different levels, or degrees, which would mean that all texts with autobiographical traits could be labelled as autobiographies. Lejeune, however, claims that "Autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing" (13). As a result of this, Lejeune has suggested how texts which are autobiographical, but fail to fulfil all criteria, should be categorised. One method of labelling uses the four previously mentioned criteria. Depending on which part of it is not fulfilled, a genre can be defined. Lejeune has found six genres related to autobiography, which means that they follow the autobiographical conventions to a certain degree, but never completely. For instance, when a text follows all of the already mentioned rules, but is written in prose, Lejeune suggests that it belongs to the genre of autobiographical poem. If the text is not written in a "retrospective point of view of

the narrative”, it is a journal or diary instead of an autobiography. A third related genre is biography, which is created by the failure of congruity between protagonist and narrator. On the other hand, if the narrator and protagonist are different, the story will be identified as a personal novel. Furthermore, if the topic of the novel is not the author’s individual life, the genre will be memoirs and finally, Lejeune suggests that the category of self-portrait is created by writing the text without using a narrative form and by having a retrospective point of view (4).

A second tool used for separating autobiography from other related genres is to look into the identity between narrator and protagonist and the grammatical person, which means the pronoun used to refer to the protagonist. In *On Autobiography*, Lejeune has designed the following table.

Grammatical person Identity → ↓	I	You	He
Narrator = Principal Character	classical autobiography (autodiegetic)	autobiography in the 2nd person	autobiography in the 3d person
Narrator ≠ Principal Character	biography in the 1st person (witness narrative) homodiegetic	biography addressed to the model	classical biography (heterodiegetic)

(7)

This table shows the difference between autobiography and biography, as well as the different sub-categories of the two genres. It also provides a system of classification, where a text can be applied to this table and the correct square reveals the most suitable genre for the text in question.

In connection to the discussion about author and autobiography and the strict rules of the genre, Anderson states that critics have claimed that it is the author’s intention which should decide the genre, not the form in which it is written. If the author writes a text about his life and wants it to be an autobiography, it should be, regardless of its narratological structure. Here another problem is brought forth, as it is difficult to know the author’s intention, and because only intention does not provide evidence and traits strong enough to define a genre. This means that the reader has to trust that a text, claimed to be

autobiographical, in fact tells the truth and that the author has honest intentions with his or her text. Furthermore, one must not only decide if the narrator is trustworthy, but also the author. The author and narrator are supposed to be identical in an autobiography, yet the reader of a fictional text does not have to question the author's credibility and does not have to try to pinpoint the author's intentions. Autobiographies can have different purposes, and it is the reader's task to discover them. This is one of the problems with intention. Interpretations are very personal, and thus the author's intentions are insufficient as a tool of definition and will not be used as a criterion for autobiography in this essay.

Many autobiographies are written in the first person, using the pronoun "I". Lejeune points out that there are two rules which, if they are followed, define "I". One of them is what Lejeune refers to as "utterance", which means that "I" should "mark the *identity* of the subject of enunciation and of the subject of the utterance" (9). The second one is the one of reference. It can be explained as a person within the discourse, the person whom the reader identifies as "I" because he or she is speaking. Hence, "I" is the person who is speaking *because* it is speaking, and it is "I" because it speaks about itself. The pronoun can also be used to hide the identity of a character. Lejeune presents the example of a person hearing a knock on the door. When asking who it is, the answer is "me". This word does not give any clearer presentation of the person behind the door, thus his or her identity is still concealed. However, Lejeune suggests that "few authors are capable of renouncing *their own name*" (15). This means that most protagonists in autobiographical works are referred to as "I", which does not shed any light to the protagonist's identity within the narrative. Instead, the reader must look at the name of author and from that judge who "I" is. However, few authors clearly reveal their name in the narrative of their autobiographies. Instead, they trust the choice of pronoun referring to the protagonist to reveal the identity between author, narrator and protagonist.

As already stated, "I" refers to the narrator/author. Consequently, most authors do reveal the identicalness of author, narrator and protagonist. Also the title of an autobiography usually brings this identity forth. My life, or something similar is a common title, which reveals that the formula author=narrator=protagonist will be followed (14).

With this information about the genre autobiography presented, an analysis of *Boyhood* follows, scrutinized with the help of the rules and definitions from the previous section. The following section will contain the analysis of Coetzee's *Boyhood* as an autobiography, followed by an analysis of the theme of otherness. To sum up, a parallel between the narratological otherness and that of the character will be pinned down or ruled out.

### 3. Analysis

“Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text”. Leigh Gilmore presents this quote by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (4). What is specifically interesting for the purposes of this essay in this quote is the word “several”. This means that Derrida opens up for the possibility that a book does not have to belong to *one* genre; instead it is possible to label a book as belonging to multiple genres. With this in mind, I will analyse *Boyhood* and look into its genre/s.

#### 3.1 *Boyhood* as an autobiography

As already mentioned, *Boyhood* is narrated in a rather untraditional way for an autobiography. Is it possible that it is so untraditional that it in fact is not an autobiography? Philippe Lejeune called the set of rules he pinpointed “the autobiographical pact” (3), and in order to allow the book to fully be an autobiography, the author has to sign this pact, i.e. follow the rules with no exceptions. How has Coetzee succeeded in following the rules and in what genre should *Boyhood* be categorized?

