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Interpreting Autobiographies in English Class

Analyzing How Self Is Constructed from Fragments of Memories

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Abstract

This essay gives an introduction to the autobiographical genre and provides a set of analyzing questions which can be used as a guideline when interpreting autobiographies with students. Since autobiographies are considered to be non-fictional and are marketed with the sales argument that an exclusive true life-story will be disclosed, the critical approach will focus on the concepts of self and truth discussed by modern and postmodern critics. The aim is to help students adjust their expectations of the truth and to give them a diversified picture of the author. This will be done by studying the autobiographical “I’s” and by examining devices used to “create” authenticity. Moreover, to study how memories are told and to reflect on the remembering process will raise the awareness of the fact that the genre is very close to fiction. Like a good story teller, the author needs to bring the story alive to catch the interest of the reader; meanwhile, he also needs to insert facts which give credibility to the story. Further, to show how the set of analyzing questions can be applied on an autobiography, *Scar Tissue* by Anthony Kiedis is analyzed in this essay. The example is followed up by a pedagogical discussion which concludes that the method used will be suitable for interpreting autobiography in English Class in Upper Secondary School.

Key words: Autobiography, Scar Tissue, Anthony Kiedis, Critical Approach, English Class, Analyzing Questions, the Autobiographical “I”, Memories

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1. Introduction

To be able to catch young people's interest in reading, the teacher needs to start out from the perspective of the students. Motivating them is a challenge, since many students in Upper Secondary School never read books outside the classroom. Teachers often serve them with classics or other well-written novels, which they have problems to identify with. One genre, however, that is very popular today is the autobiography. My experience is that many students read life narratives out of curiosity and for pleasure, which is a good way to learn a language. The aim with this essay is to encourage other teachers to use autobiographies in the classroom. Hopefully, it will give teachers a better understanding of autobiographies and new ideas of how to study this genre together with the students.

The autobiographical genre is often ignored in school books. Consequently, no tools of how to interpret life narratives with students are provided for teachers. This study will examine how to read autobiographies in Upper Secondary School and will provide a set of analyzing questions for extensive reading, which will be applied to one autobiographical work.

To get a better understanding of how to approach the genre, a historical review of the genre and the main ideas of literary critics will be presented in the introduction. Further, to give an idea of how easily one can study autobiographies in class, an autobiography project will be described. It was successfully carried out in Swedish class and it should be transferable to English class with advantage. I will, therefore, examine how this can be done and which English course at Upper Secondary School level is most appropriate for the autobiography project. Since no structured method for extensive reading is used in the project, there is a need to develop a set of analyzing questions that will enable a critical approach. This, I believe, can be done by examining the key concepts of the genre: the concepts of self and truth, discussed by postmodern literary critics.

In the last part of the essay, I will enter more deeply into features dealing with these concepts. Autobiographies are often marketed with the message that the reader will get access to an exclusive, true story. When students read autobiographies, they wish to get to know the real person they might admire. Therefore, I suggest that extensive reading should help students to adjust their expectations of the truth. To study how self is constructed from memories, will give them a broader picture of the author, and a better understanding of the genre as a whole. Consequently, the literary analysis will focus on the author and the

autobiographical “I’s”. Moreover, taken into consideration that an autobiography is based on recollections, the analysis will also focus on the memory; how memories are told and composed to a narrative plot and how authenticity is established through these fragments of memories. These are some of the issues discussed in *Reading Autobiography, A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

Finally, an example will be given of how to analyze autobiography by using this critical approach. Applying the method on an autobiography, popular among teenagers, will be a way of finding out if the analyzing questions are applicable to extensive reading in English class. I have chosen a book from the music genre, *Scar Tissue*, by Anthony Kiedis.

1.1 Introduction to the Autobiographical Genre

The term autobiography originates from the Greek language and means “self - life - writing”. It often refers to a book written by a person who tells his or her life story. Autobiography is often confused with biography, where the “self” is excluded and the “life” of a third person is described. Another similar genre is the autobiographical novel, which is often based on a true story, but never claims to tell the truth. *David Copperfield* is for example an autobiographical novel, bringing up some episodes from the childhood of Charles Dickens, but does not tell the true life story of Dickens. In other words, in distinction from the similar genres, the autobiography should qualify as a true story about the life of the author. This is often what the reader expects.

