



Identity and narrative in Doris Lessing's and J.M. Coetzee's Life Writings

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Abstract

The main focus of this thesis is the manner in which Doris Lessing and J.M Coetzee construct their identities in their life writings. While Lessing has written a “classical” autobiography using the first person and past tense, Coetzee has opted for a more fictional version using the third person and the present tense. These different approaches offer us a unique opportunity to look into the manner in which fiction and facts can be combined and used to create works of art which linger permanently between the two. It is also interesting to see how these two writers have dealt with the complications of being raised in Southern Africa and how that influences their social and personal identities.

In the Introduction I present the writers and their oeuvres briefly. In Chapter 1, I explain the terms connected with life writing, identity and narrative. In the second chapter I begin by looking into the manner in which their respective life writings begin and what repercussions does using the first and the third person have? In the third chapter I analyse their relational identities, i.e. the role that environment and family play in Lessing's and Coetzee's sense of self. In the fourth chapter I establish the “causal connections” which are the connections between the main events of one's life and how they have shaped the individual in the present. While analysing these causal connections I try to discover what Howard E. Gardner (2011) has called “the crystallizing experience”, that is the moment or episode that marked the beginning of Lessing's and Coetzee's interest in writing fiction. In the conclusion I compare the similarities and differences between their life experiences, trying to confirm the view that there is not only one identity, one life story, therefore looking for truth in life writing becomes superfluous. What we should be looking for instead is a unique vision of life and for what Coetzee has termed the “aura of truth”.

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Introduction

Doris Lessing and J.M. Coetzee are both Nobel laureates whose impressive oeuvres have inspired readers for decades. They were both raised in Southern Africa (Lessing in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe; Coetzee in South Africa), and even though they moved away from Africa physically, in their writing they seem rarely to be able to disconnect from the continent mentally. When Lessing is asked if she found it strange that she was still associated with Africa, she points out: “No, because it seems to me I belong to both places really. I certainly think I am returning to southern Africa when I write” (Lessing&Daymond, 2006, p.239). The mystery of the veld, the suffering they have seen growing up has inspired them in their creative endeavours, as Coetzee emphasised in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech in 1987: “The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable” (Coetzee&Attwell, 1992, p.99).

Doris Lessing has written both realistic and space fiction novels. Her works display a tremendous versatility and cover a wide range of themes: from her first novel in which she describes life on an African farm (*The Grass is Singing*, 1950); to the metafictional experimentation in which she deals with the theme of breakdown and compartmentalization (*The Golden Notebook*, 1962); to space fictions (*The Memoirs of a Survivor*, 1974; *Shikasta*, 1979; *Mara and Dann*, 1999). Reading her novels I could not help but be impressed by the range of themes and concerns that stem from her experiential life and imagination. Her versatility can be illustrated by taking the last novel from the *Children of Violence* series *The Four Gated City* (1969) as an example. After 609 pages of realism, in the appendix she sets up a scenery of the world in decline, where people behave violently and the society has crumbled. This appendix took me completely by surprise, even though I had read some of her other space fiction before it; I just did not expect it to happen in the “realist” phase of her writing career. She tries to push the boundaries of the realist novel in order to give us a glimpse of the future, and it does not look good: “The human race had driven itself mad, and these sudden outbreaks of senseless violence in individuals and communities were the early symptoms” (*The Four-Gated City*, 1969, p. 628). The passion displayed in her writing challenges us to see that there are other ways of understanding reality, what she calls in *The Four-Gated City* “extrasensory powers” which enable “a significant portion of population” (p.637) to see things beyond what is visible to the eye. This is the “power” she wishes to cultivate for herself and in turn inspire us to

search for it ourselves. As Roberta Rubenstein (1979) summarizes in her concluding remarks about Lessing's work: "Her efforts to break through not only the intellectual blinders to perception and knowledge, and conventional assumptions concerning the nature of reality itself, but also the limitations of verbal expression, should assure her stature as one of the major, unique and visionary writers of our time" (p.256).

J.M. Coetzee is prolific both as a fiction writer and as a critic. In his fiction he has been preoccupied with the manner in which literature can go beyond the historical and political discourses. He has been especially interested with questioning the representation of the Other in Western literature. Almost all of his characters live on the margin of society and in one way or another fight for survival, the main component of this survival being the escape from the impositions of their surroundings. Coetzee's interest in linguistics (he holds a Ph.D in linguistics from the University of Texas) has also shaped the manner in which he thinks and writes and he has experimented with the ways in which literature is able to capture reality. Michela Canepari-Labib (2005) points out that while postmodernists and poststructuralists have questioned the "existence" of reality and have developed theories in which reality is seen as a textual construction (p.115); Coetzee on the other hand "seems still to hold true the assumption that – because words refer to 'things', concrete referents, extralinguistic realities which corrupt every aspect of language – these relationships can be *only partially* linguistic" (Canepari-Labib, 2005, p.116). This is an important point to keep in mind while reading Coetzee's fiction, because it allows us to interpret it as a fiction which questions the manner in which reality is depicted. Nevertheless, it does not question the existence of reality; this probably comes as a result of his upbringing in the tumultuous South African environment, where he witnessed the injustices committed against the black population and the sufferings that the latter underwent at the hands of the white minority. If he questioned that reality, he would diminish their suffering. On the contrary, in his collection of essays *White Writing: On the culture of letters in South Africa* (1988), he emphasises that the white colonists who first came to Africa depicted the Hottentot tribe as lazy, dirty and primitive (p.18); but they never stopped to think that the way the tribe lived was actually a good life in which one is not punished to work all day, every day:

Nowhere in the great echo chamber of the Discourse of the Cape is a voice raised to ask whether the life of the Hottentot may not be a version of life before the Fall (as Bartolomé de las Casas suggested in respect of the Indians of the New World), a life in which man is not yet condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but instead may spend his day dozing in the sun, or in the shade when the sun grows too hot, half-aware of the singing of the birds and the breeze of his skin, bestirring himself to eat when hunger overtakes him, enjoying a

pipe of tobacco when it is available, at one with his surroundings and unreflectively content (p.18).

Questioning of the manner in which people, environments, political and historical situations are depicted is what marks Coetzee's fiction. Moreover, he challenges our interpretation of his fiction every step of the way; his works do not offer us solutions or answers. He probes society and reality continuously and we as readers are encouraged to interpret by ourselves what his writing represents or does not represent.

Both Lessing and Coetzee resist being put into categories. Lessing has resisted the epithet of feminist writer, she was especially defensive when *The Golden Notebook* was endorsed by feminists. She has made it very clear that this novel was an experimental one whose main aim was to challenge the form of the conventional novel. The central theme of the novel being “breakdown” which comes as a result of facing all the compartmentalizations and divisions within oneself: “But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war” (Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, 1971, p.8).

The inspiration and the challenge that these two writers have presented me with, has been the main reason for choosing to focus on both of them. They are known for being private, especially when asked to interpret their novels. Coetzee evades any questions which requires him to either confirm or deny any analysis or reading. Jean Sévry (2000) recalls that in an interview he asked Coetzee about the interpretation of his novels, to which the writer replied: “It is for you to decide” (p.13). Lessing tends to express annoyance when readers try to interpret her novels by drawing upon her life; despite the fact that in her autobiographies she sometimes points to specific people and situations and tells us how they have been turned into fiction. But she emphasises that such questions are not important: “If I had wanted to write an autobiography then I would have done it, I wouldn't have written a novel” (*Under my skin*, p.160). It seems easier to yield an autobiographical interpretation of Lessing's fiction, especially her first novels, as she has admitted herself: “First novels, particularly by women, are often attempts at self-definition whatever their literary merits” (*Walking in the shade*, p.15). When it comes to Coetzee the issue becomes somewhat paradoxical, even though Derek Attridge (2004) ensures us that:

Coetzee's biographers, when they draw their connections between the life and the fiction, will have a mass of material to work with: even with the small amount of biographical information that is currently in the public

domain it is clear that the novels are woven out of personal experiences and obsessions at least to the same degree as the majority of novels and probably more so (p.139).

The situation has changed since then, because in 2012 J.C. Kannemeyer published Coetzee's authorized biography *J.M Coetzee: A life in writing* in Afrikaans. It is translated in English by Michiel Heyns and made available in 2013. Alexandra Coghlan (2012) emphasises that by choosing an Afrikaans scholar to write his biography, Coetzee has been able to avoid being captured completely:

In commissioning Kannemeyer, a scholar of Afrikaner literature, to write the work in Afrikaans, Coetzee has maintained his determinedly ambiguous, non-assimilated identity on the fringes of both Western and South African literary traditions. He has also ensured that many readers will read the work only in Michiel Heyns's English translation. Just as we thought we had a grip on the slippery JM Coetzee, so certainty wriggles free of our grasp, and even the words themselves are revealed as mediated, provisional, inexact (para.19).

The book is comprised of 702 pages, therefore now we have ample biographical data to compare to *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Another reviewer, Rebecca Davis (2012) points out the paradoxes surrounding the image of Coetzee: "For some years now it has appeared that Coetzee sought to inherit the mantle of literary recluse donned by figures like JD Salinger" (para.5); but after one reads the biography it becomes "clear that the image of the writer as reclusive and secretive is simply not accurate" (para.6). Coetzee has not hidden his opinion that: "In a larger sense all writing is autobiography. Everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write" (Coetzee&Attwell, 1992, p.17). But it still seems more difficult to draw similarities between Magda, Michael K, the Magistrate and Coetzee than Martha Quest, Anna Wulf and Doris Lessing. But there are other characters like the writer in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Elizabeth Costello whom Coetzee uses in order to deliver lectures on animal cruelty and human reason in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) who share similarities with Coetzee. By presenting controversial views through these characters, Coetzee is able to distance himself from these views, which also allows him to analyse them from other angles through the other characters. One of the intellectuals who responds to Costello's lecture in *The Lives of Animals* is Peter Singer, a professor in the Center for Human Bioethics at Monash University. In his response he writes about a conversation he has with his daughter about Coetzee, Costello and "their" views. He tells his daughter that it is difficult to respond to Coetzee since the author hides behind the character of Costello:

But *are* they Coetzee's arguments? That's just the point – that's why I don't know how to go about responding

to this so-called lecture. They are *Costello's* arguments. Coetzee's fictional device enables him to distance himself from them. And he has this character, Norma, Costello's daughter-in-law, who makes all the obvious objections to what Costello is saying. It's a marvelous device, really. Costello can blithely criticize the use of reason, or the need to have any clear principles or proscriptions, without Coetzee really committing himself to these claims (loc. 1315).

Many critics have expressed surprise when *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial life* (1997) was published, followed by *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial life* (2009). These are all autobiographical works, referred to as autobiographical fiction or fictionalized memoirs. The first two works allow us a closer look at Coetzee's childhood, early adolescence and his early twenties. *Summertime* on the other hand moves away from John Coetzee and traces the journey of his biographer who collects information about him by interviewing people that have known the writer. By taking a look at what others say about him, often very personal and unflattering details, the book shows us another innovative way of writing about oneself. *Summertime's* subtitle is the same that of *Boyhood*, but in former the writer is dead. This is one of the reasons why it has been considered more a fiction than a memoir, but it is clear that Coetzee experiments with both genres in order to point out that the difference between the two might not be as big as critics and readers might expect.

In this thesis I will focus upon the manner in which Lessing and Coetzee construct their identities in their life writings. It will be interesting to observe the manner in which they have built their identities from when they were children to when they start thinking and challenging these early identities and developing/constructing their own versions of self. Their life writings have been chosen because I think they will provide us with interesting examples of the manner in which individuals in general, and artists in particular struggle with defining themselves, especially those that were faced with difficult and challenging environments (Africa) and had to deal with a history and a role they were uncomfortable with: being white during the colour bar years of Africa.

Chapter 1

Theoretical framework

In both volumes of her autobiography: *Under my skin: Volume one of my autobiography to 1949* and *Walking in the Shade: Volume two of my autobiography, 1949-1962*, Lessing has opted for a more classical autobiography, i.e., written using first person and past tense (Lejeune, 1989, p.8). One of the interesting aspects of her life writings are her views on autobiography and truth. She admits that often individuals (especially creative ones) can weave entire stories from small occurrences: “This is the worst deceiver of all – we make up our pasts. You can actually watch your mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then spinning a tale out of it ... But there are moments, incidents, real memory, I do trust” (*Under my skin*, p.13).

This leaves the reader with the problem of sifting between the “real memories” and the fictional tales. Barrett J. Mandel (1980) emphasises that the more the author claims that he possesses the truth and is able to communicate it, the more the reader loses interest in that autobiography (p.57). On the other hand when the author is aware that “he is at least as wrong as he is right, that his work contains as much fiction as reality, that he is playing as much as speaking in earnest, constructing as well as intuiting”, then we can experience the “profound satisfaction” of reading an autobiography (p.57). Lessing is aware of this and she is not afraid to compromise her book by admitting that writing an autobiography is differently approached in different periods of one's life. Mandel (1980) attempts to give us an answer as to why are we drawn to autobiography when it could be just as fictional as a novel:

Readers turn to autobiography to satisfy a need for verifying a fellow human being's experience of reality. They achieve satisfaction when they feel strongly that the book is true to the experience of the author and when they are aware, to a lesser degree, that the book is an achievement of literary construction, making use of pretense as a way of highlighting its opposite, reality (p.58).

Is Coetzee trying to achieve this in his memoirs? He has written about himself in a more experimental form, using the third person and the present tense thus presenting the content in a more “fictionalized” form. This form raises many issues for both readers and writers, and when Coetzee was asked by his publisher: “Is it fiction or memoir”, the author replied with another question: “Do I have to choose?” (Coetzee as quoted in Collingwood-Whittick, 2001, p.14). The separation of the “factuality” of life writing from fiction has raised many discussions. Mandel

(1980) emphasises that the division of literature into fiction and non-fiction is “an illusion”. According to him all “serious writing” is both true and false, and this depends upon the manner in which readers interpret the writing. It is the readers who participate in the release of “the intrinsic powers of the specific art form” (p.55). But a combination of autobiography and fiction does not undermine either one or the other genre:

The simple truth that autobiography is not fiction is not threatened by the fact that a swatch of autobiography out of context may have the appearance of fiction. Nor is the truth threatened between two genres. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night* experiment successfully with both fable and fact. These experiments do not turn three hundred years of autobiographical writing into second-rate fiction. They merely show that good books can be written by drawing heavily from both experience and from imagination. The unicorn does not invalidate the horse (p.62).

Coetzee has combined elements of both fiction and life writing, leaving the reader to figure out how to read *Boyhood* and *Youth*. We can read it as D.H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* which “borrows techniques from autobiography, but no one denies that it is ultimately fiction” (Mandel, 1980, p.53). Or, more accurately as a work which borrows elements from fiction, but is ultimately comprised within the genre of life writing because the protagonist's name is John (the same as the author), and many of the facts of the author's life fit with those of the protagonist. As Mandel (1980) observes: “In autobiography, unlike fiction, we expect the work to embody, even in its illusion, the truth of the life of the writer” (p.62). Collingwood-Whittick's (2001) says that “one of the major obstacles to accepting *Boyhood* as an unambiguous record of the author's personal history is, of course, the notoriety of Coetzee's reputation as a fiercely private person” (p.15). But this image and perception of Coetzee is not wholly accurate, as his biographer confirmed that: “... Coetzee's cooperation was given 'unstintingly and even enthusiastically'. Even when quizzed on the most sensitive of family matters, Coetzee gave full and meticulous answers. Typically, the only subject on which he would not be drawn was that of the analysis of his works” (Davis, 2012, para.3).

One of the forerunners in autobiographical studies Philippe Lejeune (1977), emphasises that there are three ways of establishing whether the third person is the same as the author (p.33). One is “the use of periphrasis to show that the third person will fulfil the functions of the first: 'he who writes these lines' (the ritual formula of prefaces in the third person), 'he who is speaking to you' (a figure used when giving a speech)” (p.33). The second way is when the connection is established through context, and the third is “the use of proper name” (p.34). In Coetzee's work the name John is mentioned for the first time on page 88, and is used two times throughout the book. While we see

that Coetzee uses the third technique to link the author with the character, at the same time he evades it because the first time he actually mentions the name is in the middle of the book. It has been noticed that for Coetzee it is quite common to speak about himself in third person (Coetzee & Attwell, 1992, pp.393-394). Even though Collingwood-Whittick (2001) maintains that this division of present and past self can be interpreted as a result of “some traumatic schism” which is done to “cut off his pre-adult self from the persona who emerged after he had left South Africa at the age of twenty-one” (p.21). According to Olney (1980) this is an “accurate” mode of thinking and writing about oneself, since when one writes about the past it is as if one writes about another self because it is impossible to recall the past-self in the present: “Time carries us away from all of our states of being; memory recalls those earlier states – but it does so only as a function of present consciousness: we recall what we were only from the complex perspective of what we are, which means that we may very well be recalling something that we never were at all” (p.241).

In their critical work *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson emphasise that writing about one's life is more intricate than it might seem: “For the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation” (p.1). Some of the terms used to depict this “act” are: autobiography, memoir, life writing, life narrative. In this thesis I use life writing, with the exception of quotes taken from critics who use the term autobiography. The term autobiography has a long tradition, Smith and Watson (2010) trace its development from “the period prior to the Enlightenment in the West” (p.3). During this period autobiography was used to depict writings of people who had achieved some form of public recognition. But since this term historically “privileges the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing, it has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject” (p.4). Therefore now, the term memoir has gained prominence: “In contemporary writing, the categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author’s standing as a professional writer with the work’s status as an aesthetic object” (p.4). According to this definition, Doris Lessing's “autobiography” can also be comprised under the term memoir, since she writes extensively about the “writing process”, especially at the beginning of *Under my skin*. But Laura Marcus (1994) emphasises that “the distinction most frequently made is that between autobiography as the evocation of a life as a totality and 'memoirs' which offer only an anecdotal depiction of people and events” (p.3). Therefore the term autobiography fits with Lessing's two volumes of autobiographies

in which she covers her life from when she was born until 1962. Whereas the term memoir with Coetzee's *Boyhood* which covers his life from when he is eight until thirteen, and *Youth* which begins when he is nineteen and ends when he is twenty-four. This time line has to be inferred from the narrative because it is not explicitly stated by the author. Smith and Watson (2010) emphasise that they use the term “*autobiography* only to refer to the traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative” (p.4). We can see how complicated the terminology can be, when in the title itself Smith and Watson have used two terms: autobiography and life narratives. In the book they point out that they prefer the term life writing because it is “a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's as a subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (p.4). On the other hand they use “life narrative” to include “self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic or, digital (p.4). The term “life writing” will suffice for this thesis since it includes the works of both Lessing and Coetzee.

1.1 Identity and narrative

The manner in which we can analyse identity is by looking into the ways in which people tell stories about themselves, as Smith and Watson (2010) emphasize: “The stuff of autobiographical storytelling ... is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences” (p.40). The life experiences of Lessing and Coetzee will help us understand the manner in which they think about their past selves and what kind of identities emerge when they write about their childhoods and early adolescence. What makes their life writing interesting to read is their awareness of the contradictions in their social environment and the way these are incorporated in the development of their personal identities. Some of the scholars who have employed this viewpoint are: Jerome Bruner (2004), John Paul Eakin in his books *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) and *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008); Jens Brockmeier and Donald Carbaugh's in their book *Narrative and Identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture* (2001). In Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman's book *Memory, Identity, Community: The idea of narrative in human sciences* (2001), critics David Carr and Alasdair MacIntyre study the manner in which identity building is affected by the community in which one is raised. I will also use Jennifer L. Pals' (2006) method of analysing the manner in which people make “causal connections” in order to create coherence in their life narratives. Furthermore Howard E. Gardner's (2011) theory of

“crystallizing experience” will also be employed. In *Childhood and Society* (1963), Erik H. Erikson uses psychoanalysis to study the manner in which children interpret society and how they create their identities. I will apply Erikson's views on anxiety, shame, isolation and intimacy in order to analyse Lessing's and Coetzee's feelings and thoughts during their childhoods.

In addition to these theories, I will also use the readings and analysis provided by the following critics: Paul Hollander (1997); Alice Ridout (2009; 2011), P. Kamatchi (2010) on Doris Lessing. Whereas on Coetzee: André Viola (1997), Jean Sévry (2000), Sheila Collingwood-Whittick (2001), Margaret Lenta (2003), Derek Attridge (2004), Cristiana Pugliese (2004), Dirk Klopper (2006), Anna Chicoñ (2006), Sue Kossew (2010).

I will begin with defining the terms identity and narrative and how they have developed in social sciences.

In the best-selling book *Cultural studies: Theory and practice* (2008), Chris Barker points out that identity has become an important issue in the field of cultural studies in the 1990s (p.216). We can talk of two types of identities: self-identity and social identity. The first one comprises the way that we think of ourselves, whereas the second one is the identity of the group to which we feel a sense of belonging (p.216). In *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and society in late modern age* (1991), the famous British sociologist Anthony Giddens emphasises that self-identity is not a set of characteristics that we possess, but a conscious process we engage in: “Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*” (p.53). This means that a person who is capable of developing a sense of self and at the same time can communicate it to others in the form of narrative – that person has “a reasonably stable sense of self identity” (p.54). The word stable does not mean that there is only one identity that is continuous “across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent” (p.53).