The first and most basic rule of the autobiographical pact is that of identity between author, narrator and protagonist. According to the pact, they should all concord, which means that the formula for the identity should be author=narrator=protagonist. However, the first reference to Coetzee’s protagonist alone comes in the sentence “His mother consults her sister in Stellenbosch [...]” (1). Thus, the protagonist is referred to in the third person. Already on the first page of the novel, it is obvious that Coetzee will not follow the rules of the autobiographical pact. In this case, the narrator is not the protagonist (narrator≠protagonist). However, Coetzee is, as the author of the book, identical to the protagonist. This connection, where author and protagonist is the same person, but the narrator and the protagonist are not, does not serve well as a base for the formula of identity as Lejeune describes it. The formula has to be changed into one of two options. Either the order in which the persons are listed, has to be rearranged, which would result in narrator≠protagonist=author. The other option is to add one of the persons, in this case the author, a second time. This would lead to author=narrator≠protagonist=author. Thus, the incongruence between narrator and protagonist rules out *Boyhood* as an autobiography.

With this conclusion drawn, another suitable genre has to be found. Lejeune has formed rules which determine the difference between autobiography and closely related genres. After a comparison between the narratological structure of *Boyhood* and these rules, the “correct” genre will be found. Furthermore, the notion *autrebiography* will be looked into.

The four criteria Lejeune stated (see page 6) are more or less fulfilled by Coetzee's novel about his boyhood. Depending on which he has failed to fulfil, a genre will be suggested as the correct one for the book. The first three criteria, which Lejeune calls *form of language*, *subject treated* and *situation of the author* concord with the narrative in *Boyhood*, the last one does not. The position of the narrator, as Lejeune calls it, means that the narrator and protagonist are the same and that the narrative ought to be told from a retrospective point of view. The very first sentence of the novel is "They live on a house estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road" (1). As "they" refers to the protagonist and his family, it, again, becomes obvious that narrator and protagonist are not the same. Furthermore, this sentence, as well as the rest of the narrative, is told in the present tense. This means that the retrospective point of view is not used, thus *Boyhood* does not fulfil any of the two alternatives of Lejeune's fourth criterion. There is no suggested genre for a text which cannot be applied on either of the two sections of criterion four. However, the lack of identity between narrator and protagonist suggests that the text is a biography, a genre mainly used to categorise books about a person's life written by another person. Concerning Coetzee's *Boyhood*, this is not the case. The result of that is that another genre must be found, or biography must be widened. Concerning the narrative in the present tense, Lejeune offers journal or diary as a genre. However, this genre presupposes that the narrator and protagonist are the same. Also, it is not very likely that someone writes his or her diary 45 years after the events written about took place. Therefore, diary as a genre can be ruled out in this case and *Boyhood* as a biography needs to be analysed further.

The table on page 7 provides a simple overview of autobiography and its related genres. Here, one only has to figure out the grammatical person, that is how the protagonist is referred to and to figure out if the narrator and protagonist are identical. As the table shows, an autobiography can be written in the first, second or third person, as long as the narrator and the protagonist are identical. If the narrator and protagonist are different persons, Lejeune's table automatically categorises the text as biographical. According to this table, classical biography would thus be the correct genre to put *Boyhood* in. Yet, the problem with this table is that the author is not taken into consideration. The most interesting detail of the narrative in *Boyhood* is the identity between author and protagonist combined with the dissimilarity between narrator and protagonist. Hence, this table does not provide a sufficient solution to the question of *Boyhood*'s generic traits. All of the tools found in "The Autobiographical Pact" in Lejeune's *On Autobiography* have proved *Boyhood* a biography, but none of them have discussed the importance of identical author and protagonist. Thus, one has to turn to

complementary literature to search for information about this, in Coetzee's book, important connection.

In the discussion about autobiography and the conventions of it, the question of the author's intention has been raised. Linda Anderson discusses this issue and the problems with it.

Within critical discussions of autobiography, 'intention' has had a necessary and often unquestioned role in providing the crucial link between author, narrator and protagonist. Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of 'honest' intention which guarantees the 'truth' of writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if s/he seems to be trustworthy (2-3).

As Anderson writes, the argument concerning honest intentions is problematic because the author's trustworthiness must be evaluated. Also, what Anderson describes as the truth of writing may not be the actual reality from another person's point of view. Again, truth is subjective, but it is the reader's choice to decide whose statement to believe in. There is often only one aspect of the reality which is presented to the reader. For instance, Nicola King writes about the son of a Holocaust survivor. He claims to feel a void within himself, and tells how he has been strongly affected by an event his father experienced but he himself did not. Is this son trustworthy as a narrator of what happened in the death camps when he has not experienced it? It is a problematic issue to judge who is trustworthy or not. One must base the level of trustworthiness on something, and this something is often hard to define. Coetzee's choice to separate the narrator from the identical author and protagonist might have created confusion for many readers, and it may have increased or decreased his credibility as a writer telling the truth.

Another problem with autobiography and its connection to truth is that autobiography itself does not fit into any of the other genres, such as fiction or historical writing. Leigh Gilmore writes that autobiography as a genre has a "doubled nature" and describes this with "autobiography has fallen outside both fiction and history" (6). Again the issue of truth is brought forth. Autobiography has become its own semi-truth-telling genre, since it does not fit into any other genre. It is not pure fiction, as it is supposed to tell the truth about a person's life. However, since it is even more subjective than convenient history books, it is not true enough to fit this genre. The credibility the narrator of a history book has is higher than that of a narrator in a fictional book, most people might argue. In the case of *Boyhood*, the trustworthiness is rather complex. At first, the story told is about a South African boy, which could be any boy. In fact, it is not until page 87 out of 166 that the boy's family name Coetzee emerges, and on the next page is his given name, John, told for the first time. Until these

pages, the author has not revealed that he also is the protagonist. With the identity between the two given, *Boyhood* is no longer a story about a boy, but about J. M. Coetzee. The “hiding” of the protagonist’s name might make the reader question the trustworthiness of the narrator, and the question of truth becomes more complex. What is the truth in *Boyhood*, is it before the reader realises that the protagonist is in fact the author or is it after this equivalence is revealed? When Coetzee brings the identity of his protagonist into light, the question of genre changes. With this one cannot label *Boyhood* a fictional story, and Philippe Lejeune’s rules have proved it a biography instead of autobiography. Since Lejeune’s theory does not take the author into consideration, it might not be sufficient for a book with such an unconventional narrative as *Boyhood*, thus Coetzee’s own term *autrebiography* might be more suitable.