Following Philippe Lejeune, Ronald Tulley presents his theory about “the autobiographical pact” in the article “An Exhibitionist’s Paradise: Digital Transformations of the Autobiographical Impulse”. Lejeune declares that there is a tacit understanding between the author and the reader that an autobiography should be based on facts and true memories and that it should be composed in a certain way. He writes that the reader expects three things:

- 1) the autobiography presents a generally factual account of an individual subject’s life, 2) the progression of time in an autobiography is usually linear and limited to the subject’s lifetime or a significant portion thereof, and 3) the reader of autobiography expects a “story-structure” or narrative framework to give order to the events described by the author. (Tulley 14)

One can notice that the “story structure” and the “progression of time”, mentioned by Lejeune, are characteristic devices in fiction, so it is not surprising that the genres often are confused. However, he also mentions the most prominent nonfictional device, “factual account”, which is based on the conception of truth. The autobiographical truth has been discussed by readers, publishers and critics. To meet the readers’ expectations of truth the author needs to *create* authenticity. Since memory is the only source, the narrator tries to establish reliability by referring to real places, historical events or by involving famous people in the story. Moreover, photos, lyrics or letters are frequent pieces of evidence included in autobiographies. Throughout the story, the narrator has to persuade the reader of the authenticity of the narration, because he/she needs to build trust with the reader.

But what is truth and how do we know it is true? Can truth change through time? Reading autobiographies from the past might give a historical glimpse of society of that time, but a story constructed through the memories of one single person, will only give a limited version of reality. Below, I will give a short review of the history and literary criticism of the genre, which gives good background knowledge to understand how the genre is viewed upon today.

People have been telling life stories around the world in all ages. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, whole communities gathered to listen to the life stories of the village elders or in Asia, Japanese court women of the Heian Period (794-1192AD) wrote autobiographical works (Tulley 11). In Western society, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, 397 A.D., is often the first autobiography mentioned. A focus on the enlightened individual in the eighteenth century encouraged autobiographical writing as a study in self-interest. The most famous work from these days is Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, 1782. In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson write about a canon formation, which was regarded as “high” culture among scholars in the 1960s. It included prominent men as Benjamin Franklin, Cellini, Goethe, Mill and Thoreau. The critics assumed that the behaviour and intellectual reflections of these men were the norm (Smith and Watson 198). Life narratives of celebrities, politicians and military leaders were considered as “low” culture. Smith and Watson explain that these critics acted as moralists, “evaluating the quality of the life lived and the narrator’s telling of that truth” (200). Still today, some people judge autobiographies relying on these criteria.

Nevertheless, values changed when modern critics questioned the key concepts of self and truth. The Marxist analysis defined the individual as a subject of the economic structures and relations. They declared that human beings are often unaware of these underlying structures and hence not able to interpret the world around them. In addition, Freud’s

psychoanalysis stated that our conscious control is just an illusion. Freud thought, however, that our unconscious mind would be reflected in language and dreams. On the contrary, Saussure was convinced that language cannot imitate society and that a person never can get to know herself through language (Smith and Watson 200-201). In other words, all these theories confirm that no person is able to write a true story of his or her life.

As Bran Nicol explains in his book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, postmodern criticism also questioned historiography, known to be a science, studying the past objectively. He quotes Hayden White who claims that one who “investigates data in the interest of telling a story about [them] appears theoretically deficient” (Nicol 101). The critics think that historical events are just constructed objects put into a frame. A historian selects and orders units from his perspective in the same way as an author does. In the essay, “The Discourse of History”, Roland Barthes asks the question of what discerns the narration of past events from imaginary narration (Nicol 101). In his perspective, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is becoming blurred. The post-modern author, W.G. Sebald, uses the gap between the real past and representations of it. In *The Emigrants* photographs and documents from unknown sources are included in the story to create authenticity. They are taken out of their historical context and inserted to create meaning for narrated family histories of the past. This is a sort of historical project which challenges the reader since the author blends fiction and non-fiction in the genre of memoir told in the first person. Postmodernists tried to show that the interpretation of the work is highly subjective. They often played with the ideas of reality and authenticity because they meant that literature can never claim to represent the truth.

Accordingly, literary critics started to study the autobiographical genre differently. Georges Gusdorf considered it as “art rather than history”, James Olney saw life narrative as a “self-reflection process” which “creates metaphors of self” and Francis R. Hart defined it as a “drama of intentions that interact and shift”. These new interpretations resulted in the fact that autobiography received a higher status as a literary genre (Smith and Watson 202).

Today, the genre has become very popular. The first three books on the top ten list of the most sold books in the United States during 2011 apply to the autobiographical category. Highest on the ranking is Steve Jobs, followed by the comedian Tina Fey and placed number three on the list is the abused woman Jaycee Dugard. We also find two novels based on true stories on the list, *In the Garden of the Beasts* by Erik Larson and *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain. These figures show that reading about other people’s lives is a very popular trend in today’s society. Why is this so?