In the chapter “The identities of Malcolm X¹” John Baresi (2006) adopts the theories of developmental psychologists who view self-identity as developing from the influence of the social environment upon the individual. Before we can develop a sense of self, all we have is our social identity which our environment endows us with: “We think of our selves, first, within a social interactive context, as members of some social group, before coming to think of ourselves as unique

1 Malcolm Little – a famous Muslim minister and black activist

individuals within those groups” (p.203). Baresi (2006) emphasises that “achieving a unified and continuous sense of self is no easy task, especially in a context such as Malcolm's, where one is faced with conflicting social identities out of which one must weave one's personal identities” (p.204). Therefore in the process of weaving a narrative out of one's life, the author has to figure out the manner in which all of these identities can be incorporated. As Smith and Watson (2010) point out:

Some life writers are aware of the conflicts and contradictions, some not. Some narrators thematize the conflictual nature of identity in the narrative, while others do not. Some narrators explicitly resist certain identities; others obsessively work to conform their self-representation to particular identity frames. We can read for these tensions and contradictions in the gaps, inconsistencies, and boundaries breached within autobiographical narratives (p.40).

We also have to keep in mind the distinction between the “narrated I” and the “narrating I”. The first one is the “self” that is being remembered, for example the child Doris as being remembered and written about by the adult Doris who is the “narrating I” (Smith&Watson, 2010, pp.72-73). But it is not as clear-cut as this, as Smith and Watson point out, there are instances when the “narrating I” is in fact presented in third person, which is the case in Coetzee's life writing (p.73). In addition there is the third “I”, “ideological I” which “is the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story” (Smith&Watson, 2010, p.76).

The term narrative has been applied in different fields within the human sciences. According to Jens Brockmeier and Rome Harré (2001) narrative has become a term which is not easily defined, except for literature where narrative fiction has been studied for decades. They offer a definition in which they emphasise its cultural-social aspect:

In its current, generalized sense, narrative is the name for an ensemble of linguistic, psychological, and social structures, transmitted culturally-historically, constrained by each individual's level of mastery and by his or her mixture of communicative techniques and linguistic skills – our “prosthetic devices”, as Bruner called them – and not least, by such personal characteristics as curiosity, passion and sometimes obsession. In communicating something about a life event – a predicament, an intention, a dream, an illness, a state of angst - it usually takes the form of narrative; that is, it is presented as a story told according to certain social conventions (p.41).

According to Hinchman and Hinchman (2001) there are two different schools of narrative. The one

that views narrative as a means to create “order out of chaos, i.e. out of a manifold of disordered impressions, sensations, memories, and inner states” (p.xix). The other school views it as representing a “pre-narrative identity that is already there 'in itself” (p.xix). The first adopts what is called “the weaker” theory of narrative, whereas the second the “stronger” one (Hinchman&Hinchman, 2001, pp.xix-xx). The viewpoint that is adopted in this thesis is that of Jerome Bruner (2004) and John Paul Eakin (2008) which is the “strong” theory of narrative identity. According to Bruner (2004) narrative is in fact “constructivist”, which is “a view that takes as its central premise that “world making’ is the principal function of mind, whether in the sciences or in the arts” (p.691). According to the constructivist viewpoint narratives are stories that we tell and construct out of our social, cultural and personal life experiences. But Bruner emphasises that narrative is not simply a way of organizing the crude material of these experiences, in fact “it is the only way we have to think/talk/write about our lives” since “there is no such thing psychologically as 'life itself” (Bruner, 1987, p.693). This does not mean that what we call life is an illusion, but the only manner in which we can construct it is through telling stories/building narratives. As Eakin (2008) emphasises: “The basic proposition here is that narrative is not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; it is an essential part of our sense of who we are” (p.ix). This might give us the impression that we can construct ourselves however we wish, but we have to bear in mind that “the story of one's individual life depends on the larger stories of the community to which one belongs” (Hinchman&Hinchman, 2001, p. xxiv). Therefore Lessing's and Coetzee's life writings are marked by intricate social and cultural influences, raised in Africa in middle-class families, Lessing's family is British whereas Coetzee's is Afrikaaner. They were both raised surrounded by prejudice and ignorance regarding the black majority's culture and way of life, but went on to challenge these myths. Coetzee's identity, as we shall see, is even more complicated, being born into an English speaking Afrikaaner family. Since an early age he became aware of his contradictory identities and had to try and reconcile them, especially at school where he had to hide the identities that were not “acceptable” to the society at large. But even though they have rejected the stories of the white community in Africa, they have been marked by them. In *Youth* (2002) when John is in London, he feels that “South Africa is like an albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe” (p.101). This proves that no matter how hard one tries to remove oneself from the stories of the community, one is always a part of it. When John writes his first story, he unconsciously sets it in South Africa: “It disquiets him to see that he is still writing about South Africa. He would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind” (*Youth*, p.62). Even when one leaves the community, its stories follow one everywhere because it is those stories that have shaped one's identity. Alasdair MacIntyre

(2001) argues that being part of the community cannot be ignored and we inherit both the positive and the negative aspects of the community we are born into (p.259). Therefore, according to MacIntyre, Americans cannot say that they are not responsible for slavery because they were not alive during that time, and the British cannot deny that they are part of their colonial history: “The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide” (p.259).

However, this does not mean that we cannot challenge the social and historical identity when building our own personal identity, but the context is needed as a starting point (MacIntyre, 2001, p.259). Coetzee (1992) agrees completely with this view, since he has expressed many times that all the white people in South Africa are responsible for apartheid and the crimes committed against the black population: “The whites of South Africa participated in various degrees, actively or passively, in an audacious and well planned crime against Africa” (Coetzee&Attwell, 1992, p.342). He has struggled with his role in these crimes, and while in *Boyhood* this remains implicit, since as a child he has difficulties in understanding the seriousness of the situation; in *Youth* it is expressed explicitly when in London he compares Afrikaans to Nazi: “Speaking Afrikaans in this country ... is like speaking Nazi, if there were such a language” (p.127). Coetzee is ready to accept his responsibilities as a white man from South Africa, and he accepts MacIntyre's view that his self-narrative is intertwined with the narrative of South Africa, both those of the white community which he has had to challenge and those of the black community which he tried to understand from the outsider's point of view.

There are critics who disagree with the narrative approach, and claim that life is too chaotic and does not abide to the rules of narrative structure where there is a beginning, a middle and an end (Hinchman&Hinchman, 2001, p.xxii). In the chapter “Narrative and the real world: An argument for continuity”, David Carr (2001) attempts to prove the above utterance is inaccurate. He uses Husserl's theory which claims that we cannot view anything as happening in the present without intertwining it with the past and the future (p.11). According to this theory, the manner in which we view our life is by “explicitly consult[ing] past experiences, envisag[ing] the future, and view[ing] the present as a passage between the two” (12). This shows that our actions have a “means-end structure” which is similar to that of the “beginning-middle-end” structure of narrative:

The events of life are anything but a mere sequence: they constitute rather a complex structure of temporal

configurations that interlock and receive their definition and meaning from within action itself. To be sure, the structure of action may not be tidy. Things do not always work out as planned, but this only adds an element of the same contingency and suspense that we find in stories. It hardly justifies claiming that ordinary action is a chaos of unrelated items (Carr, 2001, p.13).

One of the ways to create order and coherence in life writing is by analysing “causal connections”, i.e., the significant experiences that mark the growth of self. Jennifer L. Pals (2006) uses this theory in order to analyse the manner in which people construct narratives about their past experiences by drawing upon the most important events or circumstances in their lives, and interpreting the manner in which these have shaped them into individuals they are at the moment of recounting these experiences.

One of the advantages of thinking of the formation of causal connections as an interpretative strategy for creating coherence within the life story is that it shifts our conceptualization of coherence toward the idea that it is something we continually try to do as we construct our life stories – an interpretative act of self-making - and away from the idea that coherence is a static characteristic that the life story as a whole does or does not possess (p.177).

The analysis of causal connections is divided into three phases: first, we have to find the causal connections in the narrative “in which the narrator spontaneously and explicitly interprets an aspect of the past experience, broadly defined (e.g. relationships, life stages etc.) as having enduring causal meaning in relation to an aspect of the self or identity” (p.179). This will be difficult to achieve in Coetzee's life writing since he resists all retrospection; Lessing on the other hand constantly interprets the past events and the effect they have had upon her. The second phase involves looking into the nature of the experience, then evaluating the importance of that experience in developing a specific identity of the narrator. The third phase involves “identifying patterns of self making across multiple causal connections within a person's life story” (Pals, 2000, p.180).

Another reason why Lessing's and Coetzee's life stories are interesting is due to their standing as famous and successful writers. We expect that when we read about their lives we will get an insight into the manner in which their genius has developed. In the book *Creating minds: An anatomy of creativity seen through the lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham and Ghandi* Howard E. Gardner (2011) has analysed the lives of creative people from different domains in order “to tease out principles that govern creative human activity, whenever it arises” (p.6). According to him creative people are marked by “divergent thinking” which means that “when given a stimulus

or a puzzle, creative people tend to come up with many different associations, at least some of which are idiosyncratic and possibly unique” (p.20). Gardner borrows the views from educational psychologists Benjamin Bloom and Lauren Sosniak who studied gifted people and found out that these individuals could recall precisely the moment when they became infatuated “with a specific material, situation, or person – one that continues to hold attraction for them” (p.32). This moment is called “crystallizing experience”, a term borrowed from David Feldman (as cited in Gardner, 2011, p.32). As I move into the analysis I will try to find the “crystallizing experience” which marks the beginning of Lessing's and Coetzee's interest in the art of writing. It is undeniable that what pushed them to write was the environment they grew up in. In most of their novels the themes of injustice, inequality, how to challenge group mentality and accepted discourses are dealt with. When we read their life writing we are made aware that the interest for these issues sprung from when they were very young, as Gardner's observes: “The creator is an individual who manages a most formidable challenge: to wed the most advanced understandings achieved in a domain with the kinds of problems, questions, issues, and sensibilities that most characterized his or her life as a wonder-filled child” (p.31).

To summarize, the “crystallizing experience” will be used to focus especially on that moment/event/experience that triggered Lessing's and Coetzee's interest in writing; whereas when looking at the “causal connections” I will analyse all the experiences in their childhoods and early adolescence that in some way have influenced their sense of self.

Doris Lessing has pointed out that there are certain types of childhoods that make one a writer. These are the ones in which the child is pressured in some way to become more aware of herself/himself and her/his environment: “People become writers because they've had very pressured childhoods, and that doesn't necessarily mean a bad childhood. I don't think 'unhappy childhood makes writer', but I think a child that has been forced to become conscious of what's going on very early – they often become writers” (as quoted in Greene, 1994, p.9).

What makes Lessing and Coetzee more conscious of their environments could be explicated by the term “Third Culture Kid” developed by David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken (1999), which Alice Ridout (2009; 2011) uses in her analysis of Lessing's autobiography.

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full

ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (Pollock&Van Reken, 1999, p.19).

Even though Coetzee's ancestors came to Africa from Netherlands in the seventeenth century and both his parents were born in Africa, the term “third culture kid” can be applied to him as well, as Pollock and Van Reken (1999) point out: “TCK's can be children who never leave their parents' country but are still raised in a different culture” (p.28). He grew up feeling alienated to his Afrikaner roots, inclined towards English, feeling like an imposer on the country of his birth Africa. This is confirmed by Pollock and Van Reken (1999) who emphasise that: “TCK's are raised in a neither/nor world. It is neither fully the world of their parents' culture (or cultures) nor fully the world of the other culture (or cultures) in which they were raised” (p.6). Therefore the issue of identity becomes a more complex matter with “third culture kids”; but the questions presented by Smith and Watson (2010) offer a guideline which we can use when dealing with this issue in life writing:

What models of identity are used (recall the distinction between the person writing, the narrator, and the narrated “I”) to represent the subject? What are the features or characteristics of the models of identity included in this self-representation?

Where do you find evidence of conflicting models of identity at work in the text? What's the significance of these contradictions and conflicts? Does the narrator seem to be aware of the conflicts? If identity is seen as conflictual, is this thematized in the narrative? (p.244).

In this thesis I will engage in a discussion of differences between fiction and life writing. I will also point out to the ways in which their personal experiences have been used in their fiction; and whether Coetzee's fictionalized version of life writing enables him to write about himself in ways that are not available to Lessing who choose a more “classical” approach.

Since identity is said to be constructed through narrative, and that in different narratives we could encounter different types of identities, the question arises: is Lessing's first-person narrative termed a classic autobiography more “truthful” than Coetzee's fictionalized version? Or is it the other way around? This is the question that I will focus on in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 I will deal with relational identities focusing on the manner in which the relationships with the family members (especially mothers), and the community at large play a role in the construction of identity. In Chapter 4 I will analyse the “causal connections” and the “crystallizing experience” in Lessing's and Coetzee's life writing. In the concluding chapter I will compare their life experiences by pointing out to

differences and similarities. I will also summarize what I have found out about life writing in general and Lessing's and Coetzee's life writing in particular during the process of analysis.

Chapter 2

Life writing in first and third person

“I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?” (Under my skin, p.17)

The issues of truth, memory, identity are important in life writing, but as Lessing points out in *Under my skin* sometimes she remembers details about certain episodes, and nothing about others. This leads to an interesting question about life writing: *“How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't?” (Under my skin, p.12)*. She emphasises that while she used to think that “memory [was] Self, Identity ... now [she is] sure that it isn't so” (p.13). What she means is that even if we lost our memory, the self would survive by “creat[ing] our lives, creat[ing] memory” (*Under my skin*, p.13), and in a way that's what life writing is about. While the author has had certain experiences, feelings, he/she does not know how they will be put on paper until the writing process begins and in a way “writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place” (Coetzee&Attwell, 1992, p.18).

In this chapter I will analyse the manner in which Lessing's and Coetzee's life writings begin, and what style of narration they use. What kind of identities and what kind of views about identity emerge from their life writings? What does Lessing's statement quoted below reveal about the differences between Coetzee's fictionalized and her classical form of life writing? I will also look into whether her life writing is “conventional” or whether she has pushed the boundaries of first person, past tense life writing.

I think autobiographical novels are truer than autobiography, even if half the novel is untrue ... *Martha Quest*, which is full of made-up characters and invented situations, in fact gives the flavour of that time [Southern Rhodesia from 1919 to 1949] much more than *Under My Skin*. I am too old now to put all that violent emotion in it (Lessing&Field, 1994, para.3).

Not only in this interview, but in *Under my skin* she makes the same point. Does this mean that *Boyhood* is able to capture the atmosphere and the “flavour” of Africa to a larger degree than Lessing's life writing? What does truth and accuracy actually mean in life writing? These are some of the issues I will be dealing with in this chapter.

2.1 Tigger/Hostess and Lessing's personal identity

Under my skin begins with this sentence in third-person: “She was very pretty but all she cared about was horses and dancing” (*Under my skin*, p.1). Lessing is not talking about herself, she remembers this was said about her grandmother who died when Lessing's mother was three years old. We would expect that a classical autobiography about Doris Lessing would begin with a sentence about her. From the beginning we can sense that Lessing is pushing the boundaries of the genre in order to capture the complexities of writing about her life. Moreover, the fact that she begins her life writing with a sentence about her dead grandmother may be said to prove Eakin's point that “all autobiography is relational” (Eakin, 1999, p.43)². The manner in which she begins her story anticipates (even if we have not read her novels) the role that her mother has played throughout her life. Following this introduction, she traces the family tree further and talks about her birth just after World War I, amidst destruction and death: “I do know that to be born in the year 1919 when half of Europe was a graveyard, and people were dying in millions all over the world – that was important. How could it not be?” (p.8). In many of her novels she focuses upon the connection that we have with the world and the people around us, despite the fact that in Western culture individualism is considered holy. In her novels she always tries to develop that imagination which will make us all feel part of the world and extensions of each other.

In Chapter 2, Lessing reflects about what it means to write about oneself and other people. She emphasises that this would be a different book had she written it when she was thirty or forty years old. This points out to the fact that our ideas and interpretations of ourselves change with the passing of time; some experiences gain more focus when we are twenty, others when we are thirty or forty. Therefore, as the interpretation of our life changes, our identities change as well, they are not stable, organic entities that remain unaffected by changes in our external environment. But what strikes us more in this chapter is Lessing's admission that the reason she decided to write about her autobiography was due to the fact that there were at least five biographers who were interested in writing about her³. She beat them to it by writing it herself as a way of gaining agency over her life; but her admission that “writers may protest as much as they like: but our lives do not belong to us” (*Under my skin*, p.14), sounds as if she has accepted defeat. She gives another additional reason why she wrote the two volumes of her autobiography:

² I will develop this view further in Chapter 3 Relational Identities.

³ Carole Klein published an unauthorized biography entitled *Doris Lessing: A biography* (2000).

One reason for writing this autobiography is that more and more I realize I was part of an extraordinary time, the end of the British Empire in Africa, and the bit I was involved with was the occupation of a country that lasted exactly ninety years. People no longer know what that time was like, even those who live in Southern Africa (*Under my skin*, p.160).

But in the statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Lessing clearly admits that her novel *Martha Quest* (1952) was able to capture the feel of this period better than *Under my skin*. There are many contradictions regarding her reason for writing this book and the admission that “the older [she gets] the more secrets [she has], never to be revealed and this, [she knows], is a common condition of people [her] age” (*Under my skin*, p.11) leaves us baffled. When we read autobiographies, most of us expect to find out the writer's secrets; and if Lessing admits here that there are many she does not plan to reveal to us, we might doubt the truthfulness of her account. But as she continues to develop her point, it is not as simple as that, because the truth about past is never a clear-cut, objective concept. There is not one truth that can be captured, not one way to remember but many different ways, and *Under my skin* is one of the possibilities.

Memory is of utmost importance in autobiographies, and drawing from recent studies in brain science, Eakin (1999) emphasises that what we remember has nothing to do with recovering what is already there, but it has more to do with “construct[ing] the material” (p.106). It is not that memories are hidden in our brains and we just go there and pluck them, we “construct” the past in different ways, and the interpretation of it depends upon our state at the moment. As Lessing points out:

When you write about anything – in a novel, an article – you learn a lot you did not know before. I learned a good deal writing this ... Memory is a careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one. And not always self-flattering. More than once I have said: “No, I wasn't as bad as I've been thinking”, as well as discovering that I was worse (*Under my skin*, p.13).

Despite the attempts to be “honest” in life writing, a writer can merely build the narrative of the past in the present. The “narrated I”, that Lessing writes about is created by the “narrating I” who is Lessing at the point of writing: “The child is not doing the remembering or the narrating of the story. Nor is the 'narrated I' directly experiencing that past at the time of writing the narrative or its telling” (Smith&Watson, 2010, p.73). At the same time Lessing assures us that she believes that there are certain “real memor[ies]” especially since she has “spent a good part of [her] childhood 'fixing' moments in [her] mind” (*Under my skin*, p.13). She has fought for her memory to prevail

over those of other people, especially when she was a child and adults would try to impose their versions upon her. She has told herself: “*this* is the truth, *this* is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it” (*Under my skin*, p.13-14). She tries to prove this by writing about incidents from her life in Persia where she was born and where she lived until she was two and a half years old. Even though the “narrating I” is not experiencing the events, Lessing has experimented with drugs such as mescaline and morning glory seeds which in combination with her imagination have enabled her to reconstruct her early childhood. In one instance when she took mescaline she “recreated” her own birth, but in her recreation the birth became something beautiful, not the painful version she was told as a child: “The storyteller invented a birth as the sun rose with light and warmth coming fast into the enormous lamplit room” (*Under my skin*, p.21). The adult Lessing deals with the trauma of being told that her birth was a painful experience, and a disappointment to her mother who had hoped for a boy, by imagining a better version where she is wanted and welcomed into the world. We can see that hearing her mother say she expected a boy was very traumatic for Lessing because the moment that she is capable of giving birth to herself she does so by imagining “light” and “warmth”, the elements that she feels have lacked since the beginning of her life.

Lessing's life writing gives us a rare glimpse not only into her life, but also into the social, economical and political situation in Southern Rhodesia when she lived there. It seems at times that this is as much a history of Africa as it is her autobiography. For those interested primarily in her personal life, this may seem an evasion on her part; whereas for those who want a first hand depiction of the difficult and complex situation in Africa, her book will be greatly appreciated. Lessing has emphasised that children who have difficult childhoods, and who are forced to reflect upon their environments early on are those that have the potential to become writers. Even though this cannot be considered a recipe, since her brother grew up to be as racist as their mother; the truth is that Lessing has always challenged authority, and she wonders “how to account for the fact that all my life I've been the child who says the Emperor is naked, while my brother never, not once, doubted authority?” (*Under my skin*, p.17). She began by challenging the attitudes of white Southern Rhodesians who discriminated the black population. She tries to write about how her father disliked it when the children used the black servants for running small errands, and how her mother worried about the servants' diet and hygiene. At the same time the workers were underpaid and her mother could not hide the fact that she disliked them. Lessing is aware of the contradictions in her parents' behaviour, but she is also conscious of divisions within herself. She has two identities which she calls “Tigger” or “Hostess”, and the private identity which is named the “observer”. The

“Hostess” emerges as her social self, she is “bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected” (*Under my skin*, p.20); whereas “Tigger” is a part of “Hostess”:

This personality was expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport, that is, to laugh at herself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert. In that it was a protection for the person I really was, “Tigger” was an aspect of the Hostess. There was a lot of energy in “Tigger” – that healthy bouncy beast (*Under my skin*, p. 89).

As Lessing points out, the “Hostess” personality is very useful when she has to meet the press, do book tours which she always describes as a waste of a writer's time. But on the opposite side of the “Hostess” is the “observer” which is her private identity, the one she tries to keep secret from the rest of the world: “The observer, never to be touched, tasted, seen, by anyone else” (p.20). Does she keep the “observer” completely out of our reach throughout her life writings? We get a glimpse of this personal identity here and there in Lessing's depiction of her dreams, in her struggle to escape social constraints, and when she tries to find her own voice as a writer. On the other hand she talks about “Tigger” and “Hostess” as if they were someone else, a view which is confirmed by Eakin (1999) who points out that our different identities can seem as divided as any other person: “...the selves we have been may seem to us as discrete and separate as the other persons with whom we live our relational lives. This experiential truth points to the fact that our sense of continuous identity is a fiction, the primary fiction of all self narration” (p.93). Lessing does not harbour delusions that her identity is a continuous and stable entity. On the contrary she emphasises in both volumes of her autobiography the problems related to reconciling the contradictions within herself.