The problem with *autrebiography* is that it is not an established genre. In fact, it was invented by Coetzee to describe his book and nobody else’s. No clear definition is stated, but Margaret Lenta values it as synonymous to “autobiographical fiction” (157) or autobiography written in the third person. A search on Google shows that *autrebiography* has only 133 hits, almost all of them deal with *Boyhood*. A clear definition is not yet stated, but the name suggests that it is a biography about the author of the book, rather than an autobiography. Since this is the term Coetzee uses for his book, it seems to be the most accurate. However, because of the lack of definition, rules and other examples of *autrebiography*, it is not a very good term to use. As Derrida stated, a text can belong to one or several genres, and Coetzee does not seem to mind his text belonging to more than one genre. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick writes:

[I]ntroducing a reading from *Boyhood* during his stay at the Stanford Humanities Center in 1997, Coetzee recounted the question that had been put to him by his publisher about *Boyhood* “Is this fiction or memoir?” to which the author had replied with his usual laconic evasiveness, “Do I have to choose?” (14).

Coetzee’s reply to the question suggests that he is aware of the problem with the generic categorisation of *Boyhood*, but it also hints the author’s playfulness and a conscious breaking of autobiographical conventions and thinking outside the box.

To sum up, *Boyhood* cannot be classified as an autobiography. The main reason for that is the incongruence between the narrator and the protagonist, but also because it is not written from a retrospective point of view. According to Lejeune’s table in *On autobiography*, it is a classical biography. However, classical is not the case. *Boyhood* might, according to generic conventions, be closer to a biography than an autobiography. The best label would, according to this analysis, be *biography by and about the author*.

### 3.2 The theme of otherness

Throughout the novel, the reader is presented with different memories and events where John, the character, thinks of himself as different from his family or his peers. Sometimes he chooses to be different and sometimes he is different for some other reason. This section will present both the involuntary and the voluntary otherness. The latter one will be the most interesting for the upcoming analysis of parallels between the author's otherness in writing and the protagonist's otherness in personality; hence it will be the main focus in this section.

John seems to consider most things involving him as different from the rest. In school, he is different because of his skills, his religion and his preferences concerning sports and countries. He also considers his family different from other families because of their beliefs and ways of living. Furthermore, he finds himself different from his family and his relatives. His constant claim for uniqueness might portray him as a rather egoistic boy and, as Cristiana Pugliese writes: "he is secretive, selfish, cruel. Nobody, whether other children or grown ups, seems to like him, with the exception of his mother, his cousin Agnes and his great aunt" (501). Thus, John's level of likeability is not very high. His actions often suggest that he performs them only to let it come into light that he is better than the others. However, sometimes his otherness puts him in a more vulnerable position than if he were like his peers. In school, he often feels a need to hide his real points of view on certain things, because the "wrong" point of view could be devastating for him, for instance liking the Russians. Sometimes his otherness depends on the otherness of his family, such as religious issues or being beaten as a punishment. In school, most pupils are beaten, but never John. He reveals his fear of the humiliation this punishment would bring, and therefore behaves like the perfect pupil.

As for himself, he has no desire to be beaten by Miss Oosthuizen or anyone else. The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame. There is nothing he will not do to save himself from it. In this respect he is unnatural and knows it. He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day (6).

This passage suggests that John thinks of his family not only as different, but as unnatural. According to him, it is unnatural to wear shoes every day, to not belong to a religion and to not be beaten by the parents. This passage also reveals shame and fear of failure. It is positive not to be punished by the teacher, as it implies good behaviour and well performed studies, but John discusses the good behaviour as unnatural. He does not tell why he finds it like that,



but the text hints that he connects “other” with “unnatural”. Ironically, he connects both being beaten and not being beaten with shame. If his teacher would beat him, he would feel ashamed. At the same time, he is ashamed of not having been beaten by his parents.

In school, the pupils are separated for religious instruction. The Protestant boys go to class, those who are Roman Catholics or Jews do not. As the quote above says, the Coetzee family does not go to church or belong to a specific religion. This turns out to cause John trouble when the none-Protestant boys are being separated from those who are Protestants, referred to as Christians by the teacher.

The decision to ‘be’ a Roman Catholic is made on the spur of the moment. [...] ‘What is your religion?’ asks the teacher. He is sweating, he does not know what to say. ‘Are you a Christian or a Roman Catholic or a Jew?’ she demands impatiently. ‘Roman Catholic,’ he says (18-9).

Most of his peers are “Christians”, only John claims to be Roman Catholic and one of his class-mates says he is Jewish. This leads to a time of being bullied and taunted, not only by the Christian boys, but also by the other Roman Catholics, who realise that John in fact does not share their belief. Nevertheless, John has claimed to be a Roman Catholic and must retain this claim. His non-religious upbringing put him in a situation he found difficult, as he did not know “the right answer” (18) to the teacher’s question. Instead of telling the truth about his religious faith, he chose an answer based on his misperception of religion.