Jill Ker Conway discusses this issue in her book *When Memory Speaks*. She states that what we like to read is connected to where we look when we try to find answers to questions that concern our own lives (4). It can be the Bible or a fictional novel. She discusses the influence of postmodern critics questioning the concepts of truth, and she thinks this might have pushed the reader to search for the total experience of another person by trying to get into his mind: “In this way the lost suspension of disbelief disappears and the reader is able to try on the experience of another, just as one would try on a dress or a suit of clothes, to see what the image in the mirror then looks like” (Conway 5). In other terms, when reading an autobiography of a famous artist, we can imagine what it is to be a rock star for a day. In this way, we confirm our own identity or place it into question, by experiencing what we are or what we are not. Autobiographies can also help us understand ourselves by reading about similar experiences from a different perspective.

In his introduction to *Postmodern Fiction*, Nicol presents another theory which was introduced by Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor in their 1976 book *Escape Attempts*. Like other postmodernists, they maintain that there is not one single reality. They call our most stable version of reality for “paramount reality”, and they explain that we continually try to escape to other realities by engaging in different social activities, for example reading about celebrities, playing games and watching films (Nicol 8). Consequently, reading autobiographies can be regarded as an escape from our own dull reality to a more glorious and exciting life.

Teenagers are often accused of escaping from reality to attend more exiting activities, so reading autobiographies could be a good way to capture their interest in literature. Moreover, since they are adolescents searching for identities, the books within the genre might support them in the process of shaping their own personalities. In the next chapter, I will discuss how to study autobiography in English class in Upper Secondary School.

2. Reading Autobiographies with Students

To make the students engaged in the reading process, Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater emphasize the importance of a good match between learner and literary work. They write that a good book makes the reader personally involved and enables him/her to overcome linguistic obstacles (*Literature in the Language Classroom*, 7). When it comes to the genre of autobiography, there is a book for everyone. The students can read about famous artists, rock stars, movie stars, sport stars, adventurers like Fugelsang, important historical persons, business leaders, politicians as Obama, but also about victims, such as abused people, convicts, persons with serious illnesses or eating disorders. There is no problem for students to find a book they are interested in.

The idea of this essay emerges from my own positive experience of reading autobiographies with students. I have tried out a method in Swedish class which succeeded to stimulate reading. Therefore, I will present my autobiography project in this chapter. The methods from Swedish literature class can easily be transferred into English class. Actually, some students even asked if they could read the book in English instead of in Swedish, because they did not like a translated version. To find out whether the project corresponds to the goals of the English subject, the Syllabi of the English courses at Upper Secondary level will be examined.

2.1 The Autobiography Project in Swedish Literature Class

The autobiography project has been tried out for two years in a row with two different classes in Swedish course B. Thirty final-year students at the Upper Secondary School, Gothenburg Technical College, took part each time. Since I wanted to engage the students as much as possible, a student-centered approach was chosen.

The assignment brought up many important questions, defining what an autobiography is. The students decided that a book written by a ghostwriter should be classified as an autobiography. It is very important that the definition is clear to everyone before they search for books at the library. Since autobiographies are non-fictional, they are spread out in different departments and can be difficult to find.

To problemize the genre, the students had to read an article about a son who had sued his

mother because she had written about his drug abuse in her autobiography. The article opened up an ethical discussion of what is acceptable to make public. Once engaged in the topic, the students were asked to come up with questions that they wanted to examine in their autobiographies. The questions were divided into three different categories: the author, the book, the reader. Defining the questions themselves, made them better prepared, so they knew what to pay attention to while reading the books.

To report on their reading experience, they wrote a review, where some of their own questions needed to be answered. In addition, seminars were held, where they discussed the books in small groups. To practice presentation technique, I let the students record a sixty second commercial for the book, using the AIDA structure, which is: Attention, Interest, Desire and Action. They really enjoyed watching the films of each other which inspired them to read other books. As a writing exercise, they also practiced tabloid journalism. They were asked to find one incident in the book which could be considered a scandal or a sensational piece of information. When finished, they read their tabloid articles aloud in class.

2.2 How to Study Autobiographies in English Class

The methods and exercises used in Swedish class may easily be transferred into English class. Since the exercises have a student-centered approach, the degree of difficulty can be adjusted to the level of the students. They often choose a book they can manage, they write analyzing questions which they believe they can find answers to and the oral and written exercises can be performed on both intermediary and advanced levels.

However, before transferring the project, it is essential to see if the autobiography project refers to the syllabi of English 5, 6 and 7 for Upper Secondary School. Therefore, I have studied the general description of the English subject, part of which is presented below:

Teaching in the subject of English should give students the opportunities to develop the following:

- 1) *Understanding of spoken and written English, and also the ability to interpret content.*
- 2) *The ability to express oneself and communicate in English in speech and writing.*
- 3) *The ability to use different language strategies in different contexts.*
- 4) *The ability to adapt language to different purposes, recipients and*

situations.