Lessing's mother raised her children according to Doctor Truby King's upbringing method. The most important aspect of this method was discipline regarding every aspect of the baby's life: from feeding, toilet training to sleeping time. According to Erikson (1963) this type of early toilet training can lead to the child becoming “whiny and demanding”, “hostile and intrusive” (p.83). The child in the early stages of development (before the age of three) learns how to keep things or discard them, and in that manner gains more control over his/her environment: “This whole stage, then, which the Germans called the stage of stubbornness, becomes a battle for autonomy” (p.82). As a result, according to Erikson the attempt to control or train the child too early can have the opposite effect: “If outer control by too rigid or too early training insists on robbing the child of his attempt gradually to control his bowels and other ambivalent functions by his free choice and will, he will again be faced with a double rebellion and a double defeat” (p.82). This is proven by

Lessing who describes herself as “an over-sensitive, always observant and judging, battling, impressionable, hungry-for-love child” (*Under my skin*, p.26). One extreme example is when Doris was told not to play with matches because she could set the house on fire, and she admitted that “it had not occurred to me to play with matches, but now I could think of nothing else” (p.108). While she tried to set the dog house on fire, the hut where they preserved their food got burned as well. But while Lessing was stubborn and rebellious, her brother was compliant and obedient, especially as a baby, therefore everyone liked him. As Ridout (2011) points out the reason her brother seemed to accept her mother's authority was because as a boy he was never scolded for escaping into the bush, he could enjoy the freedoms of nature; but Lessing, especially after she entered puberty, was told not to go into the bush alone. Lessing describes her brother's freedom with envy: “If my early memories of Baby are all of a cuddlesome complacency, on someone's lap, usually mine, then later they are of him in energetic movement, flying down the hill on his scooter, then his bicycle, brakes off, or at the top of some fearsome tree, or hitting sixes over the roof of the house while he ran like a duiker” (*Under my skin*, p.97). Whereas if Lessing wanted the same kind of freedom she had to fight for it, and Ridout interprets Lessing's escape into the bush as an attempt to move away from “her mother's ideas of what a middle-class English girl and a lady should be” (p.434). Since her birth Lessing felt rejected by her mother, and she reacted by being a difficult child. As Giddens (1991) emphasises, even though the child has not developed a consciousness, he/she can still feel the disapproval of the people closest to him/her: “Anxiety is felt through a real or imagined - sensing of a caretaker's disapproval long before the development of consciously formed responses to the disapprobation of the other. Anxiety is a 'cosmic' experience related to the reactions of others and to emerging self-esteem” (p.45).

The struggle for getting her own will intensified when Lessing entered adolescence and the main battles were fought about clothes and diet. Doris wanted to decide what to wear, how much to eat herself, and her choices were always in defiance of what her mother wanted: “My fourteenth was make or break year, a sink or swim year, a do or die year, for I was fighting for my life against my mother. That was how I saw it. That was how it was” (*Under my skin*, p.155). As an adolescent she also developed an obsession with her body which her mother disapproved of; but the more the mother disapproved, the more the daughter engaged in such rebellion. There was for instance the occasion when Doris bought her first bra, and her mother was so shocked that she called her husband and then pulled up Doris's dress to show him the bra. This deepened the anger that Doris felt for her mother and made her even more determined to fight back. From an early age she told herself that she would not turn into her parents, and this has been a main drive in her life. While

they moved from England to Persia and Africa, Lessing took the opposite route back to England: “When I shrank from her, defending my body, refusing to let her touch me, I knew I was saying, 'I will *not* be infected by your illness, by your hypochondria, the diabetes, the scarred pitiful shrunken stump, by the war, the war, the *war*, - the Trenches, I will *not*'” (*Under my skin*, p.173).

According to Erikson (1963) during identity development in adolescents one of the stages is: intimacy vs. isolation. Intimacy means that the adolescent is “eager and willing to fuse his identity with that of others” (p.263); the opposite is “distantiation”: “The readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own, and whose 'territory' seems to encroach on the extent of one's intimate relations” (p.264). Lessing felt unaccepted at school because she could not share “the self made by the farm” with anyone, she felt alienated and alone and longed for the life on the farm where she could be herself. But on the farm, despite enjoying the space and isolation, her mother constantly tried to interpose her views and her desires upon her, thus infringing upon that freedom: “What I *feel*, when I put myself back in this or that scene, is a raw loneliness, isolation, anxiety. I was a defended observation post. I felt, in short, like everybody does, until we make little places for ourselves in a group, family, a gang, where the cold air does not blow so cruelly on tender skins” (*Under my skin*, p.149). This quote shows Lessing dealing with the stage of intimacy vs. isolation as depicted by Erikson (1963): the loneliness of a teenage girl as she tries to establish her place in the world. We see Lessing caught up in this fight during her years at school: “The danger of this stage is isolation, that is the avoidance of contacts which commit to intimacy” (Erikson, 1963, p.266). Was her decision to leave school a plunge towards isolation? Has Lessing escaped from intimacy throughout her life? When she ran away from her first husband? When she married and then divorced her second husband? When she left her children and moved to England?

It was only out in the African landscape, in the bush that she felt free and truly at home; she enjoyed learning the practical farm chores. She revelled because “[what she was] learning was the precise timings of nature” (*Under my skin*, p.127). As Giddens (1991) points out: “Trust in others, in the early life of the infant and, in chronic fashion, in the activities of the adult, is at the origin of the experience of a stable external world and a coherent sense of self-identity” (p.51). But we have seen that because of the strict upbringing, Lessing felt the lack of love from her mother very early. Moreover, as she grew up she noticed how unsuccessful her father was at farming. All the inefficiency and poverty which surrounded her parents made her turn to nature with its perfect timings and organization in order to feel that she belonged to a coherent and stable world. Even

though she moved to Salisbury, and later to London, Lessing claims that she has never felt more herself than when she was part of the farm life: “That was the last year when I was part of the bush, its creature, more at home there than I’ve been since in any street or town. My last year as a farm girl able to turn her hand to anything: the technology of that time has gone, and now all farms have proper electric or gas cookers, electric light, piped water, refrigerators” (*Under my skin*, p.195).

But one of the most important aspects in the development of her personal identity was challenging the prevailing racist attitudes among the white people in Rhodesia. After she left school forever at the age of fourteen Lessing began to work as a nursemaid. In one of the households she worked she was influenced by her employer who talked about the necessity to feed and treat the black majority better. He supplied her with books about politics and economy which opened up new horizons for the fourteen year old Doris who had harboured such ideas even before she met her employer; but this was the first time she had them confirmed by someone else:

When Jasper said that the Natives should be properly fed and educated and housed, because in the long run the whites would benefit, he put forward these views in a mild and judicious way, as if he had only just thought of them himself – not, as I knew from private discussions with him, because he was burning with impatience because of the inefficiency of it all. So did seditious ideas enter this household, years before they were respectable (*Under my skin*, p.182).

It is impressive to see how even as a teenager Lessing had the will power to challenge her society, family and her culture, even though she lacked the evidence at this stage. Since she was a child she developed utopias and perfect societies where wars and conflicts did not exist, like the ones depicted in *Martha Quest*⁴: “Into these lovely and loving societies I had begun to fit black people, particularly black children. Kindly, generous, happy people, in cities where no one went to war, black, brown, white people, all together...” (*Under my skin*, p.156). Lessing fought off all her mother's attempts to turn her into a nurse (like herself) or any other type of profession that she thought would be appropriate for her. She moved to Salisbury to work as a phone operator and to live by herself, continuing to defy her mother in every aspect and following her “I will not” (i.e. I will not turn into my parents) motto until the end.

⁴“She looked away over the ploughed land, across the veld to the Dumfries Hills, and refashioned that unused country to the scale of her imagination. There arose, glimmering whitely over the harsh scrub and the stunted trees, a noble city, set foursquare and colonnaded along its falling flower-bordered terraces. There were splashing fountains, and the sound of flutes; and its citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together, and these groups of elders paused, and smiled with pleasure at the sight of the children- the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze skinned, dark-eyed children of the South” (*Martha Quest*, p.15).

2.2 An English Afrikaans boy

In contrast to Lessing, Coetzee does not address the issues of what it means to write about his life. He begins his life writing by setting the scene of family life through the depiction of a trivial episode involving his mother and father. The incident recounts his mother trying to learn how to ride the bicycle, and his father making fun of her pointing out that “women do not ride bicycles” (*Boyhood*, p.3). John joins his father in his laughter, but after she stops riding the bicycle he feels guilty that he has turned against her. At the end of the chapter John admits that he does not want his mother to ride the bicycle because he wants her to be at home waiting for him. He is afraid of being abandoned, moreover he feels that his solidarity should be with men, even though his instincts are to do the opposite: “He wants her always to be in the house, waiting for him when he comes home. He does not often gang up with his father against her: his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father. But in this case he belongs with the men” (*Boyhood*, p.4).

John displays the same divisions of identity as the ones depicted by Lessing. He does not tell his mother that “at school ... boys are flogged” (*Boyhood*, p.5); and at school he does not tell the other boys that “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” (*Boyhood*, p.6). As Baresi (2006) points out: “Social identity is a characteristic way of ascribing sameness to an individual by virtue of his or her relationships with others, whereas personal identity is the way in which an individual characterizes sameness of self” (p.202). He emphasises that even though we can have a say in the the manner in which our social identity is developed, it is the “ascription by others” that is of utmost importance (p.202). We can see that at the beginning of the narrative, John Coetzee's feelings that his family is different makes him characterize it as “unnatural”. The strong desire to belong to society overcomes John at this early stage of his life since he has not yet gained the maturity needed for developing the personal identity, which according to Baresi begins in adolescence: “To be born is to be born into a social identity, often into more than one such identity” (Baresi, 2006, p.205). What are the social identities which Coetzee is born into? What kind of personal identity does he begin to develop in his adolescence? Does the third-person narrative and the present tense help the writer capture the immediacy of a child's feelings? How does it all compare with Lessing and her identity building? These are some of the questions that I shall try to answer in this part.

There is a deep conflict between John's dual social identities. Since he is not beaten at home he is constantly afraid about what will happen if he gets beaten at school. He cannot participate in the conversations with his peers because he is afraid that he will be found out. The third-person narrative gives Coetzee (the writer) the possibility to recount his childhood from a distance, whereas the present tense gives the narrative an "immediacy" that makes us feel like we are there with him at school, and feel his anxiousness. Reading his experiences is both painful and humorous because we as readers know how ridiculous this self-torturing really is; especially since he takes it so far that he starts to think about suicide: "If it ever happens that he is called out to be beaten, there will be so humiliating a scene that he will never again be able to go back to school; in the end there will be no way out but to kill himself" (*Boyhood*, p.7). Attridge (2004) compares these episodes in *Boyhood* to *Huckleberry Finn* where the main character helps the slave despite the fact that he thinks it is wrong: "The reader has no doubt about the adult author's position and relishes the resultant irony" (p.150).

In the essay "Confession and Double thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1992), Coetzee analyses the manner in which these authors deal with the issue of telling the truth in both fiction and life writing. Coetzee claims that the "hyperconscious" human being is caught in a vicious circle where he/she will analyse his/her actions infinitely, never being able to capture what the truth is. He/she will be blinded by his/her self-deception and self-doubt, and that the main reason behind confession is the confessant's ardent desire to have his/her version of events confirmed. Coetzee shows the manner in which Rousseau deluded himself about his actions and motives. When Rousseau tried to justify his actions by pointing out to his good intentions, the question readers should pose themselves is: "How can he know that that part of himself which recalls the good intention behind the bad act is not constructing the intention *post facto* to exculpate him?" (Coetzee&Attwell, 1992, p.266). Taking a cue from his reflections on confession in this essay, Coetzee has avoided justifications for his deeds during his childhood and youth. Attridge (2004) explicates that by using the third-person and the present tense Coetzee is able to avoid ethic commentaries on his actions, thus leaving the readers with all the responsibility. Moreover, writing in third person enables Coetzee to tell the story about himself without asking for absolution: "The use of the present tense and third person doesn't convey a desire to avoid responsibility or the absence of any sense of remorse; rather, it signals that the author has no interest in *making a case*, in convincing the reader of the unimpeachability of his motives or the fullness of his repentance" (Attridge, 2004, p.148).

His social identity has many facets that he needs to keep track of and that complicate his life even more. Not only is he afraid that his family is not normal because he is not beaten, he faces difficulties at school everyday because his family even though Afrikaans, they speak English at home. While analysing the identities of Malcolm X, Baresi (2006) claims that developing a private identity is done in negotiation with the social identities, and for individuals like Malcolm X "... achieving a unified and continuous self is no easy task" because "one is faced with conflicting social identities out of which one must weave one' personal identity" (Baresi, 2006, p.204). The same is true for John, it is difficult for him to reconcile all the contradictions and paradoxes which he is faced with. For example in Chapter 12 we find out that his mother's side is German but that her parents had always spoken English with their children. His father is Afrikaans but he also speaks English well, even though not as well as his mother. John feels an aversion towards the Afrikaans boys at school and he is terrified when there are talks that "false English boys" will be removed from English classes and will be put in Afrikaner ones. Not only does he hate the Afrikaans boys, he also sides with the English when it comes to the Boer wars:

In stories of the War one is supposed to side with the Boers, fighting for their freedom against the might of the British Empire. However, he prefers to dislike the Boers, not only for their long beards and ugly clothes, but for hiding behind rocks and shooting from ambush, and to like the British for marching to their death to the skirl of bagpipes (*Boyhood*, p.67).

His dislike of the language can be connected to his dislike of the Afrikaans boys and the crude way in which they use the language. In her memoirs, the author and critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2009) recounts her dislike and resistance towards her "mother tongue" Hokkien (a dialect of Chinese). When she is asked why she resents this language, she tries to describe her feelings as a child when the language was used to "insult and curse" her because of her Malaysian mother. Now she has realized that her "resistance" was a result of "childish resentment, confusion, reactive identity formation" (p.313). John's rejection of Afrikaans language is also part of the process of "reactive identity formation". He claims that: "Though his surname is Afrikaans, though his father is more Afrikaans than English, though he himself speaks Afrikaans without any English accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner" (*Boyhood*, p.124). He cannot understand or subscribe to the definition of nationality, since he rejects his father's heritage and embraces English as his first language. On the other hand, he remembers that when he was four or five and visited the family farm Voëlfontein for the first time, he could not speak any Afrikaans. After a while he becomes ecstatic to hear himself speak the language with the ease and naturalness that one associates with

the mother tongue: “When he speaks Afrikaans all the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away. Afrikaans is like a ghostly envelope that accompanies him everywhere, that he is free to slip into, becoming at once another person, simpler, gayer, lighter in his tread” (p.125).

The complication regarding national belonging and “mother” tongue are not the only things that complicate John's social identity. There is the issue of religion as well, since his family “are certainly nothing” (p.18). Therefore when he is asked at school which religion he belongs to he is unsure what the correct answer is. This is one of the most comic episodes in the book:

“What is your religion?” asks the teacher of each of them. He glances right and left. What is the right answer? What religions are there to choose from? Is it like Russians and Americans? His turn comes. “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 (pp.18-19).

When he and the Jewish boy are separated from the rest of the class, he realizes that he has made a mistake and hopes that he gets to answer the question again the next day. For the rest of the school year he has to keep up the pretence with the other Catholic boys. All of these secrets and identity issues that John is faced with make him doubt the definition of childhood as “a time of innocent joy” (*Boyhood*, p.14). He contemplates that: “Nothing he experiences in Worcester, at home or at school, leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring” (*Boyhood*, p.14). Everything gets even worse as he enters puberty and he feels more and more uncomfortable in his own skin: “Something is changing. He seems to be embarrassed all the time. He does not know where to direct his eyes, what to do with his body, what expression to wear on his face. Everyone is staring at him, judging him, finding him wanting. He feels like a crab pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene” (*Boyhood*, p.151).

The young Coetzee strangely finds himself lusting after other boys' legs and is perplexed and ashamed by his desires: “Beauty and desire: he is disturbed by the feelings that the legs of these boys, blank and perfect and inexpressive, create in him. What is there that can be done with legs beyond devouring them with one's eyes? What is desire *for*? (p.56). Moreover his sexual development is stifled by his mother who cannot talk to him openly about sex. She tells him that babies come from “the mother's backside” and he even argues with other boys who claim that babies come from the “other hole”. Why should it be more acceptable for the mother to tell him that babies come from the backside is perplexing; it is more common to tell the child that babies are

brought by storks or some other innocent lie. On the other hand his father does not want to talk about these issues at all. John innocently trusts his mother and takes her talk about sex as “a mark of her enlightenment” (p.57); whereas his father's reluctance as a proof of “the benightedness of his father's family” (p.58). This early awkwardness and shame in connection to his sexual feelings leads to awkward sexual encounters which are depicted in *Youth*.

John begins to feel uncomfortable when he sees the Coloured children in their ragged clothes. Even though there is no hate in the eyes of these children, he cannot bring himself to chase them away: “Whatever happens, whether they are chased away or not, it is too late, his heart is already hurt” (*Boyhood*, p.73). He notices quite early the morally wrong and unjust manner in which the black people are treated in his community. Moreover, he is aware that the Hottentots “not only ... come with the land, the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been” (p.62). The intense self-awareness that marks him from the beginning make it difficult for him to take childhood as a time of innocence, especially taking into consideration the country in which he grows up and the difficulties he has to face. For example on one occasion where he sees a poor Coloured boy, John perceives him as an innocent being, whereas he perceives himself as “a dark soul”. The black child “is a living reproof to him, [but] is nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much that he squirms and wriggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him any longer, despite his beauty” (*Boyhood*, p.61). The child represents the connection that natives share with the land and nature, therefore he is depicted as uncorrupted, whereas John sees himself as a representative of colonialism which makes him a sinful creature. Other black people that he knows are the ones that work on the family farm. He is curious about the way they live, but is told that he is not allowed to visit their house, which leads him to pose the following logical question which none of the grown ups can answer: “If it is not embarrassing to have Ros's wife and daughter work in the house ,..., cooking meals, washing clothes, making beds, why is it embarrassing to visit them in their house?” (p.86). As Lessing points out in her life writing, the contradictions that surrounded the attitude of white people is the most difficult aspect to write about. But this is a very important topic for readers who are interested in understanding the psychology behind apartheid and how people can behave so cruelly towards their fellow men. Reading history books will only give us facts and figures, but the life writing of people with acute perceptual skills like Lessing and Coetzee will give us a first-hand depiction of the way white people justified their behaviour to themselves. While his family has no problem with the manner in which they talk to or behave towards the servants in the farm, the young boy feels a strong sense of guilt and shame “when he passes Lientjie in the passage and she has to pretend she is invisible and he has to pretend she is not

there. He does not like to see Tryn on her knees at the washtub washing his clothes” (p.86). The reason why John begins to develop different opinions and ideas regarding these issues is because he feels disdain for people who are submissive and accept the conventions of society; and one of the reasons why he dislikes Afrikaners is because he thinks they are compliant:

Afrikaaners are afraid to say *you* to anyone older than themselves. He mocks his father's speech: “Mammie moet 'n kombers oor Mammie se knieë trek anders word Mammie koud” – Mommy must put a blanket over Mommy's knees, otherwise Mommy will get cold. He is relieved he is not Afrikaans and is saved from having to talk like that, like a whipped slave (*Boyhood*, p.49).

Despite the fact that he does not fit into his father's family (neither does his mother), their farm plays a major role in John's life even though he does not spend so much time there. He feels that he belongs there like nowhere else; he does not claim ownership over the farm, on the contrary he feels that he belongs to the farm. What fascinates him most about the farm is its continuity: “The farm exists from eternity to eternity” (*Boyhood*, p.96). He feels that only on the farm can he actually live, feel and breathe freely. At this point his identity as a rude, unsocial, eccentric boy is formed: rude because he does not like small talk; unsocial because his parents have no friends and he is not used to being around other people; and eccentric because “his heart is old, it is dark and hard, a heart of stone” (*Boyhood*, p.123) In *Youth* these feelings will only deepen as he moves from being a teenager to a young adult whose first sexual experiences are “painful to read” (Attridge, 2004, p.160). Attridge sees *Youth* as “an unflinching admission of the faults of the self-centeredness, cruelty, ineptitude, and callousness – most painfully evident in a series of disastrous sexual encounters” (p.158). We can see evidences of this personal identity developing when he describes that “when strangers come to the house, he and his brother scuttle away like wild animals, then sneak back to lurk behind doors and eavesdrop” (p.78). He attributes his eccentricity to his mother's family, but he does not hide the fact that he would much rather be like her family than like his father's. The only reason he is nice to his father's family is because “without participating in their rituals there is no way of visiting the farm” (p.79).

While he is a quiet, submissive, scared boy at school; at home he defies his mother and father; sometimes he is even cruel to her, feeling the pangs of shame when his father points out that this side of his identity is not visible to his friends and teachers at school:

His rages against his mother are one of the things he has to keep a careful secret from the world outside. Only

the four of them know what torrents of scorn he pours down upon her, how much like an inferior he treats her. “If your teachers and your friends knew how you spoke to your mother ...” says his father, wagging a finger meaningfully. He hates his father for seeing so clearly the chink in his armour (p.13).