He chose to be a Roman Catholic, that faithful morning, because of Rome, because of Horatius and his two comrades, swords in their hands, crested helmets on their heads, indomitable courage in their glance, defending the bridge over the Tiber against the Etruscan hordes. Now, step by step, he discovers from the other Catholic boys what a Roman Catholic really is. A Roman Catholic has nothing to do with Rome. Roman Catholics have not even heard of Horatius. Roman Catholics go to catechism on Friday afternoons; they go to confession; they take communion. That is what Roman Catholics do (20).

John chooses his religion based on his interest and fascination for Roman literature and mythology. The religion itself and its conventions and traditions are unknown to him. He is not a Roman Catholic, neither is he a Jew. He is brought up in a Protestant culture and baptized in a Protestant church and is, in theory, a Christian, but claims to be an atheist (142). Thus, he practically has no religion. If he did not want to be different from his class-mates, he could have listened to their answers and claimed to belong to the same religion, but he did not. Also, the reader might suspect that he would have answered Roman Catholic anyway, since he tries to understand what the right answer is, when the question itself has no right or wrong answer. Later on, John gives an additional explanation to why he chose his religion.

*Boyhood* takes place shortly after World War II, and the young boys talk about whose side they are on. Most boys are on the side of the Americans, but John prefers the Russians.

Being a Catholic is a part of his life reserved for school. Preferring the Russians to the Americans is a secret so dark that he can reveal it to no one. Liking the Russians is a serious matter. It can have you ostracized. [...] When the Russians and the Americans were first set before him as antagonists between whom he had to choose [...], he chose the Russians as he the chose the Romans: because he likes the letter *r*, particularly the capital *R*, the strongest of all letters (26-7).

John's liking of the letter R is one reason why he chooses to "be" a Roman Catholic, as well as it is one of the reasons why he likes the Russians. This passage also reveals the secrecy John constantly contains within himself. His family does not know about him being a Roman Catholic in school, and his peers do not know that he prefers the Russians to the Americans. In this way, John isolates himself from other people and thus his perception of his otherness is fortified. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how this passage reflects John's stubbornness and strong opinions about things. Liking the Russians because of the first letter in the word is not a very well-founded argument to build one's opinion on, therefore one might think that John could easily change his mind about the Russians and motivate this by claiming that he was not fully aware of everything about the Russians or the Americans. However, he does not change his mind. Instead, he likes them in secrecy. If his viewpoint of which is the better country is so bad that it can "have [him] ostracized", he could decrease the risk by claiming he prefers the Americans. If liking the Russians is a secret, he could easily lie about it to his peers, just in order to be like them and not "other". Regardless of this, John finds it more important to be himself, even if he can only be himself in secrecy.

John blames his father for much of the otherness. One of the main reasons why he is different than other boys is because his father does not beat him; at least this is what he thinks. "He wants his father to beat him and turn him into a normal boy. At the same time he knows that if his father dared to strike him, he would not rest until he had his revenge" (13). This passage suggests both that John's relationship to his father is rather complex, but also that he is ambivalent to the idea of being normal, as he calls it. He wants to be normal, but at the same time, he wants to be different. If his father would strike him, he would become normal. As a consequence, he would like to have his revenge on his father for depriving him of his otherness. John is torn between his longing for being normal and the uniqueness he already has experienced.

The peak of his perception of himself as special and different from other people is reached when John, at the age of 10, goes to a camp with his Boy Scout troop. In order to

receive a brand, the boys must swim over a river and back again. John does not know how to swim, but manages to reach the other side. On his way back across the river again, he loses his energy and almost drowns. He becomes unconscious but is saved by his troop leader. “From that day onward he knows there is something special about him. He should have died but he did not. Despite his unworthiness, he has been given a second life. He was dead but is alive” (17). It is unlikely that John actually died and was revived, but he was more likely unconscious. What is more, the troop leader had to rescue him and would have rescued any of the boys if they had not managed to swim across the river. This occurrence is not unique in any way, but John, like most children would, interprets it as if he is the only person in the world who almost drowned but was rescued. His selfishness has, in this case, turned into hubris.

This occurrence is not the only time John differs from the rest of his peers in the scout troop. At the same camp he almost drowned, he feels like he stands out from the rest because of his “wrong” equipment. All the boys are requested to bring a ground-sheet to sleep on. Since he does not have one, nor does he or his mother know what it is, he brings a red rubber mattress his mother gives him. When at the camp, he realises that everyone else has a green ground-sheet. He feels like “[h]is red mattress at once sets him apart” (15). Interestingly, John’s red mattress does not make him feel unique, but instead different. He has no wish to stand out in this way, but wants to be noticed because of his perfection. Bringing the wrong equipment is not standing out because of perfection, but a failure of following a request. The fact that the mattress is seen as a failure becomes more obvious in comparison to John’s first day in the scout troop. He puts great effort into looking professional with the perfect scout uniform and a wooden staff with the Morse code on it. “Taking the oath with a two-finger salute, he is by far the most impeccably outfitted of the new boys, the ‘tenderfeet’” (14). In this case, John differs from his peers by looking more like an experienced boy scout than the others, and he perceives this as a good otherness. However, John may be “the most impeccably outfitted”, but he does not perform the scout salute properly. According to the Boy Scouts of America National Council, the Boy Scout salute should be done with three fingers, which each finger representing one of the three scout principles, which are also said in the scout promise, as the South African Scout Association states on their webpage:

“On my honour I promise that I will do my best –  
to do my duty to God, and my country;  
to help other people at all times;  
to obey the scout law” (<http://www.scouting.org.za> 070518)

By doing the salute with only two fingers, John does not promise to follow all of the three principles in the scout promise. Which rules he does not follow is never revealed, nor does John comment on the fact that he did the salute incorrectly. Also, it is not told for how long John was a Boy Scout, thus the reader cannot know if John ever noticed his mistake.