- 5) *The ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used.*

(Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012)

The autobiography project actually covers all the aims mentioned above, with a limitation that the book must be written by an author from an English speaking country. Both reception, production and interaction are emphasized in the general description. In this regard, the exercises in the project are well balanced, since the students have several opportunities to read, speak and write. Listening comprehension of a native speaker is not included, but could easily be complemented by watching a video-blog or a documentary, followed up with discussions about authenticity.

Further, in the description of the course contents of English 5, 6 and 7, it is pointed out that the students should discuss values, attitudes, relations, ethical issues and be able to relate to their own experiences (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). These issues will be covered when the students discuss their autobiographies in the seminars. Group discussion, as a method to learn English, is encouraged by Collie and Slater. In their book, *Literature in the Language Classroom*, they indicate that talking about literature with peers helps students express their thoughts in English, which also deepens their understanding of the books. Often, the other group members fill in the meaning of a crucial word, which improves their vocabulary or strategy to find other explanations (Collie and Slater 9). Moreover, they have also discovered that when a person reads a book for a longer time, he starts to “inhabit” the text and focuses on the contents instead of the difficulties of the foreign language (5).

The Swedish National Agency for Education has established that reading books should be one of the methods to learn English. The course descriptions of English 5 and 7 state that both fiction and non-fiction should be read, including contemporary literature of different genres. In English 6, fiction, poetry and drama are emphasized, which disqualifies the autobiographical project from this course, that is to say, if the genre is strictly analyzed as non-fiction.

When it comes to the question of how to interpret literature, a progression is described in the syllabi. In the first course, students need to learn strategies for reading books, in the following course they learn to observe style, attitudes and perspectives in texts, and in the last course they should be able to analyze aims, values and understand implicit meanings. Young

students need more teacher support for choosing suitable books and help to structure their reading, while older and more advanced students require teachers who challenge them with analyzing tools to help them discover underlying structures in the text. Taking this into consideration, the autobiography project needs to be adjusted to suit either category of students. Providing well constructed analyzing assignments to stimulate extensive reading could be a help for students to reach the aims of English 6 and 7.

To sum up, it can be stated that autobiography is a genre which may encourage personal involvement, which helps students to focus on the contents and improves their motivation of reading books. The autobiography project can be carried out in English Class, since it fulfills the aims of the courses and considers the four aspects of learning a language: speaking, writing, listening and reading. Since it has a student-centered approach, it can easily be adapted to the levels of the students. However, it needs to be complemented with analyzing questions for extensive reading. In the next part of this essay, the autobiographical genre will therefore be explored more closely. I will discuss some devices specific to the genre, which focus on the author, authenticity and memories, issues which also might catch the interest of the students. Further, these questions will be applied on the autobiography, *Scar Tissue*, as an example of how an analysis can be completed.

3. Analytical Questions for Extensive Reading of Autobiographies

When it comes to interpreting fiction there are several tools for analyzing literature. Since there are similarities, some of these are also applicable to the autobiographical genre.

Describing the character, the setting and the themes are aspects important to the work as a whole. Yet, since the genre is non-fictional, there are specific features which need to be studied more closely. In this section, I will present some of the concepts which are described in *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, by Smith and Watson and in *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation*, by Carolyn A Barros. Like postmodern critics, they focus on the key concepts of self and truth, which were mentioned in the introduction.

Since students often choose to read autobiographies written by famous people, they have to become aware of the fact that stars are, “presented to the public packaged and mediated”, as David R Shumway suggests in his article, “Modernity, Stardom and Rock & Roll”, where he discusses authenticity and stardom (530). Publishing an autobiography might be a strategy to further develop the image of the star off-stage, and to build relationship with the fans. It is a way to meet their desire to get to know the “authentic star”. Shumway explains that not every fan can make the distinction between the star and the individual, mentioning Elvis’s fans as an example. I therefore suggest that extensive reading should help students to adjust their expectations of the truth. To study how self is constructed from memories, will give them a diversified picture of the author, and a better understanding of the genre as a whole.

Firstly, I would like to problematize the autobiographical “I”. The narrator and the narrated “I” are not the same, since a person changes through time. Secondly, I would like to focus on how fragments of memories are told and structured into a narrative plot and how the author creates authenticity. I will develop these ideas further in this chapter.

3.1 The Author and the Autobiographical I

Since the author and the protagonist have the same name, it is easy to forget that the person in real life is different from the main character. Life in reality is much more diversified than the life exposed in the book. If the author is famous, a public image is often established, which intensifies our desire to get to know the authentic individual behind the mask. However, we all conceal parts of ourselves, playing different roles, adjusting to the environment through time, so one single true picture of a person does not exist. Furthermore, the author may also

be totally unknown. If this is the case, an eminent person might need to present the author in the pretext. A historian may for example give credit to a witness of World War II.