He is submissive and quiet at school because he is ashamed of all the secrets he has to keep. Lessing's social persona Tigger is the opposite of that: she is feisty, funny and entertaining. But both of them hide their private self. They feel the need to hide the increasing obsession with sexual desire and the guilt associated with those feelings, a guilt which becomes prominent due to the fact that neither of their families are prepared to talk openly about sex. Both John and Doris are aware of the cracks in their identity, which Coetzee calls “the chink in his armour”, but not only in themselves. John realizes that he is not the only one who struggles with contradictions and inconsistencies in his character. His mother is often caught expressing contradictory opinions: “She says so many different things at different times that he does not know what she really thinks. He and his brother argue with her, point out the contradictions. If she thinks farmers are better than attorneys, why did she marry an attorney?” (*Boyhood*, p.33).

While Lessing and Coetzee struggle with understanding these issues, they enter adolescence and start building their personal identities which move further away from the accepted modes of thinking and behaviour. Giddens emphasises that identity is not something that we are given but it is a conscious process which humans engage in (p.52). This “reflexive awareness” which marks both Lessing and Coetzee's narrative of self shows us that being aware of divisions and cracks and trying to live with the “chinks in [their] armour” does not compromise the truthfulness of their narrative. On the contrary being aware of the processes of identity creation and all the contradictions that are involved in this process, makes their life writing more believable and an interesting source for analysis of identity.

Since Coetzee has chosen to engage with his life by experimenting with the genre of fictional memoir he can avoid addressing issues such as memory, secrets, and what it means to involve himself in writing about his life. Though, there is one episode in *Boyhood* where John asks his friends about their earliest memories. This is unusual for the private and reserved John but “the point of the game is, of course, to allow him to recount his own first memory” (p.30). Then the storyteller in him weaves a memory in which he witnesses a dog being run down by a car.

It is a magnificent first memory, trumping anything that poor Goldstein can dredge up. But is it true? Why was

he leaning out of the window watching an empty street? Did he really see the car hit the dog, or did he just hear the dog howling, and run to the window? Is it possible that he saw nothing but a dog dragging its hindquarters and made up the car and the driver and the rest of the story? (*Boyhood*, p.30).

This quote shows the problems related to memory, especially when we know that the job of a writer involves making up stories, which is exactly what John does. He admits that his first memory is actually a mundane episode which involves him and his mother sitting on a bus with him wondering whether he should throw a sweet-wrapper which he holds in his hand. But because this memory is uninteresting, he makes up another one, and even though he can see holes in his story, he is still happy that his memory “wins” and is the most interesting one.

Reading *Boyhood* and *Youth* we feel that everything is recounted as it happens, and we do not think about the accuracy of each detail; and since it is partly fiction we “allow” the author to recreate conversations and include detailed descriptions of different scenes. Lessing emphasises that novels even though fictional may be capable of capturing the mood and atmosphere better than life writing: “If the novel is not the literal truth, then it is true in atmosphere, feeling, more 'true' than this record which is trying to be factual” (*Under my skin* p.162). Despite this claim, she still insists that she has written this book as an attempt to capture the interesting historical periods she has been part of. I would say that she has accomplished this, despite the fact that sometimes it may be wearisome to read the depiction of all the neighbours and people she has met; or in *Walking in the Shade* where she writes extensively about the comrades in London. Nevertheless, all these details contribute to complete a picture of the different periods in her life. Coetzee, on the other hand, has focused mostly on his family members with general depiction of school and teachers. And as Attridge (2004) has emphasised, *Boyhood* is an accurate depiction of the situation in South Africa at the time when Coetzee was growing up; and while it is problematic to evaluate whether it is based on facts, it is nevertheless a detailed account of a child's mind and how it copes with the difficulties posed before him while growing up in South Africa:

But *Boyhood* is a literary as well as a documentary work, and to the extent that it is the former, its object is not the conveyance of historical truth. Literature may, however, be deeply involved in an exploration of *truth-telling*, of what it means, and what it feels like, to articulate sentences governed by an obligation to be accurate and honest. *Boyhood* enacts the truth of confession, and writing as confession, without transgression, repentance, or absolution (Attridge, 2004, pp.155-156).

Smith and Watson (2010) also point to the complex issue of facts when it comes to life writing since

there are many dimensions to a factual account of a historical period: “To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political and cultural dimensions” (p.13). Moreover, they emphasise that the writer depends upon the readers to have his/her version acknowledged and accepted: “Thus autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and a reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life” (p.16). As a result of this, we can not evaluate whether autobiographical writing is true or false because “it resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood” (p.17). It is not of importance to think whether Coetzee's fictionalized version is more accurate or truthful than Lessing's autobiography, because we as readers establish an “intersubjective exchange” with the author; and once we accept the conditions of the specific genres and we share in the author's view of life and narrative we do not question the truthfulness of the account. Naturally, the events have to be cohesive and coherent otherwise the intersubjective exchange will break down, as Coetzee has shown in his analysis of Rousseau's autobiography which is wrought with self-deception and incoherent justifications. According to Coetzee (1992) since “autobiography is dominated by self-interest”, we might think that a writer has special information that he will part with willingly. According to him on some level even though one knows where one's self-interest lies, it is not possible to “bring it into full focus” (p.392). Coetzee emphasises that “the only sure truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot” (p.392). Therefore in his fictionalized life writing there is no deception of the reader because there is no claim that what is recorded is the truth and nothing but the truth. This is the freedom that the experimental genre has provided the writer with. As Smith and Watson (2010) conclude, when the writing is done as a project of contemplating about oneself then this is:

A basis for writerly tack and readerly trust. It does not rule out the use of the found, the fabricated, the strategic, the consciously invented. But it asks that “my experiments with truth,” Mahatma Ghandi's fine title for his autobiography, be in the service of a project larger than personal gain, opportunism, an overt political agenda, or a desire to obfuscate and impress (p.18).

After reading Coetzee's and Lessing's life writing we can say that they are not trying to impress or deceive us. Many of Coetzee's life incidents are not very flattering and he remains unapologetic, at least in his life writing. Attwell (2004) points out that this is a “secular confession” and therefore remorse does not necessarily follow (p.146). Moreover, expressing regret has nothing to do with truthfulness of the confession either, especially since sometimes expressing regret and remorse is performed as a justification act.

To feel and express regret for what it is that one has discovered (or produced) in one's articulation will add nothing to the truthfulness, or truth-directedness, of the confession; and it will provoke a further round of self-interrogation as the subject doubts the genuineness of his or her emotion. (This will hold true all the more if the confession is being made to another or to others, when there is everything to gain from an appearance of remorse) (Attridge, 2004, p.146).

When Lessing burns her family's storage hut, she tries to justify her actions, even though she never actually asks for forgiveness or expresses any remorse. She just points out that she wanted to burn the dog house, not the storage hut. Coetzee remains unapologetic to the end, he does not even try to justify his deeds as a child, for example when he and his brother steal the milk and blame it on the delivery boy, the narrator claims that "...this is not a deceit he feels particularly guilty about" (*Boyhood*, p.63). But when he crushes his brother's finger, he feels that the "memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding" (*Boyhood*, p.119); but he neither apologizes, nor does he explain the reason behind the action. As Attridge (2004) has written: "That the memory is exclusively of the physical experience and not its emotional or mental dimensions also removes any suspicion that the account is meant to exculpate..." (p.154); and by not trying to redeem himself, he wins us readers over and convinces us that what we read is an authentic account of a young person's dealings with the feelings of awkwardness, shame, disgrace and ineptitude, and not just an attempt to redeem himself.

Chapter 3

Relational identities

John Paul Eakin (1999) challenges the widely held assumption that if a woman writes about her life, then it is “relational, collectivist, and, for some reason nonnarrative” (p.50); whereas when a man does the same then it is “autonomous, individualistic, and narrative” (p.50). He points out that he encounters many examples that demonstrate: “... that the criterion of relationally applies equally *if not identically* to male experience. All self-hood ... is relational despite differences that fall out along gender lines” (p.50). The process of writing about oneself is bound to be associated with individuality and self-obsession, but if we limit our reading of autobiography to the individual who has written it, Eakin warns us that our reading and interpretation of life writing might become too narrow: “There is no little irony in the thought that the very Enlightenment model of the autonomous, rational individual that fostered the rise of the genre, may also be responsible – now more than ever – for restricting its possibilities” (pp.52-53). Obviously it is important to go deeper into the manner in which their parents' lives and their sense of identity has affected that of these two writers. In addition to “key individuals” in a autobiographer's life, Eakin (1999) emphasises that he uses the term “relational lives” to include life writings “that feature the decisive impact on the autobiographer of ... an entire social environment (a particular kind of family, or a community and its social institutions – schools, churches, and so forth)” (p.69). The term “Third Culture Kid” (TCK) is of utmost importance in this context since being raised in Africa has made Lessing and Coetzee more conscious of the cultural differences in their social environment. Lessing was caught up between the life on the bush and her mother's attempts to protect her children from Africa and instil in them proper British values. Her mother constantly talked about “home” and the British landscape which Lessing could not relate to since her childhood was built in the wilderness of Africa: “That England they talked about, all that green grass and spring flowers and cows as friendly as cats – what had all that to do with me?” (*Under my skin*, p.82). As Ridout (2009) puts it:

[Lessing] describes her house on the veld in intimate detail and these details reveal a TCK's sensibility concerning spaces and “home”. These detailed descriptions show clearly her parents' home on the veld functioned as a “culture between cultures”. For example, in her description of the house's interior, she juxtaposes her mother's very English Liberty curtains with the “pale grey mud of the walls” which was left “unwhitewashed, because it looked so nice with the Liberty curtains” and also with the “dressing table of petrol boxes, painted black” in her parents' bedroom (pp.113-114).

In the story *The Old Chief Mshlanga* (1951) Lessing captures the feelings of a young child who roams free in the African landscape, but because the child reads stories written about England, she is incapable of understanding Africa: “For many years, it was the veld that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun, and the wind spoke a strange language”(p.13). This story captures the ambivalence of the third culture kid who tries to reconcile what she sees with what she reads in the books. But as the child reads more about Africa, she begins to enjoy the environment and feel more comfortable: “And slowly that other landscape in my mind faded, and my feet struck directly on the African soil, and I saw the shapes of tree and hill clearly” (p.17). Lessing's father was more critical towards England, and he was able to enjoy the nature in Africa. Lessing's mother on the other hand always pined over her home country, idealizing everything that was British.

Both Coetzee and Lessing were influenced by their mothers, even though in different ways. While Lessing felt that her mother did not love her, Coetzee felt that his mother loved him “too much” and as a child he was tortured by the fact that “never will he be able to pay back all the love she pours out upon him” (*Boyhood*, p.47). Their fathers seemed to be in the background, Lessing turned to her father for support and justice. He was more sympathetic to her than the mother was, but he was war struck and depressed, therefore his ability to “be there” was destroyed. She describes him as “affectionate...but not tender” (*Under my skin*, p.26). While the mothers were more efficient than the fathers, it seems that the financial situation of the family depended on the latter's performance. The mother was a frustrated, passive observer who had to watch the family's financial and social situation deteriorate, and her frustration was involuntarily (or unconsciously) transferred to the children. Lessing claims that she has often wondered why her mother did not run the farm since she was more organized and efficient than her father. But despite the fact that Emily had worked for a living before she got married, she had been raised in a patriarchal society, therefore “she did not want to undermine her husband's self-respect” (*Under my skin*, p.178).

Lessing has spent a long time in therapy trying to understand her mother and her feelings towards her. Coetzee on the other hand, has remained more private regarding his relationship to his parents, until the publication of *Summertime* (2010) where he addresses explicitly his feelings towards his lonely father. By going deeper into this issue I will not only recount their childhoods, but will also look into the manner in which their feelings towards their parents changed as they grew older. In order to exemplify this I will also draw upon their later works: Lessing's *Walking in the Shade* (1997); *Alfred and Emily* (2008); and Coetzee's *Summertime* (2010).

3.1 “Made by war”: Lessing and her war struck parents

Lessing's first memory stems from before she was two years old. It is a memory of her first horseback ride with her father; she remembers how terrified she was and goes on to depict the episode in minute detail, recalling the smell of the horse, its size and the feel of her father's wooden leg: “Now that is a real memory, violent, smelly - physical” (p.18). Her mother used to tell her that: “Daddy used to put you in front of him on the horse when he rode to the Bank, and Marta waited at the gate to bring you back. You absolutely loved it” (*Under my skin*, p.18). Eakin (1999) emphasises the importance of “memory talk” for the child's developing sense of self. By memory talk he means “early conversations between children and their caregivers [which] lay the foundation for adult life writing much later on” (p.106). Lessing has fought to establish her own memories and fight against her mother's “memory talk”, but this talk has also encouraged her to begin telling stories about herself from an early age. Her emphasis that her first memory stems from before she was two years old proves the developmental psychologist Dennie Palmer Wolf's claim that the child develops “an *authorial self*” between the ages of two and four” (as cited in Eakin, 1999, p.116). The “memory talk” is very important in this process, because “the child who has learned through 'memory talk' 'to speak as subject and object, author and critic, character and narrator' is a budding autobiographer” (Wolf as quoted in Eakin, 1999, p.116). Lessing refers to many “memory talks” with her mother, but whereas according to Eakin this talk is usually conducted as a dialogue, Lessing usually phrases it as a monologue spoken by her mother. Eakin emphasises that family is the main reason that the child begins to remember different episodes and finds ways to talk about them. This helps the child in the process of developing his/her own identity:

I follow Jerome Bruner ... and autobiographers themselves in placing special emphasis on the family's role in this process: the family serves, he writes as the “vicar of the culture”, indoctrinating the child in the received “genres of life-accounting”. From this perspective we can think of the child's sense of self as emerging within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts (Eakin, 1999, p.117).

Lessing recalls how her mother kept telling her that as a baby she had been starved because she was not breast-fed. Because her mother had a flair for the dramatic, she kept repeating this story over and over again to the daughter: “It used to drive me wild with irritation – and my father too – that everything, always, was presented to the world as a drama” (*Under my skin*, p.23). But could it be that Lessing has inherited the same talent to dramatise events, which she has employed creatively in writing fiction? Early on, the entire family adopted nicknames from A.A Milne characters: “My

father was Eeyore, my brother Roo, my mother – what else? - Kanga. I was the fat and bouncy Tigger” (p.89). Her mother read to them, she ordered books from London and told them stories: “What a wonderful storyteller she was. She read to us too, and they were wonderful tales, but nothing would compare to her stories” (*Alfred and Emily*, loc.1999). It was her mother who instilled in Lessing the desire to read, which she has continued to love throughout her life, and more importantly nurtured her talent for weaving her own stories. Her relationship with her mother was marked by love, hate and pity. Lessing's attempts to understand this relationship and how it has affected her is important not only on a personal level, she uses it in order to understand why this type of fighting against one's parents has become more prominent in her time because “judging from histories and novels from the past, things were not always like this” (*Under my skin*, p.15). Lessing connects this with the modern condition where people expect certain conditions of life to be fulfilled, but she asks “against what expectations, what promises” (*Under my skin*, p.15). Giddens (1991) emphasises that modernity is a time in which people are offered more freedom to reflect upon themselves and their identities: “The idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled is alien to pre-modern culture” (p.74). Every aspect of society during modern times is prone to “chronic revisions”, due to new discoveries nothing remains the same (p.20). He emphasises that modernity is a time of doubt, even in natural sciences which are termed as exact, everything is constantly doubted, tested and revisited: “The reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science” (p.21). Lessing observes that she has always been surrounded by people who are doubtful of authority and “who take it for granted that all authority is bad, ascribe doubtful or venal motives to government, the Establishment, the ruling class, the local town council, the headmaster or mistress” (p.16). Lessing's reflections on doubt and uncertainty in her life writing exemplify the modern condition as a time when an individual cannot rely on anyone or anything to tell him/her who he/she is, a time when everyone and everything “has to be reflexively made” (Giddens, 1991, p.3). Therefore, her life writing is an interesting case study of the manner in which a highly creative mind creates her identity while dealing with the uncertainties of the modern world. This makes her story interesting not only on a personal level but also on a broader level as a depiction of a particular historical time and how individuals have dealt with their lives and sense of self after two world wars.

Coetzee (2002) points out that the title of Lessing's autobiography “in isolation ... gestures in conventional fashion toward self-revelation”, but in fact “the hidden addressee of the book, the 'you' deep in Lessing's heart, under her skin, emerges all too plausibly as her mother, dead since 1957”

(p.287). The title of Lessing's autobiography is taken from a song by Cole Porter, and the first verse of the song, included in the epigraph of the book, exemplifies what Coetzee has observed above:

I've got you under my skin
I've got you deep in the heart of me
So deep in my heart you're really a part of me,
I've got you under my skin.
I've tried so not to give in ...

The last line “I've tried so not to give in” reveals the resistance that Lessing mounted against her mother, ever since she was a baby and which became more prominent when she was a teenager. At the same time, this line also proves that no matter how much she resisted her mother, she has always been “under [her] skin”. In this chapter I will go deeper into her mother's life and how her disappointments and broken dreams affected the daughter. This is how Lessing depicts her mother at the very beginning of *Under my skin*:

She had not known love as a child, and was making sure we would not be similarly deprived. What I remember is hard bundling hands, impatient arms and her voice telling me over and over again that she had not wanted a girl, she wanted a boy. I knew from the beginning she loved my little brother unconditionally, and she did not love me (*Under my skin*, p.25).

Lessing has emphasised not only in her autobiography, but also in her fiction and interviews that a childhood without love and affection “made her one of the walking wounded for years” (*Under my skin*, p.25). While she emphasises that this does not mean that she was sexually abused as some critics have suggested, but that she was “emotionally disturbed” (Lessing&Field, 1994, para. 20). What does this mean? She says that “psychological pressures, and even well-meant ones, are as damaging as physical hurt” (*Under my skin*, p.25). The word that stands out is “well-meant”, as the interviewer M.J Daymond points out Lessing was “able to be more generous towards [her] mother when [she was] writing her autobiography than Martha Quest” (p.236). In *Alfred and Emily* (2008), Lessing emphasises that the relationships between mothers and daughters have been dealt with in many novels, but that she considers her novel *Martha Quest* “the first no-holds-barred account of a mother-and-daughter battle” (loc.2187). Naturally, when Lessing tries to capture the way she felt towards her mother when she was just a little child or adolescent, she is as harsh and critical of her mother as in *Martha Quest*; on the other hand in her later writings she tries to look into her mother's

disappointments, the effects that the First World War had upon her in order to understand the way she behaved. In an interview she explains the contradictory feelings she harboured: “What I had was this combination of, even when I was a tiny girl, of being desperately sorry for her and hating her at the same time. I really knew I had to be sorry for her. But when you are an adolescent and you've got all this focused on you ...” (Lessing&Daymond, 2006, p.236).

But despite her claims that she has always felt sorry for her mother, she emphasises that the early childhood traumas have left her disturbed. One of her early memories of pillow fights her parents used to have with her and her brother could exemplify what she means by this “emotional disturbance”. Since this happened while they were in Teheran, we might ask ourselves how can she remember this? According to her, the memory of the tickling and her helplessness left her with nightmares until she was seven or eight. The description of “the game” has certain sexual connotations, as her father took her in his lap, her face was put in his crotch and the smell sickened her:

And then the moment when Daddy captures his little daughter and her face is forced down into his lap or crotch, into the unwashed smell – he never did go in for washing much, and - don't forget – this was before easy dry-cleaning, and people's clothes smelled, they smelled horrible. By now my head is aching badly, the knocking headache of over-excitement. His great hands go to work on my ribs. My screams, helpless, hysterical, desperate. Then tears (*Under my skin*, p.31).

Lessing emphasises that the scenes from her life in Teheran were used in *The memoirs of a survivor* : “I used the nursery in Teheran, and the characters of my parents, both exaggerated and enlarged, because this is appropriate for the world of dreams” (p.29). The subtitle of the novel was “An attempt at an Autobiography” and Lessing laments that this was soon ignored by everyone because it was not understood (*Under my skin*, p.28). When one reads *The Memoirs of a Survivor* one does not think that it is autobiographical, especially since the subtitle was dropped in later editions. But if one goes back to *Memoirs* after reading about the childhood experiences in Teheran, and especially the nursery there, one is made aware of the subtle and remarkable ways in which personal experience can be used in fiction. Moreover, if we look at the paragraph above, what strikes us is that Lessing uses the present tense in recounting the experience. This is not the only example either, in many other instances, especially when dealing with the experiences in Teheran, which stem mostly from dreams, nightmares, sensations, and what she was told by her parents, she uses the present tense. When she employs this technique to tell us about her early childhood, we feel that we

are there with her, and we feel her fear and panic. So, despite the fact that the past tense dominates her self-narrative, she lapses into present tense now and then, thus breaking with the “classical” autobiographical genre. Moreover in the paragraph quoted above she even uses the third person singular.

Doris Lessing does not only look back upon her relationship with her mother, she even goes on to analyse her parents' relationships to their families. Emily's mother whose name was also Emily died when Lessing's mother was three years old, and her father married a woman who was “a typical stepmother, cold, dutiful, and correct, unable to be loving or even affectionate with the three children” (*Under my skin*, p.4). Her father's relationship to his parents was similar; there was lack of love and a need to get away: “She did not love her parents. My father did not love his” (*Under my skin*, p.4). When Lessing left her first husband and her two children, we can see the same pattern repeating itself. She claims that the reason she left her children was to “break some ancient chain of repetition” (*Under my skin*, p.262), which was “this secret doom that was inside me – and which had brought my parents to their pitiful condition” (*Under my skin*, p.263). But as Kamatchi (2010) emphasises, by leaving her children she continues the same pattern of lack of love in her family:

When Lessing left her children to “break some ancient chain of repetition” she ensures the continuity of that generational chain by reproducing the abandonment her mother experienced as a child. This in turn influenced her mother’s inability to show warmth and love to her daughter. Thus Lessing misses the opportunity to create a closer and more congenial relationship with Jean than Lessing had experienced with her own mother. Lessing fails to escape her mother along with her children and Southern Rhodesia, because she carries her mother’s voice with her to England embodied as previously mentioned, in the personas of the Hostess which shields and protects her “private self” from becoming “public property” (p. 341).