The comparison between the two sorts of otherness in the scout troop, the red mattress and the scout uniform and staff shows how John values difference and how important it is. His concern with difference is not just about difference as such, but about perfection. He wants to be different only if it means being better than the others, preferably being the best. He is afraid of failures and being bad, in the sense of not performing better than his peers.

The issue of being normal and having a normal family occupies a big part of John's mind. He thinks about who in his family is normal and who is not, and comes to the conclusion that he is different from his family. Also, he refers to his otherness as unnatural when he compares himself to his father.

His father is normal in every way. He is grateful to his mother for protecting him from his father's normality [...] At the same time he is angry with his mother for turning him into something unnatural, something that needs to be protected if it is to continue to live (8).

This passage suggests that John's ambivalence to being normal is much connected to the mother/son relationship. John does not want to be like his father, whom he judges is normal, but he does not want to be "unnatural" either. He decides that his mother is to blame for the unnaturalness. However, it is only he himself who has been protected from his father's normality. John reckons that his younger brother has not been given this protection. "In fact, he suspects that at heart his brother may be normal. He is on his own" (13). The brother, whose name is never revealed, is obviously not as special as John, at least not according to the protagonist. The sentence "he is on his own" shows that John does not want to be completely different alone, but wishes someone to be different together with him. He wants, in a way, his brother to be different, or unnatural, as well, but also implies that he is proud that he is special. Also, he thinks he is different from his cousins as well. His mother has two sisters, who have one son each. All four boys, that is John, his brother and the aunts' sons, are "[hovered over] with suffocating solicitude" (38) by their mothers. However, John perceives his difference from the others by claiming that "[o]f all the four sons, he is the only one who is not wholly under his mother's thumb" (38). With this separation from his mother, John is not only different from his brother and cousins, but also escapes from his mother turning him into a completely "unnatural" and dependent creature. However, the word "wholly" suggests that he

is not completely free from his mother's authority and power over him. His relationship to her is rather ambivalent, and he is not able to completely break free, nor is he able to keep a very close relationship to her and obey every order or request she utters.

John is not the only person who perceives him as different. His aunt Annie shows her opinion that John is and will be very special.

'You know so much,' Aunt Annie once said to him. It was not praise: though her lips were pursed in a smile, she was shaking her head at the same time. 'So young and yet you know so much. How are you going to keep it all in your head?' And she leaned over and tapped his skull with a bony finger. The boy is special, Aunt Annie told his mother, and his mother in turn told him. But what kind of special? No one ever says (165).

Again, John's idea of the two kinds of difference shows. Different could mean being better, but it could also mean being not as good as the rest. Aunt Annie chooses to call John special instead of different, and he does not quite know how to interpret this word. His feelings towards Annie's view of him are indecisive, as he does not get an explanation of what kind of special he is. To him, the only two options are being the best or failing, and he does not know how to value "special". Still, he senses that it is a positive word, but he is not sure.

One of the main issues of John being different is his linguistic rootlessness. He comes from an Afrikaner family, but speaks English as his first language. Cristiana Pugliese notes:

John's constant feeling of alienation has political roots too; it can be traced back to the historical division between the English and the Afrikaners in South Africa. The boy is Afrikaner, but his mother tongue is English, a problematic 'double identity' in a country where the two cultures have been in constant confrontation. To make things more difficult for him, he identifies with the British, but has no English blood. [...] John is neither Afrikaner nor British and he finds himself being discriminated by both the Afrikaners and the English (499).

With an Afrikaner father and a mother half German, half Afrikaner, John's family would count as an Afrikaner one, but he is sent to an English school, the family speaks English to each other and they "admire the English" (499). This creates confusion, not only for John but for other people, as he does not belong to a certain group of people that share the same language. John's being different from the English, since he is Afrikaner, and different from the Afrikaner, since his mother tongue is English results in a lack of belonging. The linguistic otherness is involuntary from John's perspective, but has been created by his parents and their choice to give their children English as their mother tongue. However, it seems as if John makes a distinction between his English self and his Afrikaner self. He states that he is English rather than Afrikaner, but also claims that: "[w]hen he speaks Afrikaans all the complications of life

seem suddenly to fall away” (125). Since John lives in an area where the English are a minority and since most of his relatives speak Afrikaans, John blends in when he, too, speaks Afrikaans. Apart from this quote, there is nothing in the book which suggests that John connects trouble to his mother tongue, but since his “complications of life” disappear only when he speaks Afrikaans, a connection between these troubles and English somehow exists, even if it is only in John’s mind and inexpressible to him.

As he grows older, John begins to realise in what way he wants to be different. To him, being number one of his class, with the best grades and the best results in exams, is the best way of being different. “He is good at examinations; if there were no examinations for him to be good at there would be little special about him” (131). This passage suggests that John has narrowed his specialness to being good at exams, at least to some extent. He appoints his intelligence the most distinct and special one of his traits. Without this high intelligence, he would not be as special as he claims to be. This argument is also supported by an incident in school, where John reveals his interest in thinking about whatever crosses his mind at whatever time or place he might be.