When interpreting life narratives, students should pay attention to what position the author has in the cultural context; is the person an outsider or someone with a high legal status? Does the author want to modify or keep up the image of him/herself?

The author is often synonymous with the narrator, who constructs parts of a life story by sorting out fragments of memories. Caroline Barros indicates that autobiography is “a narrative of transformation” (9). Thus, the older narrator is the “I” with a greater knowledge and linguistic competence, telling a story about a naïve and less mature narrated “I”. The author Eleanor Garner explains this phenomenon which occurred in her writing process: “When I was writing my memoir, I soon became aware that the older me, like any parent, criticized the young girl as she tried to express herself with brutal honesty. I wanted... at times, [to] make excuses for her behavior” (“Memoirs in Adolescent Literature” 29).

When reading autobiographies, we should observe self-reflexivity, indicating how the narrator comments on his/her own behavior, and try to find a gap between the narrator and the narrated. It may be manifested in the tone that comes through the narrative voice. “Is it defensive, ironic, apologetic, romantic, self-important or self-critical” (Smith & Watson 238)? What kind of story does the narrator want to tell about him/herself?

The narrated “I” is the main character and could be analyzed as a fictional character told in the first person. Assuming that autobiography is a narrative of transformation, it is natural to study how the narrated “I” is developing. If the narrative plot is told in a chronological order, it is often easy to distinguish different phases of life. In this way, multiple narrated “I’s” are created, one version following the other. For example, in the autobiography of Malcolm X, four stages in his life are presented by the different names he was known as: Malcolm Little, Detroit Red, Malcolm X, and el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. When interpreting autobiographies, students should try to distinguish and describe the multiple “I’s” that are created in the story. This exercise will raise their awareness of the fact that a person may have different identities which will diversify their picture of the narrated “I”.

Smith and Watson draw a distinction between four autobiographical “I’s”, the author, the narrator and the narrated “I”, which are mentioned above, and finally “the ideological I”. The fourth and last “I” is described as “the concept of personhood, culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story” (Smith & Watson 76). This “I” reveals the role model of the narrator, who unconsciously tries to fulfill ideals accepted in society. We should be aware of the fact that ideals change through time; what is normal today was not normal hundred years

ago; so, when interpreting autobiographies, it has to be considered that every author is the product of his or her time. It might be difficult to perceive the ideals and values revealed implicitly in the text. However, by observing relationships, motivation of actions and historical events mentioned in the autobiography, we might be able to discern what kind of public roles and ideals that were accepted in contemporary society. When analyzing life narratives, we should seek to understand the underlying values, present at the time and in the cultural context in which the book is written.

Barros indicates that “the perspectives of self as construct”, discussed in this chapter, have improved the understanding of the genre. Nevertheless, she thinks it may limit our analysis if we ignore other important aspects of autobiography. A literary analysis would for example not only focus on the protagonist in a fictional novel but also on the plot and the theme (20). Since a life story is based on fragments of memories, it is also essential to study how memories are told and how the author constructs authenticity.

3.2 Fragments of Memories

Mentioned in the introduction, Philippe Lejeune describes the writer-reader relationship as an “autobiographical pact” (Tulley 14) where the reader expects the author to tell the truth. However, understanding that it is impossible to remember every single detail, the reader relies on the narrator’s intention to describe the memories as closely to reality as possible. Remembering involves an interpretation of the past. Following Daniel L Schacher, Smith and Watson give a clear definition of memory, as “records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves” (22). The narrator is aware of this dilemma and may insert comments in the text about the problem of remembering. Violent or traumatic memories may be difficult to describe in words. For some authors, life-writing can have a therapeutic function, where the act of remembering assigns meaning to the past.

When interpreting autobiographies, we should pay attention to how the author reflects upon his/her memory. What are the sources of remembering: diaries, letters or photos? Does the narrator leave gaps in the story?

In addition, it is exciting to analyze what the author remembers and how these fragments of memories are retold? A skilled author manages to revitalize his/her fragments of memory and involves the reader through vivid descriptions. Memory is often evoked by senses: smell, taste, touch, sight and sound. The aroma of a Madeleine cake made Marcel Proust’s narrated “I” remember an episode of his life. A memory can be triggered by a sense or described through

a specific sense. A geographical place may be described as detailed as a photo and a girlfriend might be pictured through the emotions of the narrator. To bring the life-story alive, the narrator might rephrase memories into a dialogue or tell exaggerated actions in rapid succession. Sometimes, the narrator remembers painful experiences through his/her body and chooses an introvert perspective. Other narrators might be extrovert, telling memories closely related to others, such as family, friends, lovers or band members. Smith and Watson call it “relationality”, examining how the narrator positions him/herself towards others (248).