But her mother has influenced her in other ways too. Emily is depicted as a woman who was strong, efficient, hard-working, stubborn and determined. It could be argued that Lessing has more in common with her mother's personality than she is ready to admit in *Under my skin*. Because Lessing's mother also rebelled against her father and did not follow his ambitions and desires for her, in the same manner Lessing always did the opposite of what her mother wished for her. Her mother wanted her to become a nurse, Doris refused; Emily's father wanted her to go to university, she became a nurse instead. Moreover, she married a working class man when her father had tried to put as much distance between himself and his working class background as possible. In the same manner Doris's father escaped not only from his family, but also from England: “He wanted to be a farmer, always, but the moment he left school to put distance between himself and his parents, went

into the bank” (*Under my skin*, p.6). Doesn't this remind us of Doris Lessing? The moment she left school, first she escaped by taking jobs as a nursemaid, then at the telephone exchange in Salisbury, running as far as possible from her family. Gardner (2011) has emphasised that the seven creative minds whose lives he has analysed, all have rebelled or gone against their families or the standards of their societies. But they have found the model for such behaviour within the family circles: “The homes of these seven creators may have been strict and conservative, but hints were given, either inside or around the home, that it was permissible to strike out on one's own” (p.368). We have seen that Lessing's mother used very strict methods of upbringing, and despite the fact that they had moved from England, Emily tried to instil proper middle-class behaviour in her children. On the other hand, growing up in a colony freed Doris from the restraining traditions that still prevailed in England, traditions which her own father described as stifling and unnecessary in Africa. Eakin (1999) emphasises that “in forming a sustaining sense of self, we draw on models of identity provided by the cultures we inhabit. Some of these models are life enhancing, some not” (p.46). Lessing had the freedom to roam in the bush as a child, observe nature and daydream. The bush with its creatures provided ample material for her imagination. She remembers how she thought that the mafuti tree was being devoured by a monster; how when she saw a chameleon catching flies, she thought that “all its insides came out” (*Under my skin*, p.62). Lessing claims that she “acquired adult vision” when her mother explained to her that it was the way the chameleon fed itself; after that she would never be able to “really see it, not really, ever again, not as [she] saw it the first time” (p.62). But she tries to capture the “child's vision” in her fiction works. She recalls the sounds of the bush in minute detail, nature serving also as the only bond between her and her brother: “We sat deep in the grass and listened, we sat concealed and looked. And heard, as our ears opened to sound, since we were silent so as not to frighten birds or any beasts around, how the farm's activities, the life on the farm, told us what went on everywhere” (p.116).

The free life in the bush instilled in Lessing a desire for a free and just society in which everyone is accepted and has equal rights. As Coetzee (2002) points out: “Aside from the restorative power of the natural world (about which Lessing is unabashedly Wordsworthian), there reigned among the children of the settlers a strongly egalitarian spirit that helped her escape the class obsessions of her parents” (p.286). But despite the fact that Emily was conservative and traditional, we should keep in mind that as a girl she also made her own decisions and followed her ambitions; therefore it is easy to see where Lessing got her rebellious side from. She has gone further and has been more successful in her endeavours than both her parents, but at the same time we can see that her identity as a stubborn, hard-working author with a mind of her own has been implicitly nurtured by her

parents. She may be said to have gained a critical and unconventional way of thinking from her father, and stubbornness from her mother. On the other hand “the secret doom” which she inherited from her parents has been used productively in her fiction, to either challenge it, confront it or confirm it. In the last volume of the “*Children of Violence*” sequence, *The Four-Gated City* (1969), humanity is torn by violence and disease. In *Mara and Dan* (1999) the two main characters journey in a post-apocalyptic world trying to survive. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975) there is a possibility to escape the end of the world by running into the world of imagination. In *Shikasta* (1979) the earth is depicted as a desolate place where human selfishness has destroyed any possibility for a productive and peaceful environment. It begins as a planet rich in resources and of abundant promises, but is taken over by the evil Shammat who destroy the good influence of the planet called Canopus whose inhabitants live under “SOWF – the substance-of-we-feeling” (loc.1368). But since this substance is prevented from reaching Shikasta (Earth), the humans suffer by living selfishly:

We were running scenes from Shikasta, recent scenes, of the new swarming millions upon millions upon millions – poor short-lived savages now, with the precious substance-of-we-feeling so limited and being shared among so many, the tiniest allowance for each individual, their little drop of true feeling ... we were both overwhelmed with pity for the fate of the Shikastans, who could not help themselves, while they fought and hated and stole and half-starved (loc.1523).

Lessing has often emphasised how it was the First World War that had paralysed and incapacitated her parents who were two able and intelligent people. Her father had lost an essential part of himself in the war, while before the war Lessing imagines her father as a man who was “strong, vigorous, in command of himself ... now he was an invalid, with no hope of ever being well again” (*Under my skin*, p.156). In the same manner her mother was turned into an “over-wrought victim” (p.156). Lessing remembers her mother being always sick, which the author knows now was caused by anxiety (p.64). The picture of her depressed parents remains alive in Lessing's mind:

I see them very clearly, but from a child's view, two old people, grey and tired. They are not yet fifty. Both of these old faces are anxious, tense, full of worry, almost certainly about money. They sit in clouds of cigarette smoke, and they draw in smoke and let it out slowly as if every breath is narcotic. There they are, together, *stuck together*, held there by poverty and – much worse – secret and inadmissible needs that come from deep in their two so different histories. They seem to me intolerable, pathetic, unbearable, it is their helplessness that I can't bear. I stand there, a fierce unforgiving adamant child, saying to myself: I won't. I will not. I will not be like that. I am never going to be like them (*Under my skin*, p.120).

Despite the fact that Doris Lessing was born after the First World War, and experienced the Second World War only indirectly, she considers war as one of the worst things that a human being can go through, based upon how her parents' lives turned out. Her father's feeling that he had been deceived by his country, his lack of trust in authority was passed on to Doris who even though refused to listen his talk about the war and the trenches, she was never able to stop listening since it continued indefinitely. She makes a strong claim about the influence that the war had upon her: "We are all of us made by war, twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it" (*Under my skin*, p.10). Therefore it is not surprisingly many of her novels are about war, conflict and the end of the world scenarios. She faces us with the destructiveness that is present within ourselves, the "horrible things" that her father was faced with after the war are present in all of us "but the war had made them worse, that was all" (*Under my skin*, p.7). Does her fiction, especially her space fiction serve as a sort of warning about the destruction that we will face if we do not stop and think that war is the worst thing that can ever happen: "If we make war impossible the world will be full of whole and healthy and sane and marvellous people who... In my mind I lived in utopias, part from literature and part the obverse of what I actually lived in" (*Under my skin*, p.156).

She remembers the positive sides of her mother's character as well. Despite her sickly disposition, Emily was a resourceful woman who had taken over the education of her children who were described as "in advance of their age" by the local authorities. The manner in which Lessing describes the lessons that her mother used to give them shows a woman who could be creative with a few resources: "My father was the sun. The two servants were the heavy planets, Jupiter and Saturn. Stones stood for Pluto, for Mars. I was Mercury and my brother Venus, running around my father, while she was the earth, moving slowly" (*Under my skin*, p. 68). It could be because of her mother's fun teaching methods that Lessing never really cared for the conventional educational system. She did well in exams, as she points out "my cleverness was a continuation of my mother's" (p.95). But Lessing used disease to get away from school, even though she resented her mother who used it to get love and pity from her children: "Poor mummy, poor sick mummy" (p.64). When the entire family got dysentery, her mother nursed them all even though she was ill herself. Lessing recalls that the sicker she became, the more she longed for her mother: "As I became convalescent, and weepy and enfeebled, I begged her, 'Come and cuddle me, come and cuddle me'" (*Under my skin*, p.125). But she continued educating the children who "would fulfil her ambitions and do even better" (p.59). It is not uncommon for parents who feel that they have failed in one way or another, to pin all of their hopes and dreams on their children. She paints a dire picture of her parents' life; her mother put all her love and devotion into her son, and her father into "dreams of love.

Nightmares of war” (p.187).

There are instances when she identifies with her mother, but mostly she tries to distance herself from her parents because she is terrified by how weak and pitiable they turned out to be: “It was not my parents' strength that threatened me, it was their weakness” (p.189). The child became resentful and turned away in disgust when she saw the manner in which her parents were “trapped by circumstances” (*Under my skin*, p.120). They were both victims of the First World War, her father wounded both physically and psychologically and her mother psychologically affected by her husband's illnesses. Their inefficient farming, their empty dreams of finding gold and becoming rich while they took up more loans and stooped deeper into poverty, made Lessing bitter. But now she is able to look back at her parents and explain why they embraced the victim identity; she is also able to feel more sorry for her mother than to hate her. In her second volume *Walking in the Shade* (1997) after her mother died, Lessing was overwhelmed with pain and grief, she contemplated if she “could have behaved differently” (loc.3699). She knew that if her mother was still alive, she would have been the same, but now that she has become old herself, she imagines that she could understand and communicate better with her mother:

Suppose she were to walk in now, an old woman, and here I am an old woman ... how would we be? I like to think we would share some kind of humorous comprehension. Of what? Of the sheer damned awfulness of life, that's what. But most of all I think that I would simply put my arms around her ... Around who? Little Emily, whose mother died when she was three, leaving her to the servants, a cold unloving stepmother, a cold dutiful father (*Walking in the Shade*, loc.3699).

To witness this development of her identity from a rebellious, disobedient child and teenager, to a young woman who is a nervous wreck every time her mother comes to visit, to a wise old lady who could share her knowledge about life with her mother and offer love to her is one of the most moving aspects of her life writing.

3.2 “The prince of the house”

“They have the same birthday. He was born to her on her birthday. This means, as she has told him, as she tells everyone, that he is a gift of God” (Boyhood, p.49).

John is made to feel like “the prince of the house” by his mother (*Boyhood*, p.13). He is aware that in other families the man of the house (the father) is the authority figure, but in their house it is the mother and the children that are the centre and he has difficulties in “work[ing] out the position of his father in the household” (p.12). Despite the fact that she offers him nothing but love and protection, he has contradictory feelings towards her. While he appreciates the protection she offers, he feels that this binds him to her forever, and this makes him feel weak: “He is grateful to his mother for protecting him from his father's normality, that is to say, from his father's occasional blue-eyed rages and threats to beat him. 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” (*Boyhood*, p.8).

He claims that he is cruel to her, he does this in order to assert himself but he is aware that “she is the firmest thing in his life. She is the rock on which he stands” (p.35). Feeling such connection to his mother makes him feel afraid and anxious most of time. On the one hand because he is afraid of losing her, on the other hand because he wants to get rid of her. As Cristiana Pugliese (2004) points out, when John sees his mother working with a knife, it makes him think “that her unconditional love may suffocate him, or rather castrate him” (p.498). His mother's love makes him feel that he is losing his masculinity, in the same manner as his father has lost his. Moreover, when John sees her riding the bicycle he thinks that “she looks young, like a girl, young and fresh and mysterious” (*Boyhood*, p.3). The fact that he sees his mother as a girl can be explained by Freud's Oedipus complex theory. The simple way to describe this theory is that the boy wants his mother, therefore hates the father, and the opposite is true for the girls. Whether we think that Freud's theory is too far fetched or not, we can certainly see elements of love for the parent of the opposite sex, and hatred (or resentment) for the parent of the same sex in both *Under my skin* and *Boyhood*. In *Summertime* (2010) when Coetzee is back in South Africa and lives with his father he begins to develop feelings of pity and guilt. He remembers that he scratched his father's Tebaldi record when he was an adolescent and at that time “he ... resolved to hate and despise anything in the world that his father loved” (*Summertime*, p.249). Now that he is grown up and sees how unhappy his father is, he feels

a great desire to apologize:

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, p.250).

But in *Boyhood* there are no such feelings of pity and guilt. He doubts his father's intellectual skills: his father likes Shakespeare, he consequently decides that Shakespeare must be worthless. His father also likes Wordsworth, but John has difficulties in understanding how this man who only reads newspapers, likes poetry as well: "He cannot see how poetry fits into his father's life; he suspects it is just pretence" (*Boyhood*, p.105). But while he doubts his father's love of literature, he boasts about his father's military service and his participation in the war to his friends: "Why his father only became a lance-corporal he is not sure: he quietly leaves out the *lance*-when he repeats his father's adventures to his friends" (*Boyhood*, p.40). But his father's war adventures are not given much space. He mentions a story his father told him about shooting a German soldier, but the story changes many times and the child is confused as to why his father thinks it is funny to see someone die: "Sometimes, in the story, it was he who shot the German, sometimes one of his friends; but in none of the versions does he show any pity, only amusement at the German's confusion as he tried to raise his hands and pull up his pants at the same time" (p.41).

John does not seem to mind the war stories, on the contrary as a boy he is fascinated and proud of his father's service. Lessing points out that in the war books that her father used to read it was explained "that there are two kinds of old soldier, those who cannot stop talking about the war, and those who shut up and never say a word" (*Alfred and Emily*, loc. 2082). Even though Coetzee was born in 1940 and World War II began in 1939 and ended in 1945, he does not dwell upon it in *Boyhood*. It could be because he pays little attention to his father and what he has to say: "He mumbles, refuses to meet his father's eye, refuses to play the game. It is not long before his father gives up" (p.105). On the other hand he has been preoccupied with war, revolutions and state violence in his fictional works, either implicitly or explicitly: *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983), *Age of Iron* (1990).

The only activity it seems he could have bonded over with his father is sports, since they both like cricket; but they never play together. This shows how deep the split between them is, and how hard the child tries to set himself apart from his father, even when it comes to activities they could have

shared. A paradoxical thing is that he doubts Shakespeare because his father likes his work, but he plays cricket despite the fact that his father likes it. He calls his father's love for Wordsworth's poems and Shakespeare's plays "pretence", and maybe the child intuition is correct. His father might pretend to like literature in order to connect to his family, but his love for cricket is true to his character:

When his mother says that in order to escape the mockery of her sisters she had to take her book and creep away in the loft, he believes her. But he cannot imagine his father, as a boy, reading poetry, who nowadays reads nothing but the newspaper. All he can imagine his father doing at that age is joking and laughing and smoking cigarettes behind the bushes (*Boyhood*, p.105).

Therefore he can connect with his mother, who would read in order to get away from her sisters. He understands her because he also needs literature in order to retreat from the world. Maybe the reason why he likes cricket and wants to learn how to play is because secretly he wants to connect to his father too, but it has to be over something both of them can enjoy. It is not only cricket, it seems that the only activities he can enjoy with his father are the ones that are masculine. On one occasion they watch a boxing match and after the South African boxer wins, in a moment of unexpected euphoria John pulls his father's hair. This leaves both of them baffled since physical contact between them is rare. The father's body arouses only feelings of discomfort and disgust, and just the thought that he has touched it makes him shudder: "In his hand he retains the feel of his father's hair, coarse, sturdy ... He has never been so free with his father's body before. He would prefer that it did not happen again" (*Boyhood*, p.110).

Despite the fact that he is quite effeminate, the traits that he thinks are worthy to be admired in his father are the ones that are traditionally considered masculine. But his father's failures make it difficult for him to uphold him as a model of what kind of man he would like to become; with each success that his father has had, there is a failure attached to it: "He was a soldier but only a lance-corporal. He played rugby, but only for Gardens second team, and Gardens are a joke, they always come at the bottom of the Grand Challenge league. And now he plays cricket, but for the Worcester second team, which no one bothers to watch" (*Boyhood*, p.51).

In the same manner as Lessing pretends to be an orphan, and substitutes her mother with the Persian gardener; John is more than willing to substitute his father with Uncle Son. We do not know if this is due to the fact that Uncle Son lives on the farm which John loves so much, or because his uncle's

masculinity is seen as a sign of strength, which he feels his father lacks. He has heard his mother express her dislike for men who are not handy and “among whom she numbers his father” (*Boyhood*, p.31). The mother's disapproval of her husband might have brought on the son's rejection of his father. But there are occasions when he longs to reject his mother as well, and nowhere is he more successful in this than in the farm, where man do manly activities which set them apart from women. Kossew (2010) emphasises that “by conceding that this turning-away from his mother reinforces that he 'belongs with the men', he is showing a consciousness of gender roles and their Freudian implications well beyond his years” (p.367). But “the farm is also the place where the cruel realities of life that fascinate the boy are made plain: lambs are castrated and sheep slaughtered before his eyes” (Viola, 1997, p.98); when he witnesses these acts, he runs to his mother for comfort. In the same manner as the lambs which “at the end of the operation ... stand sore and bleeding by their mothers' side, who have done nothing to protect them” (p.99), he realizes that he will have to face the cruelties of the world by himself. No matter how much he has tried to side with the men, no matter how much he enjoys boxing, cricket, hunting, the person he communicates best with on the farm is his cousin Agnes, and the person he loves the most in his family is his mother. This makes him wonder:

Why is it that he can speak so easily to Agnes? Is it because she is a girl? To whatever comes from him she seems to answer without reserve, softly, readily. She is his first cousin, therefore they cannot fall in love and get married. In a way that is a relief: he is free to be friends with her, open his heart to her. But is he in love with her nevertheless? Is this love – this easy generosity, this sense of being understood at last, of not having to pretend? (*Boyhood*, p.95).

Coetzee claims that: “He has two mothers. Twice born: born from woman and born from the farm. Two mothers and no father” (*Boyhood*, p.96). The interesting aspect of this utterance is that he considers farm to be “mother” (female gender), even though grammatical gender does not exist in either English or Afrikaans. But these are the two “entities” he feels most connected to; the paradoxical attitude of considering the farm as his mother is that it has as strong a hold on him as his mother, on the other hand the mother's grip loosens while on the farm. John is aware that being on the farm is a bitter experience for her because she remembers the farm she grew up on “which she speaks of with a love and longing of her own but can never go back to because it was sold to strangers” (p.80). While this again makes him feel guilty (like most of his feelings, thoughts and actions throughout the narrative), he nevertheless manages to enjoy himself on the farm like nowhere else. The only disadvantage is that he is bound by the conventions of his father's family

which makes him wonder “is there no way of living in the Karoo – the only place in the world where he wants to be – as he wants to live: without belonging to a family?” (*Boyhood*, p.91). He does not hide his dislike for his father's “normal” family, it makes him think what kind of life they would have had if his father was in charge of family life: “A life of dull, stupid formulas, of being like everyone else” (*Boyhood*, p.79). But he often gravitates between the wish to fit in, so that he will not be so tense and on edge all the time, and his declarations that he “hate[s] normal people” (*Boyhood*, p.78). But whether he likes it or not, whether he wants it or not, his mother sacrifices everything for her two sons; while the father “who started as a tolerated appendage to the family ends a despised nuisance” (Viola, 1997, p.97). In the beginning of *Boyhood*, John reflects that “it 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*, p.12). As the family's financial situation deteriorates, his father loses even the mere role of “contributor”, becoming thus completely useless to the family; while the mother goes back to work and becomes both the contributor and the core of the family. But no matter how hard his mother tries to separate herself legally from her husband and his debts, the law means that “if his father goes down, his mother goes down too, she and her children” (*Boyhood*, p.155). Divorce was probably not common at the time because even though the parents are involved in constant fighting and disagreement, divorce is never discussed. But we notice that as the story develops, John's disdain towards his father only deepens. While in the beginning his feelings towards him are a mixture of pride and disappointment, by the end of *Boyhood* there is only resentment and hatred left. His father is more than just a “useless nuisance”, he becomes a menace to the survival of the mother and her two sons: “He seethes with rage all the time. *That man*, he calls his father when he speaks to his mother, too full of hatred to give him a name: why do we have to have anything to do with *that man*? Why don't you let *that man* go to prison?” (*Boyhood*, p.156).

It is in these last chapters that Coetzee portrays an even crueler picture of himself as a child. He has no pity and no sympathy for his father. The hatred cuts so deep that one day when he does not hear his father in the morning, he secretly hopes that he has committed suicide. Therefore he is quiet around the house because “would it not be best to pretend not to notice, so that the sleeping-pills or whatever he has taken can be given time to act?” (*Boyhood*, pp.158-159). And even though Viola (1997) claims that despite the fact that his mother tries to do everything for him it “does not bring the boy closer to her” (p.97), I think that he is close to her, closer than he would want to be: “He is too close to his mother, his mother is too close to him” (*Boyhood*, p. 37). She becomes too much for him: too close, too protective, sacrificing too much for him. But he has many of her traits, they are

both different from other people and therefore feel isolated. He hears her controversial opinions and after a while starts developing his own. She defends the Germans when it is not acceptable, and her son prefers the Russians to Americans when "in Worcester no one but he likes Russians. His loyalty to the Red Star sets him absolutely apart" (p.27). As a child he harbours "many naïve judgements and received opinions (about the 'Natives' for instance) and politics appears only episodically in the form of a conflict of opinions among adults" (Viola, 1997, p.98); but we see how he eventually starts challenging the received opinions about Natives, since he senses that there is something wrong with the adult's arguments about this issue. He learns from his mother that going against the current is an option for him; she neither fits in with her husband's family nor does she have any friends. However, he has problems with understanding his mother's contradictory opinion: she thinks that Coloured people can do anything with their hands despite the fact that "these strangers reveal that they have no idea of how to fix a tap or repair a stove" (*Boyhood*, p.37). He can see that she is wrong, but what is important to him is that "at least she has beliefs" (*Boyhood*, p.37). Can we then wonder how Coetzee has developed into an eccentric writer whose opinions and works always raise discussion and controversy? We see how despite himself, he knows that he is like his mother, and by holding her up as a role model he starts developing his identity as an independent thinker who always tries to explore the unknown or challenge the accepted norms. But the relationship to his mother is not only a positive one, he feels that his mother is a hindrance to his dream to live as a loner on the farm, with no family, no attachments:

He yearns to be rid of her watchful attention. There may come a time when to achieve this he will have to assert himself, refuse her so brutally that with a shock she will have to step back and release him. Yet he has only to think of that moment, imagine her surprised look, feel her hurt, and he is overtaken with a rush of guilt. Then he will do anything to soften the blow: console her, promise he is not going away (*Boyhood*, p.122).