Once, during their early months in Worcester, a boy from his class had wandered in through the open front door and found him lying on his back under a chair. ‘What are you doing there?’ he had asked. ‘Thinking,’ he had replied unthinkingly: ‘I like thinking.’ Soon everyone in his class knew about it: the new boy was odd, he wasn’t normal (29).

Already in a position where he is not fully like his peers, John, albeit unthinkingly, distances himself to an even larger extent. Not only is he “the new boy”, but also “odd”. It is his intelligence and thinking that makes John special, according to himself. However, the mind is an uncontrollable thing, and already at young age, John remarks how his mind “darts about here and there all the time, with an impatient will of its own” (59). Obviously, John has already noticed his ability to associate different things with each other, sometimes to the extent where he himself cannot understand the connection between them. Aunt Annie’s comment of how much he knows and the difficulty in keeping everything in his mind was right, which is also confirmed by John’s notion of his dynamic mind. These remarks hint at John’s future as the reader knows it: he will become a world-famous writer.

In short, John finds himself different from his peers in many ways, but mainly because of his intelligence. He makes a distinction between two sorts of different: the good different, which means being better than everyone else, or the bad different, which means failure or standing out when he does not want to stand out. Aunt Annie has already discovered that John is a special boy, but John does not know what kind of special she means. He wants clear

answers and always feels the need to give the right answer to questions. When asked a question where there is no right or wrong answer, such as his religion, he chooses his answers based on something irrelevant. Being the best, being right and being impeccable are some of the goals John strived for, with various levels of success. As the first section of the analysis shows, *Boyhood* is, according to Lejeune, far from an impeccable autobiography. Therefore, the following section will deal with the connection between Coetzee's unconventional choice of narrative and John's perception of himself as an unconventional boy.

### **3.3 Parallels between narrative and the protagonist's self-perception**

The most obvious connection between author and protagonist as such is the fact that they are the same person, but as the first section of the analysis shows, *Boyhood* is not a conventional autobiography. In fact, it is not even an autobiography, but a biography which deals with the author's boyhood. In order to find the parallel, if there is one, between the author's choice of narrative and the protagonist's view of himself as different, the reasons for Coetzee's choice of narrative must be looked into. J. M. Coetzee himself has not given a clear and obvious motivation for this, but many writers of the critical articles dealing with *Boyhood* speculate about this motivation. Also, Coetzee has written and been interviewed about writing about the past and writing in general. In these texts and interviews, he sometimes hints at explanations for why he chose a third person narrator to tell the story about his boyhood.

Sheila Collingwood-Whittick is one of the writers who discusses Coetzee's choice to use an unconventional third person narrator. She suggests that the choice is connected to Coetzee's personality and unwillingness to talk about his private life and his past. Also, she points to the shame John often talks about in the book, and by the author's distancing himself from the narrative, the shame can be found within the protagonist but not within the author.

What third-person narration does for Coetzee is to allow the reluctant autobiographer that he indubitably is, to set down the "shameful" secrets of his private life while maintaining the scientific detachment of the entomologist describing the specimen that he holds between pincers under his microscope (21).

By not narrating *Boyhood* himself, Coetzee becomes an author instead of an autobiographer. This means that he is detached from the story and therefore becomes less subjective. Whether that is good or bad is the reader's decision. By using a third person narrator, Coetzee creates an illusion that the protagonist in *Boyhood* is any boy, and the reader might be surprised to realise that the protagonist shares the author's name. This connection allows Coetzee to choose if *Boyhood* is an autobiography or a fictional story where the protagonist happens to have his name, simply by claiming that the events in the book have or have not occurred in reality.

Furthermore, Collingwood-Whittick suggests that with his choice of narrative, Coetzee separates himself from the protagonist and, in this way, disconnect them from each other. She writes:

omniscient narration in *Boyhood* is used as a screen which Coetzee interposes between the intensely private individual who feels the need to set down the truth of his own blemished and guilt-ridden personal history and the internationally renowned public figure who lives in the full glare of voracious media interest (22).

Collingwood-Whittick suggests that the separation of the protagonist from the author is made in order to show the two different personalities: 10-year-old John, who is unknown, sees himself as “unnatural” and is full of shame and guilt, and J. M. Coetzee, the world-famous author who safeguards his personal life. This interpretation suggests that, with his choice of narrator, Coetzee separates himself from the protagonist in order to protect his private life. This, in turn, points to the suggestion that Coetzee’s style of writing *Boyhood* has nothing to do with John’s feeling of being different from his peers.

Another reason for the choice of narrative might be to get closer to the objective truth. Like Linda Anderson wrote, one can trust the narrator to tell the truth only if he/she seems trustworthy (see quote on p 11). However, the narrator of *Boyhood* can be seen as both trustworthy and untrustworthy. The third person narrator implies objectivity, distance and the ability to see thoughts and actions from the outside. On the other hand, a first person narrator has experienced the events told in the book and by that, the reader might get the impression that it is the truth as experienced by the narrator/protagonist which is told. Either way, the trustworthiness can be questioned. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick remarks that “[f]or Coetzee, as for most other autobiographers, the goal of absolute truth has proved unattainable” (20). With the absolute truth being an impossibility, the reader, and author, must settle for the second best, which is the narrator which can come the closest to what is called the absolute truth, which means everything that happened, seen from an objective point of view. In the case of *Boyhood*, the choice was an omniscient third person narrator. For some reason, Coetzee did not find a first person narrator able to tell as much of the truth as one in the third person. Another interpretation of Coetzee’s choice of narrative is presented by Margaret Lenta. She suggests that the third person narrator would turn *Boyhood* into what she calls autobiographical fiction. This would mean that the reading of the text would be ambiguous, thus the reader “must be prepared to consider the possibilities of the work’s being part autobiography and part fiction” (160). Lenta’s reading suggests that *Boyhood* is not an entirely true story, but might be partly fictional. The reader must be aware of this and not read the story as completely true. However, a third person narrator does not necessarily have to mean that the story is not