When studying autobiographies, students should examine which sense is evoked to retell a specific memory and what feelings are connected to various kinds of memories in the text. Is it possible to discern if the narrator prefers to tell memories in an audible, visual or kinesthetic way (smell, taste, touch)? We should also reflect on how others are described and how the narrator positions her/himself to them. This exercise of close reading encourages students to pay attention to linguistic and semantic features. How do sensory details and vivid descriptions involve the reader in the story? Questions may arise concerning the authenticity of a memory described in its every detail. Is it possible to recall one’s mind so precisely? Is this fiction or nonfiction?

Eventually, it is interesting to study the narrative plot and to analyze how the fragments of memories told constitute a story. Since an autobiography is often a narrative of transformation, the pattern of the action is a story of the character’s development. According to Smith and Watson, “it can be a confessional self-examination, a coming to artistic self-consciousness, a story of conversion through fall and enlightenment”(245). They state that models of identity are closely related to the narrative plotting. For example, the ideal of the self-made man needs a special plotting where the character goes through a learning process before becoming a strong, independent man. (246). A life story is often told chronologically; it may span over a life time or just deal with a short period. Some parts may be omitted, contracted or expanded. Some issues will be highlighted throughout the story. Since people normally write only one autobiography in their life time, the closure tends to be permanent; nevertheless, some life-stories might have open endings.

When analyzing autobiographies, we should observe how the story is told. How does the narrative begin and how does it end? What parts are omitted and what is emphasized? Is there a theme? What is the pattern of the action of the story? Does it conform to a model of identity?

Many readers value the authenticity of the story. One of the challenges of life-writing is to build a trust with the reader which gives credibility to the author. First of all, the publicizing

needs to be justified. A famous name or “a person with authority of experience” (Smith & Watson, 34) gives trustworthiness to the autobiography. Drawing parallels to the music genre, Shumway writes that authenticity has always been critical among musicians. That is why live performances are important. He also points out that modernist aesthetics “defines authenticity against economic success” and gives examples on how music genres are valued differently (529). Circumstances are the same when it comes to literature; the poor poet is seen as more authentic than the best selling detective writer. The popularity of autobiographies might, in fact, undermine the authenticity of its genre.

The insistence on authenticity puts pressure on the author. Throughout the story, the narrator has to persuade the reader of the authenticity of the narration. Evidence, asserting the credibility of the author, is constructed from the narrator’s experiences. Descriptions need to be authentic since people involved in the life-story may still be alive and may react upon inaccuracies. By referring to real places and historical events and by involving famous people in the story, the narrator tries to establish reliability. Testimonies of others or self-exhibitionistic features inspire the reader with confidence. Moreover, photos, illustrations, letters, notes, lyrics and historical documents are frequent pieces of evidence included in autobiographies.

When reading autobiographies, students should try to understand how the author *creates* authenticity. What kinds of evidence does the narrator incorporate in the text? We should reflect whether the narrator succeeds to tell “a true story”, which is often one of the sales arguments, or if there are doubts undermining the credibility.

Drawing conclusions based on the answers to the questions posed above, will also raise the awareness about the autobiographical “I’s” as the author, the narrator, the narrated “I’s” and the ideological “I”. All in all, considering different aspects of autobiography will help us understand how self is constructed through memories. The set of questions, developed in this chapter, will increase our understanding of the genre. They may serve as a guideline when interpreting autobiographies with students. In the next chapter I will apply this critical approach on an autobiography within the music genre, *Scar Tissue* by Anthony Kiedis.

4. How Self is Constructed through Memories in *Scar Tissue* by Anthony Kiedis

One of the aims of the analysis of *Scar Tissue* is to see how self can be constructed in an autobiography. A good method of exploring this issue is to examine the four autobiographical “I’s”: the author, the narrator, the narrated, and “the ideological I”, which were explained in previous chapter. These issues will therefore be discussed in the first part of this analysis. Moreover, since a life story is based on fragments of memories, it is also essential to study how memories are told and composed to a narrative plot and how authenticity is established through these reminiscences. The second part of this chapter will deal with these questions.

4.1 The Author and the Autobiographical “I’s”

The author, Anthony Kiedis, is famous for being the lead singer of the American rock group Red Hot Chili Peppers. He was born in 1962, grew up in Michigan and in California, and started the band together with friends from high school in Los Angeles in 1980. Today, the group is world famous having produced ten records, of which *Californication* (1999) is one of the most popular. At the age of 42, when Kiedis had been clean from drugs for four years, he published his autobiography. Since the publication of 2004, Kiedis has become a father, and today, he and his own father, Blackie Dammet, are developing a television series based on the stories from Anthony’s childhood. The band, Red Hot Chili Peppers, still exist and their last record, *I’m With You*, was released in 2011.