An arena where his social identity is put to the test is school. Because he feels different and knows that other families are not as strange as his own, he always feels he has to be careful about what he does or says. He compares himself to a spider: "Always the spider has to be scuttling back into its hole, closing the trapdoor behind it, shutting out the world, hiding" (*Boyhood*, p.28). The reason why he wants to hide in a hole is because he feels shame, and as Erikson (1963) points out "shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at: in one word, self-conscious" (p.252). John is self-conscious to the extreme, therefore the feeling of shame follows him in every social situation, mostly at school: "He who is ashamed would like to force the world not to look at him, not to notice his exposure. He would like to destroy the eyes of the world.

Instead he must wish for his own invisibility” (Erikson, 1963, pp.252-253). Moreover, as Pollock and Van Reken (1999) emphasise: “TCK chameleons may never develop true cultural balance anywhere. While appearing to be one of the crowd, inside they are still the cautious observer - always checking to see how they are doing” (p.93). We can see John analysing and evaluating his every move at school, careful about what he reveals to his teachers and other pupils. Therefore he compares himself to a spider who hides in his hole in order not to be seen. School, like the farm is a place where he learns the hard facts of life, which only leaves him wanting to explore and see more:

In Worcester he had gone to school in a state of apprehension but of excitement too. True, he might at any time be exposed as a liar, with terrible consequences. Yet school was fascinating: each day seemed to bring new revelations of the cruelty and pain and hatred raging beneath the everyday surface of things. What was going on was wrong, he knew, should not be allowed to happen; and he was too young, too babyish and vulnerable, for what he was being exposed to. Nevertheless, the passion and fury of those days gripped him; he was shocked but he was greedy to see more, to see all there was to see (p.139).

The situation changes in Cape Town where he has to go to a Catholic school due to the fact that his family's financial situation deteriorates. The school becomes “a shrunken little world, a more or less benign prison” (p.139). He feels that the school has lost that appeal it had when he was younger where he was exposed to cruelties which he viewed as learning experiences. But now, everything has become boring and stifling. He also senses that they are being told lies “but he has no means of proving it” (p.141). Later in *Summertime* (2010) he reflects about the school days in Worcester and Cape Town and about the brainwashing process which he underwent there. He concludes that despite the disharmonious family environment with parents who were hostile to each other, despite the difficult financial situation, his father's debts and drinking problems, the worst damage to him was done at school: “He is the product of a damaged childhood, that he long ago worked out; what surprises him is that the worst damage was done not in the seclusion of the home, but out in the open, at school” (*Summertime*, p.252).

The contradictions of different identities which John tries to incorporate and rationalize make him suffer pangs of guilt. While he feels free in nature and loves the farm, it feels as if he is betraying his mother. Intense self-scrutiny brings forth all the nuances of his identity but at the same time reveals the contradictions and discrepancies. For Coetzee self-analysis does not equate with truth-telling or even knowledge about oneself. His doubts about first-person autobiographies have led him to choose the third-person narrative which enables him “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” (Collingwood-Whittick, 2001, p.21). By using fictional devices such as third-person, present tense and free indirect speech, Coetzee has given us a subject that we feel we can know intimately, but who at the same time is kept at a distance (Klopper, 2006; Kossew, 2010).

We are given an autobiographical subject who both is and is not present, who is portrayed vividly and convincingly as interiority, as consciousness, but is located elsewhere, as an imaginary and an imaginative construct, the self as other, divided and displaced. To use a term coined by Coetzee himself, this is autobiography as “autrebiography” (Klopper, 2006, pp.24-25).

Relational selves are not only about one's relation to family members, friends, cultural, social and economic environment, but also one's relation to one's old self. The fact that Coetzee keeps us at “arm's length” is because his child-self cannot be totally recalled and presented in the memoir. In *Boyhood* he avoids any type of retrospection, but we are aware that it is the adult J. M. Coetzee who writes about the child.

The absence of the first person-narrator is clearly only an apparent or symbolic absence since, whatever pronoun the author may select as the vehicle for his personal history, it is ultimately and exclusively through the consciousness of the Coetzee of now that his childhood self is able to exist on the written page before us. And though there can be no denying the intense vividness, realism and emotional authenticity of the record of Coetzee's youth that *Boyhood* conveys, a careful reading of the memoir reveals a number of “slippages” which suggest that the author has not, after all, been able to remain wholly faithful to the perspective of his ten year old focaliser (Collingwood-Whittick, 2001, p.19).

The “slippages” that Collingwood- Whittick (2001) refers to here are: writing about certain details when depicting scenes from the past which a child would not be able to recall or even notice; or the “psychological interpretations both of the boy's own feelings and of the behaviour of those around him” (p.20). Collingwood-Whittick assesses Coetzee's attempts to hide his adult perspective as “unsuccessful” (p.19). While I agree that there are “slippages”, there are also moments during which we really get into the mindset of a child struggling to figure out his identity, the world around him and its inconsistencies where the adult perspective is hidden quite successfully. This is what makes *Boyhood* a magnificent experiment in life writing.

Chapter 4

“Causal connections” and “crystallizing experience”

4.1 The writer who escaped her circumstances

In *Under my skin*, Lessing tries to cover her life from when she was born until 1949. She reflects upon those events and episodes which have shaped her and which have sparked her interest in writing. Coetzee on the other hand has chosen a different approach to life writing, refraining from making comments upon the episodes or analysing their effect in the present. In fact his entire book may be read as a selection of experiences and sensations which have left their mark on young Coetzee's mind and which have shaped him as a person and as a writer. Pals (2006) emphasises that “the narration of the life story involves an interpretative process of self-making through which individuals highlight significant experiences from the past and infuse them with self-defining meaning in the present by interpreting them as having a causal impact on the growth of the self” (p.176).

One of the key events of Lessing's life which she interprets as having had a “causal impact” on her happened even before she was born, that is the First World War. She considers the war one of the events that have influenced her character and identity the most, and which has burdened her with the feeling of doom which she has carried with her since childhood. Moreover, it is because of war that she has always felt the need to run away, as if she was afraid to be trapped and sucked into the ground. That is how she explains her escape first from her parents, then from her husband and children:

I used to feel that there was something like a dark grey cloud, like poison gas, over my early childhood. Later I found people who had the same experience. Perhaps it was from that war that I first felt the struggling panicky need to escape, with a nervous aversion to where I have just stood, as if something there might blow up or drag me down by the heel (*Under my skin*, p.10).

Sensing that she was not loved by either her mother or the nurses who looked after her, she felt she always had to fight against them because “unloved children are not 'nice', not 'gentile’” (*Under my skin*, p.28). Another trauma was caused by hearing her mother talk about what a “burden” her children were in front of them. This is why Lessing thinks she has become such a sensitive person.

She tries to understand whether she “was born with skins too few. Or [whether] they were scrubbed off [her] by those robust and efficient hands” (p.30).

There is no need to look for memories of “abuse”, cruelty and the rest. I remember very well - though how old I was I do not know – leaning against my father's knee, the real one, not the metal-and-wood knee, while my mother chatted on and on in her social voice to some visitor about her children, how they brought her low and sapped her, how all her own talents were withering unused, how the little girl in particular (she was so difficult, so naughty!) made her life a total misery. And I was a cold flame of hatred for her, I could have killed her there and then (*Under my skin*, pp.29-30).

That these early events in her life have had a big impact on her is shown through another memory. She remembers that every time she and her brother emptied their bowels, they were met with words of approval: “Harry is a good little *baba*. Doris is a good little *baba*” (p.27). This created an intense need for approval in the child who once “actually arrived at a formal Legation dinner party holding out a pot and announcing, 'Doddis is a *good* little *baba*” (p.27). The memory in itself is not important to Lessing, but how it affected her as an adult is. Once when she finished writing a novel, she dreamt that she had gone into the publisher's office with a pot in which she had put the novel: “Doris had been a good little girl. She was full of the glow of achievement, of having proved herself worthy of loving affection” (p.27). But this memory does not stop here, in her novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) she addresses the same issue. The woman in the novel has a discussion regarding hierarchies, class divisions and democracy with Emily, the girl she looks after. Emily is part of a group of young people who have created their own community and try hard to break with the old rules which have brought about the collapse of society. But no matter how hard they try some of them become more authoritarian and others more obedient and responsive to this authority. Emily realizes that no matter how much they talk about not having a hierarchy, it seems impossible to achieve this goal. The woman tries to explain to her that the process of indoctrination begins when we are born; we are manipulated into behaving in a certain way, following certain rules and authorities by being told that we are good or bad. That is how the world has functioned for a long time, and it seems unavoidable:

“It starts when you are born”, I said. “She's a good girl. She's a bad girl. Have you been a good girl today? I hear you've been a bad girl. Oh, she's so *good*, such a good child. ... *don't you remember?*” She had stared at me; she had not really heard. “It's all false, it's got to do with nothing real, but we are all in it all our lives - you're a good little girl, you're a bad little girl. “Do as I tell you and I'll tell you you are good.” It's a trap and we are all in it” (*The Memoirs of a Survivor*, pp.112-113).

One of the “most powerful memories” which Lessing accounts is from a hotel lobby in Russia when the family travelled from Persia to England. She recalls big doors and people going in and out of rooms, ignoring the little girl who starts to feel invisible:

No one comes for what seems like for ever, but that cannot have been so, the door must have soon opened, but the nightmare is of being shut out, locked out, and the implacable tall shiny door. This shut door is in a thousand tales, legends, myths, the door to which you do not have the key, the door which is the way to – but that is the point, I suppose. Probably it is in our genes, I wouldn't be surprised, this shut door, and it is in my memory for ever, while I reach up like Alice, trying to touch the handle (*Under my skin*, pp.43-44).

For Lessing the shut door is the symbol of the isolation she felt from an early age, which only deepened as she grew older. When they were in Africa, Lessing remembers two girls that were ten years old and who played with her brother but excluded her from their games: “I longed to be included in their games. 'Just now,' they said. 'Just now.' Meaning perhaps – sometime – never. The sharp pain of exclusion”(p.51). One way for her to act out against this and to attract attention was through small acts of cruelty: “I began to steal, ridiculous things like pots of rouge, ribbons, scissors, and money too. I lied about everything. There were storms of miserable hot rage, like being burned alive by hatred” (p.51). The more she was scolded by her mother and the nurses, the more she embraced the disobedient child identity, taking it to new heights when she entered adolescence: “I was in nervous flight from her ever since I can remember anything, and from the age of fourteen I set myself obdurately against her in a kind of inner emigration from everything she represented” (p.15).

Another aspect of her childhood which is very important is life at school. Since she lived on an isolated farm the only way for her to attend school was to leave her bush heaven which caused young Lessing anxiety, unhappiness and homesickness; especially in the Convent where she spent four years. But one episode which I think establishes one of the most interesting causal connections in Lessing's life was when she wrote an essay about the teaching methods used in the convent. The young child thought the essay was intelligent and original but was rebuffed by the teacher who insulted her: “I thought she would applaud it because it was funny, but she called me in and made me stand in front of her while she slashed me with that tongue of hers. I thought I was clever, didn't I? Well, compared to really clever people I was nothing. I stood trembling” (*Under my skin*, p.150). Lessing felt that she could not grow at school, and that everything she learned she “forgot in a

month” (p.150). Moreover she viewed her teachers as dictators who did not leave any space for developing critical thinking. When she expected to be congratulated on her writing, not only was she criticised, she was brought down and was too frightened to even speak up for herself. This is interesting to read in context of her home life where she did not leave a single opportunity to challenge, argue and rebel. At school even the funny Tigger turned into a scared little animal: “This is how subjects are with tyrants” (p.150). Lessing gave up school when she was fourteen and focused upon her reading and writing; as readers we cannot help but wonder what kind of writer she would have turned into had she taken a Ph.D.? In the Preface (1971) to *The Golden Notebook* she blames the educational system for producing critics who are “so parochial, so personal, so small-minded?” (p.17). She considers herself lucky that she escaped this brain-washing process which is called education, because this allowed her to read works that mattered and not spent years reading one author or writing about one book. She thinks the only reason we accept this educational system is due to the fact that we are so used to it that we cannot see how wrong it is: “I am not used to it, because I left school when I was fourteen. There was a time I was sorry about this, and believed I had missed out on something valuable. Now I am grateful for a lucky escape” (Lessing, 1971, p.17). Having left school when she was very young, we have a writer who can stand outside society and describe it from a distance since “the reaction of someone from outside is valuable simply because it is fresh and not biased by allegiance to a particular education” (Lessing, 1971, p.17). Coetzee (2002) emphasises that the two other famous women writers from Africa, Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer, did not complete high school either, but developed their intellectual skills independently. According to Coetzee (2002) women were not encouraged to pursue education since their place was considered to be the home. But the more these women writers were discouraged, the more they read and learned on their own: “All were substantially self-educated, all became formidable intellectuals. This says something about the fierceness with which isolated adolescents on the margins of empire hungered for a life they felt cut off from, the life of the mind – far more fiercely, it turned out, than most of their metropolitan cousins” (Coetzee, 2002, pp.288-289). We can trace Lessing's intellectual development through her fiction. While her first novels according to Coetzee (2002) “go bent under the burden not only of prosaic language but of an uninventive conception of novelistic form” (p.291); in her later fiction she leaves behind the “nineteenth century models” and moves on to write experimental metafiction and space fiction: “What Lessing was looking for, and to a degree found, was a more inward, more fully contemporary conception not only of character but of the self and of the self's experience of time (including historical time). Once this had been arrived at, the nineteenth century trappings fell away of themselves” (p.292).

Lessing characterises her childhood as having developed in “two themes or streams” (*Under my skin*, p.119). One was “the world of dreams” and the other one was marked by “special moments, when one is alive, and noticing, as if injected unexpectedly with some substance whose gift is that you should see clearly” (*Under my skin*, p.120). She recalls that in the first ten years of her life she had a lot of nightmares, but she taught herself ways in which to make them less scary: “Every night before going to sleep I went over the incidents of the day, those that seemed to have the stuff of potential nightmares. I ran emotion-loaded incidents again and again in my head, till they seemed tame, harmless” (p.119). Not only did this help her get rid of some of her fears, it also helped her later when she wrote about her life; because going through the events of the day, analysing them and trying to cope with them as a child, has enabled her to remember them better. Therefore now she can capture the feelings of a child who sees the world for the first time. In this way she is able to present it in a new light, a technique which the Russian formalists called “defamiliarization”:

What do we mean - it is a common term of praise - when we say that a book is “original”? Not, usually, that the writer has invented something without precedent, but that she has made us “perceive” what we already, in a conceptual sense, “know”, by deviating from the conventional, habitual ways of representing reality. Defamiliarization, in short, is another word for “originality” (Lodge, 1992, p.55).

From an early age she developed the skill to turn entire days into a few important incidents, create stories in her head which would later be put down on paper: “I was learning how to make short work of Time – no, of course the days still crawled, would for some years yet, but I could also reduce a day to a few incidents” (*Under my skin*, p.120).

The other important causal connection is the desire to escape the circumstances of life which she calls “the most powerful influence of [her] life” (p.121). As a girl she witnessed that many women were trapped in unhappy marriages, her own mother who was a capable woman was reduced to a helpless victim who complained all the time. In one of the households she worked as a nursemaid, she noticed how the wife was “treated...like an invalid” (p.181). She decided that she would avoid this fate: “Meaning, never let yourself be trapped. In other words, I was rejecting the human condition, which is to be trapped by circumstances” (*Under my skin*, p.120). But she got married when she was nineteen and had children immediately after. It seemed that she was bound to end up like her parents, or the other women she had seen and judged before she got married herself:

They complained all afternoon about the hardness of their lot, and these complaints were directed against the

apologetic men, whose fault it was they were on these lawns, with children who dragged them down and prevented their real selves from developing. Men were the villains, men were criminals. Had they not chosen to get married? - I was (silently) accusing them. Had they been forced to have these children? Who had held a gun to their heads? (*Under my skin*, p.200).

There is a causal connection between witnessing as a child her mother's constant complaining that her children were holding her back, her dislike for the women she met in Salisbury as a young girl, and her opinions about women later in her fiction. Lessing has developed a complex and controversial relationship with feminists because even though she agrees that women have been treated as "second-class citizens" (Lessing, 1971, p.8), she also emphasises that "women are the cowards they are because they have been semi-slaves for so long. The number of women prepared to stand up for what they really think, feel, experience with a man they are in love with is still small" (Lessing, 1971, p.9). In many of her novels, especially *The Golden Notebook*, she has written about women and their situation, but she has also claimed that it is not the main theme of the novel; and even though she supports their cause, she still thinks that there are more serious issues happening in the world: "It is already clear that the whole world is being shaken into a new pattern by the cataclysms we are living through: probably by the time we are through, if we do get through at all, the aims of Women's Liberation will look very small and quaint" (Lessing, 1971, p.8).

Another aspect of her life which explains her emotional turmoil is related to sexuality and her mother's manipulation of her feelings. Recalling her "erotic longings" as a teenager, she says that "it is [her] belief that some girls ought to be put to bed, at the age of fourteen, with a man even as much as ten years older than they are, with the understanding that this apprentice love will end" (*Under my skin*, p.185). She argues that if she had been provided with such an "apprentice love" she would not have spent her adolescent years in this state of longing which she says "is a kind of homesickness, perhaps for past and not future Edens. It is an illness, incapacitating" (p.186). Moreover, witnessing the manner in which her father's sexuality was suppressed by her mother's cold behaviour also left a mark on her, especially since her father told her about it: "Of course I wished he had not, although I was flattered I was his confidante" (p.186). While on the one hand she felt that she triumphed over her mother, on the other hand as a woman she felt sorry for her. According to Lessing this a problem many marriages suffer from; after getting children, women become so absorbed and obsessed with them that they forget their husbands: "They may very well love their husbands, all sex and kisses and then Crash, a baby, girl or boy, and she is in love - besotted, obsessed" (p.187). Lessing remembers how after the birth of her brother, her mother

manipulated her into thinking that the baby was hers, telling she must love him unconditionally. While she resented her mother for deluding her, she nevertheless loved the baby with a strength she can recall even now: “Love the baby I did. I loved that baby, and then the infant, and then the little boy with a most passionate protective love. This is not only an authentic memory, every detail present after all this time, but deduction too. By this event and others of the same kind my emotional life was for ever determined” (*Under my skin*, p.25). This is a very important causal connection, because from one event when she was two years old, which she calls “the vividest early memory”, she claims that her “emotional life was for ever determined” (*Under my skin*, p.24-). How was it determined? She tells us that she begged her mother to have another baby and she interprets this longing as “for some other good lost perhaps when we are born” (*Under my skin*, p.98). She missed her brother and the connection she shared with him, because after he came back from boarding school “half his heart [was] sealed off” (p.111). When her mother refused to have a baby, Lessing gave her attention to all the babies in the district, so much so that the neighbours would remark to her mother, “your little girl, she's a funny one for babies” (p.98). But it seems that this longing was for something else, for an emotional connection with her brother? They grew apart as they grew older, and even though they were not raised to show emotions or feelings, she could not deny that she loved her brother with passion. The other babies in the district aroused in Lessing the early memories of the love she felt for him. When she longed for other babies, she makes it clear that it is not her own that she longed for, but for her affection and closeness to her brother:

I adored the baby, loved it to death, wanted only to cuddle and hold it, just as if he were – no, not my own, not at all – this was my baby brother again. From memories of this baby I am able to deduce the strength of my passion for baby Harry. All my life there have been times when my arms have ached, yearned to hold a baby, and they are the arms of a little girl wanting her baby brother. Grown up Harry did not remember our early fondness (*Under my skin*, p.136).

She left her two children when they were very small and she barely mentions them afterwards. In *Walking in the Shade* (1997) her son visits her in London and there are pictures of her children in the book itself. Even though she does not express strong feelings of regret for what she has done (maybe she wants those feelings to remain private), she does try to explicate why she left her first husband and her children: “The fact is, I would not have survived. A nervous breakdown would have been the least of it. In the four years I was married to Frank I drank more than before or since. I would have become an alcoholic, I am pretty sure. I would have had to live at odds with myself, riven, hating what I was part of, for years” (*Under my skin*, p.265). It is difficult to reconcile all these paradoxes, how she would not have survived her first marriage, but she got married again?

How she always “yearned” for a baby, but left her two small children? She claims that the worst thing her first son said to her was “I understand why you had to leave my father, but that doesn't mean I don't resent it” (*Under my skin*, p.402). We hear very little about her daughter, as far as we know from the book, the daughter never visits her, the resentment between mothers and daughters continuing in her family. But in the end, she credits her third son Peter for saving her and keeping her grounded in London. If it was not for him, she says she would have fallen into the same pattern of drinking and partying.