completely true, nor does a first person narrator always tell the truth. The issue of truth is delicate, and it is not solved simply by using a first, second or third person narrator. Derek Attridge writes: "Fiction, it might be said, is always involved in a certain avoidance of responsibility: these things haven't actually happened. [...] Historical writing (including biographical and autobiographical writing), however, cannot avoid responsibility to the past" (86-7). This passage suggests that the author of a historical novel has a responsibility to tell the truth in some way, whereas an author of fiction does not. Fiction may take place in a historical setting, but it does not have to be accurate. The demand on the author to provide a text which reflects an actual event is determined by the genre of the text. If Margaret Lenta's reading of *Boyhood* as part autobiography, part fiction, is to be followed, the responsibility Coetzee has to the past falters. It is not clear whether he has this responsibility or not, as his text would be only partially true. Attridge continues by discussing what kind of truth Coetzee writes about: "[t]he truth that *Boyhood* offers, then, is, in the first place, that of testimony: a brilliant account of what it was like to grow up as a white male in the 1950s in South Africa" (91). Here Attridge brings in a new definition of what Coetzee actually wrote: a testimony. With that interpretation, Coetzee would be telling the truth and *Boyhood* would not be fictional to any extent. The unconventional style of the narrative Coetzee chose has caused readers and critical writers many problems, mainly concerning how much of *Boyhood* is true and how much is fiction. By choosing a genre, the reader may also be able to decide if it is the truth which is written in *Boyhood*, but the choice of genre falters too.

Interestingly, Coetzee does not seem to be as bothered by his choice of narrative as some of his readers or some literary critics are. In fact, in an interview published in his book *Doubling the point*, he says that "[a]ll autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (391). This quote suggests that the absolute truth can never be told, but every text is partially true or carries traces of the author's life. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as if Coetzee sees *Boyhood* as his autobiography, although it, according to Lejeune's conventions, is not an autobiography. With this, the issue of the writer's intention is brought forth again. That would give the reader the possibility to choose how to read *Boyhood*: as an autobiography, biography, fiction or anything in between.

Coetzee has been pointed out as different in the sense that he does not write "typically South African" but rather "within a western European tradition", as David Atwell puts it (4). What Atwell defines as typically South African is not stated, nor does he reveal who has made this claim from the beginning. Furthermore, Dominic Head suggests that "Coetzee stands fundamentally opposed to this kind of normative prescription [...]" (9). By that he means that

Coetzee does not put an effort into following conventions. Whether or not this is true is left for the reader to decide. One might focus on the conventions of writing and therefore find Coetzee unconventional, or one might bring up the argument of artistic freedom. If Coetzee sees his writing as art, the unconventional style would be a sign of creativity and open-mindedness instead of breaking conventions. A third possibility is that he actually wants to be different and stand out from all the other autobiographers, hence he wrote *Boyhood* as differently as he could, compared to traditional autobiographies. However, none of the three arguments would parallel John, who most of the time tries to follow conventions, but often fails to do so. His perception of himself as different is often expressed when he fails to follow the conventions or when his family or peers fail to follow them. In fact, John's feeling of otherness seems to be nothing else but an ambition to reach perfection.

The protagonist feels that he is different from his family and his peers, but the reader might not do so. John has the same self-centred mind and odd obsessions as many other children have. What is interesting about John is his ambivalence towards his family, his peers and towards being different. He realises that he shares certain traits with both his family and peers, and in some aspects he wants it to be like that, in other aspects he does not. For instance, he wants to be able to have a close relationship to his mother, but is not capable of doing so. John also wants to be like his peers in the scout troop, but during the camp he is not, because of his red mattress. On the other hand, the uniform and staff he has on his first day in the scouts make, in his eyes, his appearance better than the others'. Hence, he is different. However, this kind of otherness he likes. When dissimilar is synonymous to better, John wants to be different from every one else. When it is synonymous to weird or not as good as the rest, he wants to be like his peers. Hence, John does not in fact want to be different, but better or preferably the best. He wants to have the highest grades, be the best cricket player, have the best childhood memories and be the most beloved son. In short, he wants to be perfect.

J. M. Coetzee does not reveal if he has written *Boyhood* in the rather unconventional way he did just in order to be unconventional. Critics seem to believe that he did so with the aim of distancing himself from the protagonist and protect his private life. Furthermore, the protagonist would not enjoy a high level of credibility and trustworthiness, as he is a ten-year-old boy when the narrative begins and thirteen when it ends. Moreover, since he sees himself as the centre of the world, like children in general do, the reader might become suspicious that he does not know what is happening in the outside world. No matter how much John might perceive himself as different from his family and friends; it is not likely that Coetzee chose to write his unconventional autobiography just in order to be different. On the contrary, Coetzee

wrote in an unconventional way in order to tell the truth as objectively as he could, and at the same time he distanced himself from the protagonist. John may not be as different as he suspects he is, but his childish, naïve mind puts him at the centre of the world and makes him perceive his uniqueness *in absurdum*. With that, a parallel between the protagonist's idea of himself as unconventional and the author's unconventional writing is ruled out. However, the ambition to reach perfection can be found in both of them. John compares himself to others and finds himself different either when he has reached perfection or when he has failed to do so. Coetzee might have chosen the form of narrative in *Boyhood* because it would bring him as close as possible to telling the absolute truth, which, in the case of all autobiographies, is the main goal. Reaching this goal would be perfection, thus the parallel between author and protagonist does not lie in the otherness, but in the perfectionism.