His autobiography, *Scar Tissue*, was a success; in fact, it was, ranked number one on *New York Times* best seller list. In retrospect, it was clever to market himself and his band in a book. He managed to reach a broad audience and arouse their interest in his band. An interesting point is that most of the facts about him on *Wikipedia* refer to information presented in his memoir. In this way, he has succeeded to take control of his own image. He presents himself as the stereotypical rock star: leading a life of sex and drugs and rock’ n’ roll. The title, *Scar Tissue*, is a name of one of his songs which gives the reader a hint that the book will reveal an uncompromising life story.

Even though it is written with the author Larry Sloman, the reader gets the impression that Anthony Kiedis is the narrator. The voice in which he narrates himself is very self-critical. He describes himself as; “a cocaine addict” (93), “a hooligan”(130), “just a fucking nutcase“(146),” a horrible leaching boyfriend”(163), and “a hypocritical moron” (179). However, he

is more indulgent towards himself when telling the story of the real young Anthony. He writes that he was very protective of his little sister (18) and that he in school showed his tender side when he was “keeping an eye on the blind girl... if any of the jerk-offs teased her” (23).

A dialogue between the narrator and the narrated “I” is frequently distinguished. It is obvious that the older more mature Anthony describes a young and naïve Anthony as he explains that: “I’m willing to laugh at myself and to acknowledge when I’m being a spoiled brat and when I’m not” (293). Often, he places himself in an unfavorable light. One example of this is when he reflects upon his own personality: “My whole life, I had been the most defensive person you’d meet, unable to tolerate any criticism” (226). Throughout the story, he also describes himself as a terrible boyfriend, but sometimes he makes excuses for his behavior: “I was not a great boyfriend. If I said I’d be home in an hour, I might stroll in three days later. Today, if someone did that to me, I’d have a heart attack, but when you’re a kid, you don’t know any better” (178). This is one example of how the older narrator comments on his own behavior. The darkest voice of the narrator is heard through the story of drug abuse. The sober narrator tries to give a true picture of how it really is to be a drug addict: “Sometimes doing heroin was nice and dreamy and euphoric and carefree, almost romantic-feeling. In reality, I was dying and couldn’t quite see that from being so deep into my own forest.” (191). He also reflects upon his first sobriety which only lasted one month, “I decided to write a song about my monthlong experience of going to meetings, getting clean, and winning the battle of addiction. I look back on it, and it seems naïve, but it’s exactly where I was at that point of my life” (200). A much brighter tone is perceived when his musical development is retold. In one episode, he describes how George Clinton taught him to sing: “We talked about the song and we practiced it... I didn’t even see it, but he was quietly schooling me... and he was subconsciously building my confidence...” (175).

The examples mentioned above, demonstrate Kiedis’ different roles in life. In his autobiography, multiple narrated “I’s” can be distinguished, some of which he is proud and some he repents. The most prominent characters are, as I have termed them, the band member, the drug addict and the boy who fell in love with the crazy girls. They fit easily into the sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll theme. How these narrated “I’s” are developing in the story, will be described later in this chapter. Yet, two other characters can be explored. They play the more subtle roles as the poetical writer of rock lyrics and the son of a drug dealer.

Kiedis describes himself as a writer of rock lyrics with self-respect. Early in the book, when the English teacher praises his writing, the reader gets acquainted with him as a writer. Later, he reveals with confidence that he “had a notebook filled with lyrics that [he] was

dying to turn into songs” (401), and shows his ambitions in the following lines: “I can’t write about girls and cars. That has already been done. I want to write about some weird shit that no one’s been writing about” (264). To emphasize how much the lyrics mean to him, he has copied some of them into the text, accompanied with explanations of their meanings.

The other serious character, the son of a drug dealing father, is drawn up with a mixture of feelings. When he is a young boy, he adores his father Blackie. As a teenager he dresses in the same clothes as him and they go out to clubs together. Eventually, when his father ends up in prison and changes styles, they break up their relationship. At this point, the reader can discern a bitterness and a sorrow: “It was hard, because none of us had any father figures to consult with on these heavy issues....” (102). Later on father and son reunite. Kiedis describes with joy, how Blackie shows up at some of his concerts. The following episode from 1995 shows how much he really meant to him: “I decided to cut off my hair. I’d had my tailbone-length hair for thirteen years... I did save the hair and send it to my dad in Michigan. He and I had had a hair-solidarity thing since the early 70s” (410).