But amid these causal connections is it possible to point to a specific moment when Lessing became obsessed with writing? First of all she started writing very early and one of her prose poems was published in a local magazine. She recalls the way she felt about this and it is not different from the way she feels now, after many decades of writing and publishing books: “The complex of feelings about this were the same as now: I was proud that there I was in print, uneasy that impulses so private and intimate had led to words that others would read, would take possession of” (*Under my skin*, p.82). First of all it is important to emphasise that her first published effort was about sunset; it is clear that growing up on an idyllic and isolated farm house which was “perched on the top of the hill” surrounded by the wild bush “on either side” (*Under my skin*, p.54), inspired her to a great degree. The site for her family's farm was chosen because of its beauty and Lessing learned to appreciate the rhythms of nature which would inspire her to write her first pieces as a child, and which would also aid her later when writing her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950), and her African stories. The depiction of nature is one of the most important features of her childhood, which is given prominence in the first half of *Under my skin*. These are the parts that Coetzee (2002) considers the best written ones. The minute details of how nature works are depicted in the book, and how the child found a sense of consolation and freedom on the farm which otherwise lacked in life. She was not afraid of thunder, snakes or other animals, she ran free and barefoot in the bush; and even though she now lives in a crowded city, she is still able to recall the life on the farm as if she was there:

It is raining. The sound is the dry thatch filling with water, swelling, and the frogs are exulting with the rain. Because I understand, everything falls into its proper place about me, the thatch of the roof soaking up its wet from the sky, the frogs sounding as loud as if they are down the hill, but they are a couple of miles off, the soft fall of the rain on the earth and the leaves, and the lightning, still far away. And then, confirming the order of the night, there is a sudden bang of thunder. I lie back, content, under the net, listening, and slowly sink back into a sleep full of the sounds of rain (*Under my skin*, p.63).

But while her first published piece was about nature, at the age of 12 she wrote about her parents and their lost hopes and dreams by using the trunk they had brought from England as a metaphor; she called the piece “The treasure trunk”. Lessing was not allowed to open her parent's trunk and she imagined it filled with magical items, but as her parents realized their temporary house was actually their home, she was permitted to open it. It seems that the destruction of her mother's high hopes and her father's dreams about owning a farm in England has also inspired Lessing's art. She wrote *Alfred and Emily* (2008) when she was 89, and in the first part of the book she gives her parents the lives they never had. One interesting aspect of this version is that in it her mother gets everything she ever wanted, a doctor husband, and a nice house, but ends up a lonely widow without children. Her father on the other hand marries a compassionate and empathetic woman and has children. The episodes and characters in the fictional part were derived from Lessing's analysis of her parents' photographs, and build up from what they had told her about their lives prior to getting married and having children: “Writing about my father's imagined life, my mother's, I have relied not only on traits of character that may be extrapolated, or extended, but on tones of voice, sighs, wistful looks, signs as slight as those used by skilful trackers” (*Alfred and Emily*, loc. 1764).

These episodes seem to suggest that Lessing knew she was going to become a writer from a very early age. She was inspired by her mother's amazing stories: “She made whole epics out of the mice in the storeroom, the rats, the cats, the dogs, the chickens in the fowl run” (*Alfred and Emily*, loc.1996). She was also absorbed in reading, at first children's books, then continued with reading D.H Lawrence, Beverly Nichols, Dornford Yates: “I read all day lying on my stomach on my bed, and I read nearly all night, while the candles burned themselves out one after another, and I fitted new ones” (*Under my skin*, p.140). It seems that every major decision she made, every time she escaped from her circumstances, was part of a process that she had to go through in order to develop as an individual and as a writer:

And now there was a sudden change of course, like shedding religion, abandoning school, leaving home to be a nursemaid. I was going home to write a novel. These changes, or “conversions”, are not really abrupt, but the result of slow but out-of-sight accumulations of a substance, or feeling, different from the one that temporarily dominates (*Under my skin*, p.189).

After she left her job as a nursemaid, she began writing novels, one after the other but never satisfied with the end result: “I tore up thousands and thousands of words and went back to

practising on short stories” (*Under my skin*, p.192). She was eighteen when she tore up her first two novels, but luckily being a determined and strong woman, she kept following her ambitions and instincts and pursued a career in writing, thus defying the traps of circumstance. This was the year she learned speed typing and the last year she lived in the bush as a farm girl. She moved to Salisbury, never to return: “No writer can come up with anything as merciless as what Life Itself, that savage satirist, does every day” (*Under my skin*, p.197).

It seems that the reason why most of her memories from childhood are recalled with such immediacy is due to the strong connection with the dream world which she has developed since she was a child. This dream world has provided her with the symbols for many of her stories, especially her space fiction. From a very early age Lessing learned how to analyse events and dreams, doing it in order to remove their frightening aspects, but at the same time she developed her analytical and deduction skills which have been useful to her art.

4.2 Portrait of an artist as a young man

Coetzee (1992) has emphasised that when you talk about truth and autobiography, you have to remember that you cannot include “all the facts” because “all the facts are too many facts” instead “you choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose” (p.18). The nature of the purpose is not always clear, not even to the writer, but in order to understand the purpose it is important to understand the driving force behind writing (p.18). Lenta (2003) interprets these utterances as an indication “that the writer of autobiography will not falsify, though he must select” the events that are going to be included (p.161). The episodes selected in *Boyhood* are of importance because these are the ones that are remembered and that have left a mark on the present Coetzee. These are what Chicoń (2006) calls “juvenile traumas” (p.64), which establish causal connections between Coetzee the child and Coetzee the adult. As Chicoń (2006) points out, even though the focus is always on the child (*Boyhood*), or the young man (*Youth*), without any allusion to the future, “the narratives create an illusion of being future-oriented” (p.64-65). This is done through John's dreams and hopes that he will become an important man in the future. But the bleakness of the narrative would leave us with little hope, if we did not already know about his future. Chicoń (2006) considers Coetzee's life writing as more of a fiction than memoir: “In this light his autobiographies bear semblance more to self-creation, if not self-concealment, than to self-revelation or self-disclosure” (p.65). Chicoń (2006) asks “why a world famous author, in his late

fifties and early sixties, at the top of his career, looks back at his past with such despair” (p.65). While she sees this as a sign of “self-concealment”, I see it as the writer's great ability to recreate his child self and the confinement he felt growing up in South Africa. Moreover, even though we know that Coetzee has become a famous and influential writer, this does not mean that he was aware this was going to happen when he was a child, or even a young man in London, struggling with finding his voice. The irony here is that in *Boyhood* the child thinks that reading stories will not get him there:

He knows that if he wants to be a great man he ought to be reading serious books. He ought to be like Abraham Lincoln or James Watt, studying by candlelight while everyone else is sleeping, teaching himself Latin and Greek and astronomy. He has not abandoned the idea of being a great man; he promises himself he will soon begin serious reading; but for the present all he wants to read are stories (pp.103-104).

John is bored at school, he feels that his teachers cannot teach him anything because “nothing his teachers say is not already written in the textbook” (p.108). He misses many lessons, pretending to be sick at home, but nevertheless he is able to be first in his class. This makes him realize that his teachers are not particularly intelligent, and as he grows older he finds less and less pleasure in going to school: “He might as well be weaving baskets as going through the classroom routine” (p.139). He actually feels that school is having the opposite effect on him, instead of broadening his mind, it is making it narrower. He feels that it prevents him from discovering his true self: “Whoever he truly is, 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 puny and stunted” (*Boyhood*, p.140). In *Doubling the point* (1992) he talks of himself in the third person up until he goes to Texas to study linguistics: “The discipline within which he (and *he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography) had trained himself/myself to think brought illuminations that I can't imagine him or me reaching by any other route” (p.394). When he speaks of himself in the third person, it seems that he is alienated from that subject, or the subject is so removed from his present self that it is like writing about someone else. It is only when he becomes “slightly maturer” and more in touch with his true self that he is able to turn into an “I”. But in *Boyhood* he is afraid that this will not happen since he is not allowed to truly express himself. When writing at school he feels that the process “is not like stretching his wings; on the contrary, it is like huddling in a ball, making himself as small and inoffensive as he can” (p.140). Even though he has to keep his “dark ideas” under wraps and write only on topics which are acceptable to the religious teachers in the Catholic school, there are moments of enlightenment when he lets his pen go and finds enjoyment in the writing

process. In one instance he gets carried away and an essay on road safety turns into a narrative about a highwayman, but this story fails to move his teacher who reads it without any reaction and gives him his usual grade:

For Mr Whelan he writes essays on The Character of Mark Antony, on The Character of Brutus, on Road Safety, on Sport, on Nature. Most of his essays are dull, mechanical performances; but occasionally he feels a spurt of excitement as he writes, and the pen begins to fly over the page. In one of his essays a highwayman waits under cover at the roadside. His horse snorts softly, its breath turns to vapour in the cold night air. A ray of moonlight falls like a slash across his face; he holds his pistol under the flap of his coat to keep the powder dry (pp.138-139).

There is something telling the boy that he is special and that in one way or another he is “untouchable”. He remembers when two big Afrikaans boys had taken hold of him and dragged him in the field, even though he felt afraid, there was also something inside him that told him: “Never mind, nothing can touch you, this is just another adventure?” (p.113). On the one hand, this makes him feel like he stands above the ground, but on the other hand he feels like he is missing out on real life:

Nothing can touch you, there is nothing you are not capable of. Those are the two things about him, two things that are really one thing, the thing that is right about him and the thing that is wrong about him at the same time. This thing that is two things means that he will not die, no matter what; but does it not also mean that he will not live? (p.113)

John in both *Boyhood* and *Youth* has difficulties in forming personal relationships, every relationship he has ends in disaster. Even though in *Youth* he seeks to find a woman that will light his creative fire, he nevertheless seems to be aloof and cold to all those he comes in contact with. The only reason why he wants to find a woman is in order to feel the passion and love that a writer needs in order to produce art. Because he thinks that “artists do not have to be morally admirable people. All that matters is that they create great art. If his own art is to come out of the more contemptible side of himself, so be it” (*Youth*, p.30); he sees no reason to hide his moral shortcomings. Attridge (2004) emphasises that what enables Coetzee to paint such a dire picture of himself, especially in *Youth*, is by changing or leaving out many important events from his life:

... an absence which makes possible a remorselessly self-denigrating picture of the narrator's sexual relations, but which renders the notion of autobiographical “truth” particularly problematic. The urge to confess may

itself distort the representation of the past, producing an exaggeration of one's failings and *Youth* certainly provokes the thought that by giving us so little in the way of compensatory moments of generosity or joy Coetzee has succumbed to this tendency (pp.160-161).

But taking into consideration that in *Doubling the point* (1992) he has already mentioned that one can never include “all the facts” and that including the negative more than the positive does not make the narrative less true, since truth is more complex than this. The same issue is taken up in *Youth*, after his girlfriend Jacqueline finds his diary and reads all the disparaging things he has written about her, she become furious and leaves him. This leads John to contemplate about the meaning of “truth”: “What are his true thoughts anyway? Some days he feels happy, even privileged, to be living with a beautiful woman, or at least not to be living alone. Other days he feels differently. Is the truth the happiness, the unhappiness, or the average of the two” (*Youth*, p.9).

Therefore the critics who claim that his focus upon the negative, means that he is distorting or hiding his past are missing this point. Coetzee (1992) emphasises that when writing autobiography “selective vision, even a degree of blindness, becomes inevitable – blindness to what may be obvious to any passing observer” (p.391). The “tendency” to dwell upon his flaws and negative experiences is an attempt to capture the general mood of his formative years which seems to be longing, loneliness and alienation. The most fascinating aspect about his contemplations on autobiography and truth is that while we read this genre with the expectation that the author has a unique viewpoint on his/her life which readers will get access to; Coetzee shows us that writers often cannot divide between what is fictional and what is factual, the dividing line between the two being blurry. Moreover, he does not even think that it is important to separate them: “Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure?” (*Youth*, p.10).

In *Youth* we meet a young man who has decided that he will be an artist, most likely a writer; but the “crystallizing experience” that leads John towards writing weirdly enough happens when he gets in touch with “bad” books written by members of his family. When his mother's aunt Annie is in hospital, John visits her home with his mother and there he finds books written by his uncle and his grandfather Balthazar du Biel. His grandfather wrote about “his boyhood in Germany [which] he interrupts with long reports of lights in the sky and voices speaking to him out of the heavens” (p.118). The child thinks the book is boring and that his grandfather was probably crazy, but what

he can not understand is why aunt Annie had spent all her money to publish her father's book when he had been cruel to her all his life. His mother points out that even though du Biel was a harsh man "at least you can be proud to have someone in your family who did something with his life, who left something behind him" (p.119). John starts to become obsessed with immortality and leaving something behind him, maybe something that people would actually read and remember him for? After Aunt Annie dies, John recalls that she used to tell him that he was special and that he knew too much for his age, asking him "how are you ever going to keep it all in your head?" (p.165). This leads the boy into thinking that "he alone is left to do all the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?" (p.166). This is the moment when John has his "crystallizing experience", that he is "the one" who has to find a way to keep the stories in his head. He wants to be a great man, but it is not until the end of the book when the child is faced with death for the first time, that he asks himself how he will he ever be able to achieve immortality in order not be forgotten like Balthazar de Biel and his book: "He is convinced that he is different, special. What he does not yet know is why he is in the world. He suspects he will not be an Arthur or an Alexander, revered in his lifetime. Not until after he is dead will he be appreciated" (p.108). Arthur and Alexander were warriors, admired for their strength and leadership, but the child knows that he lacks the physical attributes and the desire to become like them; and since he emphasises that he will gain admiration only after his death, this tells us that he will become an artist. What kind of artist he does not say, but the references to books, stories and his reading habits point to one direction – writing.

Youth depicts a young man who struggles to find his artistic voice, studying and reading authors that inspire him. Even though he begins by studying mathematics, he finds it difficult to take other science courses: "Since he would appear to have no sympathy with the real world, he avoids the sciences, filling in the empty slots in his curriculum with courses in English, philosophy, classical studies" (p.23). The answers that the natural sciences provide, leave him unsatisfied. He is not convinced by the laws of physics, he wants to explore the questions more deeply.

At first Coetzee experiments with poetry, but he feels that none of his poems are good enough. Even though London provides him with the suffering and loneliness that he needs in order to become a poet, it fails to provide him with fire and passion which according to him are essential in order to produce good art since "art cannot be fed on deprivation alone, on longing, loneliness. There must be intimacy, passion, love as well" (p.10). His search for the woman who will ignite his poetic fire does not produce any results in London either. In the end he turns to prose because it "does not

demand emotion”. He begins to write his first experiments which point clearly to the path that Coetzee will follow as a writer:

He sets aside a weekend for his first experiment with prose. The story that emerges from the experiment, if that is what it is, a story, has no real plot. Everything of importance happens in the mind of the narrator, a nameless young man all too like himself who takes a nameless girl to a lonely beach and watches while she swims. From some small action of hers, some unconscious gesture, he is suddenly convinced she has been unfaithful to him; furthermore, he realizes that she has seen he knows, and does not care. That is all. That is how the piece ends. That is the sum of it (pp.61-62).

Even though his main mission in life was to get away from South Africa and be part of a larger world, he feels alienated in London. His work at IBM provides him with no satisfaction, he can be neither a part of the working class nor the middle class; and no matter how hard he tries to become a Londoner, he feels that long-distance patriotism starts to get a hold of him as he sits in the library reading old books about his home country. This is the moment when it becomes clear to him what he should write about:

If, to make his book convincing, there needs to be a grease-pot swinging under the bed of the wagon as it bumps across the stones of the Karoo, he will do the grease – pot. If there have to be cicadas trilling in the tree under which they stop at noon, he will do the cicadas. The creek of the grease-pot, the trilling of the cicadas – those he is confident he can bring off. The difficult part will be to give to the whole the aura that will get it onto the shelves and thus into the history of the world: the aura of truth (*Youth*, p.138).

These ideas are fully embraced in his second novel *In the heart of the country* (1977) where the details of life on a farm evoke a “bygone world” which is exactly what he feels his art should be about. As Lenta (2003) emphasises, the words “aura of truth” establish a connection between “fiction, biography, and autobiography which, insofar as all are works of art, can only aspire to the 'aura', rather than the actuality, of truth” (p.168). He admires William John Burchell's *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa* (1822) because of its truthfulness and because it “really happened” (*Youth*, p. 137). While all three genres may be said to be versions of truth, as long as we are able to feel what John feels when he reads Burchell's depiction of a South African farm, then that is what counts as truth. It is not about facts, a work has to feel true, otherwise it will fail to move us. After reading all the classics of Western literature, it is Burchell that enlightens John on his path. He realizes he has to “write a book as convincing as [*Travels in the interior of Southern Africa*] and lodge it in this library that defines all libraries” (p.138). South Africa does not bring joy to him, on

the contrary “it is a wound within him” (p.116). Nevertheless he knows that it is the pain and misery that he knows and that if he is able to capture on the page, will make him into a great writer. And even though he feels miserable in London, he does not have that complicated emotional connection to the place. He does not feel that he knows London well enough:

If he were to try, what would come out would be no different, he suspects, from the London of any other bachelor clerk. He may have his own vision of London, but there is nothing unique to that vision. If it has a certain intensity, that is only because it is narrow, and it is narrow because it is ignorant of everything outside itself. He has not mastered London. If there is any mastering going on, it is London mastering him (p.63).

As Lenta (2003) points out “the two *autrebiographical* works depend on the young protagonist's progress to consciousness of himself as artist” (p.168). Since he was a child he was fascinated by the life on the farm and its simplicity; and in *Youth* we see that while he struggles to find his unique vision which will enable him to write masterpieces, he goes back to his roots. Even in *Boyhood*, he feels that what sets him apart from the other boys are the stories from the farm that his mother and uncles tell him:

He loves to listen to his mother and his uncles going for the thousandth time over the events of their childhood on the farm. He is never happier than when listening to these stories, to the teasing and the laughter that go with them. His friends do not come from families with stories like these. That is what sets him apart: the two farms behind him, his mother's farm, his father's farm, and the stories of those farms. Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance (p.22).

But whether in Cape Town, Worcester or London, Coetzee feels alienated, albeit for different reasons. This alienation has enabled him to create some of the most marginalised and lonely characters in literature like Magda in *In the heart of the country* (1977): “This is what I was meant to be: a poetess of inferiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotions of ants, the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain. It seems to be the only career, if we except death, for which life in the desert has fitted me” (p.35).

Personal identity starts to develop during adolescence, as separate from that of his country and family. But we see that the same questions and issues that bothered him as a child continue to haunt him in adulthood, and his fiction arises as a result of trying to explore those intriguing aspects of his childhood. Gardner (2011) has pointed out that creative people connect the insight gained in adulthood with the questions that intrigued them as children. For example, when he goes to the

Catholic school and he listens to what his teachers say about China and Russia, it causes him anguish because he knows that it is not the truth: “He knows that his teachers' stories must be lies, but he has no means of proving it. He is discontented about having to sit captive listening to them, but too canny to protest or even demur” (*Boyhood*, p.141). On another occasion he wants to prove that his family's opinions about the black people are flawed. As a child he has no arguments, but as he grows older, reads and develops intellectually he knows exactly what his art will be about: challenge the accepted discourses and create works that operate according to their standards and truths.

Pals (2006) distinguishes three patterns of self-making: the first one is “the positive to negative: the narrowing of self” in which the positive experiences are connected to positive growths of self, whereas the negative ones are interpreted as “threatening or reversing those positive aspects of self” (p.182). According to Pals this can lead to limitations of a person's “opportunities for growth” (p.185). The second pattern is called “the compartmentalization of self” in which the positive causal connections are separated from the negative ones which also limits a person's “potential for growth (pp.185-186). The third one is called “negative to positive: the springboard effect and the transformation of self” (p.189). The latter depicts Lessing's and Coetzee's pattern of self-making because even the causal connections which are negative are embraced and acknowledged as useful to their growth as humans and to their careers as writers. Moreover, the negative causal connections have aided Lessing in fighting to assert her true self, which enabled her to live the life she wanted, not the life that “Tigger” would have led her towards.

Conclusion

“All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography”
(Coetzee, 1992, p.391)

When reading Lessing's and Coetzee's life writings we sense that both of them feel uneasy when writing about themselves. Lessing expresses this explicitly in her book, which at times makes us wonder why she has even written it. She sees many problematic issues connected with writing about her life and revealing her secrets; moreover she thinks it is very important to protect secrets of friends and family. Another issue which arises is related to her own perception of her young self: How to capture her naïve self now that she has outgrown it without sounding condescending? On the other hand Coetzee's troubled relation with his early self and with life writing is captured in the experimental form in which he chose to write or more accurately the way in which he managed to both write and not write about himself.

The most interesting aspect of Lessing's life writing is her openness regarding her approach to the genre. Some of her opinions in themselves present us with illuminating theory on how to read, analyse and approach life writing. For instance, on one occasion in *Walking in the Shade* (1997), she describes a trip to Russia, and she realizes that one of her friends who was with her on that journey was not “remembering the same things” (*Walking in the Shade*, loc.1069). She elaborates that “it was not a question of remembering the same things differently but as if [they] had been on two different trips” (*Walking in the Shade*, loc.1069). When her friend reads Lessing's account of the trip in *Walking in the Shade*, she can think that it is untrue. And if we heard her friend's version, would we have doubted the truthfulness of Lessing's account? Or maybe her friend's? This particular episode left Lessing feeling baffled as to how memory operates: “This experience, which was shocking to me, began my attempts to understand the extraordinary slipperiness of memory: before that, I had taken it for granted that people with the same experiences would remember the same things. Particularly when they were as vivid as those during our trip to Russia” (loc.1069). Lessing reaches the conclusion that what we remember has to do with how “present” we are in that particular moment. There is another aspect to the issue of memory and recalling the past and that is the issue regarding the term “reality”. As Brockmeier and Harré (2001) emphasise, to think that narrative is giving voice to some pre-lived memory or reality is a misconception. Lessing has boldly pointed out how her viewpoints and her ideas have changed over time, therefore if she wrote her life story in a different phase of her life, different identities and different stories would be emphasised.