#### 4. Conclusion

The thought on which this essay builds is that the unconventional narrative is paralleled to the protagonist's perception of himself as different. After the analysis of generic conventions, the protagonist's otherness and the connection between them, it became obvious to me that the text I dealt with was very complex. It is filled with small details, which can change the entire meaning of a chapter depending on how that little detail is interpreted. Furthermore, the strict generic conventions of autobiography became clear and the artistic freedom I connected to authorship became limited.

*Boyhood* might have been intended to be J. M. Coetzee's autobiography, but according to the generic conventions in Philippe Lejeune's *On autobiography* it is not. An autobiography ought to be written in a retrospective point of view, and the author, narrator and protagonist ought to be identical. *Boyhood* is written in the present tense, the author and protagonist are identical, but the narrator is an omniscient third person one. The difference between narrator and protagonist means that the story is, in accordance with Lejeune's theory, not an autobiography, but a biography. However, the same theory suggests that biographical writing in the present tense belongs to the category of diary or journal. That would put *Boyhood* in two categories, or a mixture of them. However, most diaries are written at or close to the time the events written about took place. Coetzee, on the other hand, wrote his story 45 years later. Even if Lejeune does not state when a diary has to be written in order to be a diary, it seems far-fetched to put *Boyhood* in that category.

The most accurate genre for Coetzee's book could be *autrebiography*. This is a term invented by Coetzee in order to describe *Boyhood*. The word *autrebiography* is a play on

words; it is similar to autobiography, but instead of the Latin prefix auto-, meaning self-, he uses the French word *autre*, meaning other. However, *autobiography* is not an established genre and has no set rules, thus it is not to be treated as if it were a customary one. Instead, the most correct genre for *Boyhood* is biography. However, since it is not a traditional biography, an additional description is to prefer. For example, it could be described as a biography written by the protagonist, or an *autobiographical biography*.

John, the ten-year-old protagonist whom we get to follow for three years, perceives himself as different from his family and peers. He sometimes calls himself unnatural or not normal, but he is ambivalent towards otherness as such. One of the first types of otherness in himself which John reveals is the fact that he has not been beaten neither by teachers in school nor at home by his parents. This makes him “unnatural”, as he calls it. He wishes that his father would beat him, which would result in the unnaturalness being removed, but he also claims that if his father would beat him, he would call for his revenge.

In school, John differs from his peers mainly by having a different religion than the majority of his classmates. Most boys in the class are Protestants, but John claims to be a Roman Catholic. He claims that because he likes the letter R. This is also the reason why John prefers the Russians over the Americans. His liking of the Russians might have him ostracized; therefore, his preferences in the countries participating in World War II remain a secret.

John is bilingual, as his Afrikaner family speaks English. This causes ambivalence in John; he feels that he is not completely English, nor is he totally Afrikaner. He does not belong in any of the linguistic groups, and that makes him feel different from other people. This sort of linguistic otherness cannot be affected by John himself, but his dissimilarity from his peers can change. John does not actually strive for being different, but for perfection. The highest grade and the most perfect scout uniform are some of his goals, and when he reaches them he is happy. When being different means being the best, John longs for being unlike his peers. On the other hand, when he stands out because he has failed to do something, he wishes to be like his peers. He has a clear division between good and bad otherness, and the good one is synonymous to perfect.

Although John perceives himself as unconventional and different and Coetzee has written *Boyhood* in a rather unconventional style, there is no parallel to be found between the two breakings of conventions. John wants to be perfect and in his attempt to reach perfection, he often attracts attention to himself. Coetzee, contrarily, does not give any clear explanation to why he has written *Boyhood* in such an unconventional way. Critics present different theories concerning this question. Most critics argue that it is to distance himself from the protagonist

and thereby protect his private life. Others suggest that the choice of narrative is based on the ability to tell the truth. An omniscient third person narrator would be able to come closer to telling the absolute truth, which is the goal of biographical writing, than the very young protagonist. However, no critics claim that Coetzee wrote an unconventional story in order to be different. It is possible that Coetzee wanted *Boyhood* to be perfect, but according to the generic conventions stated by Philippe Lejeune, he failed to do so. Hence, John's otherness in his strive for perfection and Coetzee's unconventional story about his boyhood do not parallel each other.

It might be true that Coetzee wanted to distance himself from John when he wrote *Boyhood*, like many critics have suggested. Some of the critics have met Coetzee and some even know him. Therefore, they might have a more accurate image of him and his personality and a better understanding of how Coetzee and John are similar to each other. However, my idea of the reasons for the unconventional style is not only those which have been discussed by critics. I also believe that it could be artistic freedom taken too far for traditional readers or just playfulness in the writing. Either way, Coetzee has succeeded in writing a book from a ten-year-old's perspective and the text and the thoughts presented in it really seem to come from a young boy with a darting mind. No matter if one likes Coetzee's unconventional style of writing or sees it as a failure to write an autobiography, Coetzee's skillfulness cannot be disregarded. I truly believe that he managed to confuse more people than me with the twists, turns and breaking of conventions in *Boyhood*.

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