Therefore the issues regarding truth, reality and how autobiography captures them become problematic, and in a way they become irrelevant since as narrative and autobiographical research emphasise: “A life normally embraces several life stories, which moreover, do change over the life course. It is a fallacy to assume that such variety of (auto)biographical narratives differ in that some are 'true' and some are 'not (or less) true’” (Brockmeier&Harré, 2001, p.48-49). It is impossible to determine what “this pre-given reality” is, therefore all life writing is a construction of our experiences and remains the only way we have for capturing and presenting our identity to ourselves and others. When Lessing was a child and an adolescent, she hated her mother and defied her in every possible way. She developed the identity of a determined fighter who would stop at nothing to achieve her goals. But as she grew older and lived through two divorces, gave birth to three children, moved to London and began her career as a writer, Lessing realizes that the most essential parts of her stemmed from the relationship with her mother. In her study of women's autobiographies, Mary G. Mason (1980) arrives at the conclusion that projecting themselves into an Other enables women to write about themselves: “... the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness and I emphasise recognition rather than deference – this grounding of identity through the relation to the chosen other, seems to enable women to write openly about themselves” (p.210).

Coetzee too acknowledges that his mother loomed large in his life, and in the same manner as Lessing he tried to break free from her. When he moved away from his parents' house, even though he lived in Cape Town, he avoided contact with her. Later in London he only wrote to let her know that he was alive. He was determined in his attempts to ascertain himself, and maybe his manhood as well by cutting all ties with her. But it was different with Lessing and her mother, because even though Lessing tried not to have contact with her mother, she never quite succeeded; and the only reason she began to see a therapist was in order to deal with her mother's first visit. She recalls this as one of the most emotionally tumultuous experiences she has had to go through in London. A strong woman who was so fierce that she moved to the big city alone with her small child, but when her mother announced her visit, Lessing turned into a vulnerable and scared little child. Moreover, she has spent her entire life trying to understand her mother, and the relationship with her. She claims that she was middle-aged when she began to sympathize with her parents and their lives, which is captured in *Alfred and Emily* (2008).

Another difference between them which is very evident in their depiction of childhood is how loved they felt by their mothers. While Coetzee felt as “the prince of the house”, Lessing was the unloved

and unwanted child. While both mothers devoted their lives to their children, Lessing was completely aware that her mother loved her brother more than her. This has impacted the manner in which Lessing has behaved towards her own children and her issues with commitment. She remembers that while she had always loved babies and cuddled her first son constantly, things changed with her daughter: “Jean would have happily spent every moment on a knee or in loving arms. But I had switched off. This is not to say she was not dandled and loved, but from me – not enough” (*Under my skin*, p.261). More than anyone else, we would expect her to understand the repercussions of motherly love or lack thereof, as she recalls her own pleading to be cuddled by her mother: “Mummy, come and cuddle me” (p.261). Throughout the narrative even though she does not express any regrets about her actions, some of her explanations sound more like justifications and attempts to hide her true feelings, trying to maintain the image of the strong woman who never looks back in regret. This is how she felt about seeing her two children after having the third one:

Why did I go along with it? For one thing, when one is so deeply in the wrong, it is not easy to assert oneself. For another, I felt dragged along by powerful currents, contradictory ones and that was the point. I felt – and still wonder if this wasn't right – that it would be better to make a clean break with the two children until – the formula used for these situations – they were old enough to understand (*Under my skin*, p.401).

Moreover, another difference between them which is also related to gender has to do with the freedom of movement. Coetzee was free to hunt with the men on the farm, and his mother could not do anything about it. On the other hand, as soon as Lessing entered adolescence her mother tried to confine her movements by warning her about rapes, something which Lessing found ridiculous since she had roamed the bush for many years without perceiving any danger. Lessing was not going to abide to the society's rules for women and where they were allowed to go; she boasts that she would spend as much time outdoors as the men. Both in life and in her art, Lessing has not been afraid to pursue her freedom: “All those years I had wandered about miles from home, and had tactfully not said how far I went, but now it was Principle, it was the Truth, and we fought. 'If they are so dangerous why is it no one has ever attacked me?' 'Yes, but there is always a first time’” (*Under my skin*, p.155).

Their reminiscing about school days is very similar as they both attended Catholic schools. They recall cruelty and ignorance from the teachers, and being discouraged when they engaged in creative writing. But while Lessing managed to escape school life and has never regretted it, Coetzee went through with it, eventually pursuing a Ph. D at the University of Texas. Lessing was

born in another period, when education was not as important as when Coetzee was growing up, at least for girls. She was also raised on an isolated farm, therefore it was easier for her to quit school and move back home. Moreover getting married and having children was considered the primary duty of a woman. For Coetzee, however, it would have been more difficult to stop going to school altogether. In *Doubling the point* (1992) he credits his university education with helping him find himself and his voice. Lessing was able to find it through another route, by experimenting both in politics and in her art with different roles; from active roles in the Communist party, to rejecting this early self and embracing spiritualism and Sufism; from realism to space fiction. When she broke with Communism, she remembers how difficult it was to discuss this issue with her friends “who were still the Faithful” (*Under my skin*, p.397). It seems that before she moved to London, only a part of her was alive, that is the social persona: “Looking back now I would say that perhaps one quarter of me had been involved since then, and the best part of me was in cold storage. So I felt” (*Under my skin*, p.262).

Neither Lessing nor Coetzee try to hide the constructive nature of their life writings, nor their divided identities. In fact, Coetzee thematizes his conflictual identity by turning his narrative into a third person one; a technique which Lessing also employs in certain parts of her writing, talking about “Tigger” and “Hostess” as if they were someone else. Many decisions that Lessing has made throughout her life she attributes to her social persona Tigger, who was always eager to please other people. Even on her wedding day she remembers that what she was feeling inside was completely different from what is captured in the pictures of that event: “There was a graceless wedding, which I hated. I remember exactly how I felt: it is not a question of inventive memory. In the wedding photographs I look a jolly young matron. It was 'Tigger' who was getting married” (*Under my skin*, p.207). As Klein (2000) points out in her analysis of Lessing's identity, it seems that very often Tigger took over Lessing's life:

The evolution of Doris Lessing has not been a linear process. There are a series of identities, embraced and then discarded. In her lifelong quest to find the real Doris, she seems to have unwittingly stumbled onto a number of Tiggers – personas who moved so effortlessly in a certain milieu that they dragged Lessing with them, away from finding her true identity herself. In looking back, she has little mercy for these traitors to her quest for self (pp.92-93).

It is interesting to observe how both Lessing and Coetzee began to see quite early that there is something wrong with the attitudes and opinions of grown ups. Their curiosity regarding black

people around them was stronger than the white supremacy ideas they were indoctrinated with. It began as an instinct, which later developed into arguments and strong convictions about equality and justice. Since Coetzee tries to see the world through the eyes of a child, the political opinions are implied, though slowly even in *Boyhood* John begins to see that the indigenous people whom the white population try to remove from South African history “come with the land [and] the land comes with them” (p.62). In *Youth* on the other hand, he is convinced that the white people do not belong in Africa, especially since all they have done is exploit the people and the land. When he sees a black woman in London, and he feels that she disapproves of him; he wants to make sure that she understands his opinions on this topic: “Africa belongs to you, it is yours to do with as you wish: if he said that to her, out of the blue, across the kitchen table, would she change her mind about him? (p.121). It is riveting to witness John's reminisces as a child, trying to figure out where the black people fit in his life, or in the society at large; then in *Youth* as a student, realizing “that people like Paul and himself, with their pianos and violins, are here on this earth, the earth of South Africa, on the shakiest of pretexts” (p.17). In the same manner Lessing as a child was unable to understand her father's frustrations that his children used the servants to run small errands, and rebuffed his wife who got angry when her servant didn't set up the table according to her standards: “Throughout my childhood he remonstrated with my mother, more in sorrow than in anger, about the folly of expecting a man just out of a hut in the bush to understand the importance of laying a place at table with silver in its exact order, or how to arrange brushes and mirrors on a dressing table” (*Under my skin*, p.73). Moreover, Lessing saw her father in the fields talking to the leader of the workers, Old Smoke, in a way that wasn't common for white people. This must have influenced the girl into thinking that black people could be talked to on the same level as the white ones. Even though she claims that “she doesn't propose to elaborate on white settler attitude, there's nothing new to say about them” (*Under my skin*, p.113); in her stories and novels she has had a lot to say about these attitudes. In the story *The Old Chief Mshlanga* (1951), the child realizes that the only way for the black and white people to live together is by respecting each other. As soon as she tries to communicate with the black people she is met with acceptance and friendliness: “It seemed it was only necessary to let free that respect I felt when I was talking with old Chief Mshlanga, to let both black and white people meet gently, with tolerance for each other's differences: it seemed quite easy” (p.17). But what comes easy to the child, doesn't come easy to the grown ups; the father in the story takes away the tribe's goats because they had destroyed his crops. The Chief tries to reason with him, telling him that his tribe would starve, but the white man doesn't change his mind. In the end the tribesman tells him that: “All this land, this land you call yours, is his, and belongs to our people” (p.24). The character is probably moulded more from the other white farmers because from

the portrayal of her father, he seems less racist and more open to his black workers, as his deep conversations with Old Smoke illustrate. On the other hand her mother had embraced the white settler attitudes and was rude to her black servants, always scolding them, always dissatisfied. But while her father was not cruel to the workers, he didn't do much to improve their living conditions, nor was he very interested in the issue. Lessing, though very young, was capable of contemplating that there was something wrong with the arrangement on the farm: "... why were all these people working for so little money on our farm? (*Under my skin*, p.179). Later on when on a holiday in Cape Town she met a woman who was part of a Christian Church that was trying to establish good relations between the two races. When this woman heard that Lessing was from Southern Rhodesia, she began to say the worst things imaginable about that country and the white people. For Lessing this was the first time she had ever heard anyone express those view with such passion: "No one I had known was capable of saying anything so simple and so obvious" (p.251). Later on in her fiction, Lessing would show the small-mindedness of the white settlers and how conceited their attitudes were from the insider's viewpoint; something which made her unpopular with her brother who had embraced those attitudes.

In many instances of my analysis I have pointed out how certain aspects of the lives of these two writers have been used in their fiction. This is useful not in order to argue for an autobiographical reading of their novels; but in order to see how complex the issues of truth and fiction are. As Attridge (2004) emphasises, there is always a chance that an author will combine "fictional episodes into a framework of autobiography" (p.161), and this makes life writing "a genre that hovers permanently at the borders of the literary and the nonliterary" (p.161). While fictional works use elements from real life, and life writing may contain elements of fiction, what remains important is that both have what John in *Youth* calls "the aura of truth" (p.138). This is a work which comes alive on the page and gains the status of a classic. This does not diminish the genre's value, and while it makes the reading process more challenging, it also makes it more interesting. Once we are carried away by their childhood memories of the bush life, the protagonists' naiveté and their attempts to make sense of the world, we forget about facts because the story matters more than the minute details of their lives. Both Lessing and Coetzee manage to capture the atmosphere of growing up in Africa, and life as new inhabitants of London which chills them with its coldness and harshness. The works resonate as true because the vision of life is true; as Attridge (2004) summarises: "We read *Boyhood* and *Youth* not in order to dispense forgiveness or blame, but to experience the pleasures of language being shaped and arranged to capture, for its author, for its readers, a certain form of truth" (p.161). Lessing has expressed her displeasure with readers and

critics who seem disappointed when she tells them that certain characters and certain experiences are not wholly autobiographical; at the same time in *Under my skin* she exposes the complexities of the manner in which autobiographical elements can be included in fiction. For example she explain the process of writing her *Children of Violence* series. The first three books she admits were more or less autobiographical, even though she emphasises that she didn't put Gottfried Lessing in them in order to protect their son. The character of Martha's second husband was modelled according to the husband of one of her friends, but who was of “the same psychological type” as Gottfried (p.299). Reading her autobiography, we cannot help but notice the similarities between Gottfried and Martha's second husband, no matter how much she modified his background. She claims she broke with the autobiographical elements in her fourth book, *Landlocked* (1965):

It was with *Landlocked* I left autobiography behind. For one thing, there was a gap of years between *A Ripple from the Storm* and *Landlocked*. I wrote *The Golden Notebook* in that time, other books, short stories. I could not find the right tone for that period, such a bad, slow, frustrated, blocked time. At last life came up with the psychological recipe for *Landlocked*, a melancholy book, pervaded with post-war disillusion (p.298).

As long as the book is able to capture the mood of the particular period, it should not be important how much of it is actually factual: “True or false, who cares? The storytellers of this world should not be held to account for tedious exactitudes” (*Walking in the Shade*, loc.3941). Therefore, it is baffling when Collingwood-Whittick (2001) claims that by using the third person Coetzee breaks the “truth telling pact” which is essential in life writing (p.22). She emphasises in her paper that “there is no preface or foreword or explanatory preamble to the text to confirm the author's autobiographical intention” (p.14). This shows us that Coetzee by not making such a pact cannot be held responsible for breaking it. As Olney (1980) says, when creative writers engage in the process of writing about their lives, they will experiment with the form in order to express their unique vision. They are used to experimentation in fiction, always looking for new forms and new ways to express themselves; consequently it will not be different when they write about themselves:

When the autobiographer thinks of himself or herself as a writer and would put down “writer” (or “poet”, “novelist”, “playwright”) when asked for a profession, the tendency is to produce autobiography in various guises and disguises in every work and then – this being the other side of the coin – to seek a unique form in a work properly called “an autobiography” (or any other name pointing to the same thing) that may reflect and express the life and the vision of this individual writer alone (p.236).

Both of their life writings are written from the adult's perspective, even though Coetzee

camouflages this perspective by using the present tense. We have seen that many critics emphasised that the child's reflections seem too mature, and that detailed depictions of certain scenes are erroneous because they show us that the scene is written from an adult's point of view. While this may be true, in *Boyhood* these scenes are combined with others in which the child's dilemmas are depicted with such genuineness that it enables us to achieve “the willing suspension of disbelief”. Moreover, even though we know that it is the adult Coetzee who wrote the book, he does not perform any kind of evaluation of the episodes or thoughts of the protagonist. The experimental genre enables him to detach himself and look at his younger self from distance. Doris Lessing on the other hand constantly analyses her life and her childhood memories from the present point of view, trying to offer explanations for certain important events of her life. While the critics and her readers have expected her to express feelings of guilt, it seems that their expectations have been met with annoyance from Lessing's part. She recalls “giving a lecture on barriers to perception” mentioning guilt as one of the causes, which led the audience to “jump [and] ask about guilt, guilt, nothing else, only guilt. I suggested I talked about other things, but no, it was guilt, guilt” (*Under my skin*, p.264). She assures us that even if guilt wanted to take over her life, she never let it, since one of the main driving forces in her life is not to be “subdued by circumstance”, especially since she spent her first thirty years being controlled by it:

I did not feel guilty. Long afterwards - about ten years ago – a psychotherapist informed me, with the air they have of producing revelations out of a hat, that I carried a load of guilt. *No! You don't say!* By then I was regarding myself as something of an expert on guilt, both evident and devious. I know all about the ravages of guilt, how it feels, how it undermines and saps. I energetically fight back (*Under my skin*, p.264).

The way they organize their life writing is of importance as well. Lessing tries to weave a more or less chronological narrative, in the second chapter she even starts by numbering her first memories. One interesting point about these memories is that they are recounted in the present tense. All of Lessing's first memories are about her parents' bodies: her father's wooden leg, his smell, her mother's breasts, hair under armpits: “an intense physicality, that is the truth of childhood” (*Under my skin*, p.18). According to my opinion, Lessing has captured the “physicality” of childhood in *Under my skin*. In *Boyhood* John also expresses the same disgust regarding his father's body and habits, especially his smell:

What he hates most about his father are his personal habits. He hates them so much that the mere thought of them makes him shudder with distaste: the loud nose-blowing in the bathroom in the mornings, the steamy smell of Lifebuoy soap that he leaves behind, along with a ring of scum and shaving-hairs in the washbasin.

Most of all he hates the way his father smells (*Boyhood*, p.43).

Even if John cringes from any type of physical contact, he allows his father's family to kiss him because he wants to be in the farm, but he does not allow his mother to tell him she loves him; and he is glad that his mother and father do not engage in any displays of affection. It sounds as if his parents' lack of affection has made him incapable of showing any type of emotion. John's attempts to find love, passion and a woman who will inspire his art by lighting a passion in him, also end in disaster. Lessing's feelings of rejection from her mother has made her look for love and approval in relationships, and in both volumes she is involved in those kinds of relationships that seem doomed from the start. There is a clear similarity in the way that both of them depict scenes of physical contact between their parents. The only difference is that Lessing, because her sympathies lie with her father, feels compassion for him; whereas John is relieved that he does not have to witness such behaviour:

I am in my father's bed, my brother, who is asleep, in my mother's. My father and my mother come into the room together. She carefully sets the lamp down. He puts his arms around her and turns her about to face him. He is gallant and shy, like a boy – or like a rebuffed man ... He kisses her, and she laughs, but she has turned her face away and is looking over her shoulder at her two little children in their parents' beds, whom she will carry asleep to their beds next door. The door between the bedrooms was always propped open at night until I insisted on its being shut (*Under my skin*, pp.186-187).

His mother's family does not kiss. Nor has he seen his mother and father kiss properly. Sometimes, when there are other people present and for some reason they have to pretend, his father kisses his mother on the cheek. She presents her cheek to him reluctantly, angrily, as if she were being forced; his kiss is light, quick, nervous (*Boyhood*, p.121)

His parents sleep in separate beds. They have never had a double bed. The only double bed he has seen is on the farm, in the main bedroom, where his grandfather and grandmother used to sleep. He thinks of double beds as old-fashioned, belonging to the days when the wives produced a baby a year, like ewes or sows. He is thankful his parents finished with that business before he knew about it (*Boyhood*, pp.121-122).

What distinguishes their life writing though is the fact that Coetzee's portrayal of himself in *Boyhood* and *Youth* is self-deprecating. He returns his mother's love with rage and aloofness, his dislike for his father turns into hatred by the end of *Boyhood*, he crushes his brother's finger and does not express any regret. In *Youth* the image of John only worsens, he treats women with coldness, and is unable to feel any true emotions for them. While some critics have interpreted his

self-depreciating image as a sign that his life writing is not a true account of himself, Eakin (1999) emphasises that “the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a lifelong process of identity formation” (p.ix). If Coetzee portrays his younger self as a selfish, cold, heartless human being, it is because that is the identity he feels defines him at that period.

Lessing on the other hand portrays herself in a more “balanced” manner. She is honest about her behaviour towards her mother, but justifies it with the fact that it was the difficult mother that created this difficult child. She does not express any feelings of regret about the time when she used to be mischievous. Is it because she views that part of self as another person? A quote from her book could prove that this is true: “Had I written this when I was thirty, it would have been a pretty combative document. In my forties a wail of despair and guilt: Oh my God, how could I have done this or that? Now I look back at that child, that girl, that young woman, with a more detached curiosity” (*Under my skin*, p.12).

In the chapter included in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture* (2001), Jacque Vonèche analyses the different autobiographies that the psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget wrote, and in which he presents different identities. According to Vonèche it is the target audience that establishes Piaget's life writing and that the same period of his life is depicted in different ways “according to the main purpose of each of the specific autobiographies” (p.223).

Autobiography is always written from the retrospective viewpoint of person interpreting one's own past; its form and content largely depends on what the person is at the time of writing, and part of its function is to preserve and be true to the writer's personality. At the same time, however, an autobiography will affect its author's very being; to a certain extent, the autobiographer will become the true subject of his or her own narrative (p.226).

What Vonèche means by the last sentence is that Piaget tried to prove that his theories of mind and development were accurate by writing about his own self “who develops as the theory claims” (p.226). How do Lessing and Coetzee turn into “the true subject[s] of [their] own narrative[s]”? Coetzee depicts himself in negative terms trying to emphasise that writers are not the moral epitomes, even though their subject matter might be morality. He wants to establish the image of the writer as a cold and heartless creature, thus shattering any romantic ideas that readers might have about his/her image. That their memories are probably constructed is especially clear in an episode in *Boyhood* when John asks his friends to recount their earliest memory, and goes to construct one

that is far more dramatic than his “real” memory; this shows that a writer's life is not only about the external events, it is also about what goes on inside him/her. This is also confirmed by Lessing in *Walking in the Shade* (1997) where she struggles to capture what goes on inside her creative mind as she goes about the daily routines. She uses the metaphor of “wool gathering” to depict the creative process which involves sifting through a huge amount of ideas and finding the ones that can be turned into great art. The same can be said of life writing, the writers have to sift through many experiences and find the ones that define them.

So, that's the outline of a day. But nowhere in it is the truth of the process of writing. I fall back on that useful word “wool gathering”. And this goes on when you are shopping, cooking, anything. You are reading but find the book has lowered itself: you are wool-gathering. The creative dark. Incommunicable. And what about the pages discarded and thrown away, the stories that were misbegotten – into the waste-paper basket, the ideas that lived in your mind for a day or two, or a week, but haven't any life, so out with them. What life, what is it, why is one page alive and another not, what is this aliveness, which is born so very deep, out of sight, fed by love? By describing a day like this: I got up, the child went to school, I wrote, he came back, and the next day was the same – that is hardly the stuff that keeps the reader turning pages (loc.1721).

One of the most interesting aspects with reading these two life writings is to find out that they are not as different as one might initially think. Autobiographical and narrative studies have emphasises that life writing can incorporate fictionalized elements, but it does not mean it is not “true”, which was proven by these two writers. Lessing admits that she will keep certain things to herself, Coetzee doesn't even choose a genre, he moves from fact to fiction leaving us to decide for ourselves how we will read his book. Neither of them promise us truth, facts, the whole of life, but the pieces they deliver are recounted with such vivacity and presence that we are left with little doubt that these experiences reveal to us important aspects of these writer's lives, their views and a small piece of Africa's history.

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