The relationship of father and son discloses the ideal “I”, as I prefer to call it, which is easier to describe than the ideological “I”. Like many men throughout history, Anthony strives to be the ideal son ceaselessly acknowledged by his father. Yet, at the same time, he succeeds to live up to the ideals of a rock star: being rich, idolized by girls, touring the world and enjoying life together with his band members. However, in this autobiography he also reveals the reverse side of the coin. Moreover, the ideological “I” is not disclosed in the story. Even though Kiedis describes the flower power movement, his meeting with Dalai Lama and his band giving money to charity, it is hard to draw any conclusions of his ideological “I”.

4.2 Fragments of Memories

Kiedis has succeeded to recall memories from his early childhood, his teenage period, the time with the band until the day he finishes the book at the age of forty. He writes that he, already at the age of three, has some “vague recollections of the first apartment” they moved to (13). In the text, there are scarcely any doubts whether his memory is correct. At one occasion, however, he admits that he does not remember his punishment after shop-lifting at the age of six. Commenting on some photos, he also confesses that he has “no clue when or where” the picture is taken (373). These are exceptions, whereas the constant impression is that his memory is very clear. The verb “remember” is not frequently used, but when it is written, an emotion often follows, such as “I do remember a burst of happiness”(144) or “I

remember being nervous and terrified” (150). These memories seem to reveal strong feelings, and the verb might be used to emphasize the episode.

Studying the text closely, it is interesting to reflect upon the senses evoked in connection with certain memories. The sense of smell is often known to be the strongest memory, and, accordingly, Kiedis recalls the smell of dead starfish he brought to the apartment after fishing with his father at the age of three (13). Moreover, he also remembers the terrible taste when he tried whiskey for the first time in seventh grade (42). However, emotions are most often used to describe his experiences with drugs. In the beginning they are very bright: “we were all smiling and laughing and feeling really mellow... I loved the sensation” (26), but at the end he describes the drug abuse as a “mystical black energy” (335) and expresses very negative feelings, “drugs, drugs, drugs... sad, depressed, demoralized, hurt, lonely, destroyed” (385). As a sharp contrast, the feeling of love is flourishing throughout his life story. Anthony seems to be a very romantic guy, which the following lines reveal, “I adored her, and every day I’d wake up and write her a little poem and fax it to her” (269). Furthermore, detailed sex-scenes disclose his sensual pleasures with girls.

Yet, one cannot be mistaken that the visual sense is his strongest. Every girl and woman is gorgeously portrayed, even the girlfriend of his father: “Connie was a fantastic character with a shock of flowing red hair, alabaster skin, really beautiful and crazy...” (16). Descriptions of people are sometimes as detailed as a photograph. He pictures his father’s “snake skin shoes with rainbows... and bell bottom jeans with crazy velvet patch-work” (21). Moreover, apartments, studios and houses are carefully illustrated. It is astonishing, however, that the audible memory is not used so often, due to the fact that he is a lead singer of a band and has devoted his whole life to music. Remembering his first punk concert, the music is only considered as “cool”, while a long description follows of how incredible the people looked (77). Of course there are memories from recordings and concerts, but the sound is only described briefly, which may disappoint readers who are interested to learn more about their music.

However, the voice of Anthony and his friends are often re-created. Through simulated dialogues, he and his friends are brought alive. Direct speech makes the following episode appear much stronger: “- Anthony, we’re kicking you out of the band. We want to play music but you obviously don’t...” (191). The narrator often positions himself towards others. He describes intimately his friendship with different band members, especially with Flea and Hillel whom he met already in high school. At one point he might feel obliged to make excuses for his honesty, since he writes: “Just for the record, anything negative that I ever say

about Flea is only because he's my brother and I love him" (434).

The fragments of memories are told in a chronological order, although the disposition of *Scar Tissue* is circular. In the first chapter, the reader meets the old narrator presenting his life today. Thereafter, follows a story of his life which ends in the same room as in the beginning. As indicated earlier, the autobiography can be seen as a narrative of transformation. The story is progressing through the action of the most prominent characters in *Scar Tissue*: the band member, the drug addict and the boy who fell in love with the crazy girls. The narrative plot may therefore be explored by following in their footsteps. The reader can read about the positive development of Anthony with his band, from unknown garage players to world famous MTV stars. This is a tough story, lined with conflicts and sometimes described as "a conveyor belt going backwards" (392), but, against all odds, it turns out to be a successful journey with regard to fame and wealth. Amazingly, Anthony often succeeds to stay sober during recordings and tours.

The story of *the drug addict* is closely connected to the tale of the band since the members sometimes take drugs together and help each other out when they are seriously ill. However, Anthony, the drug addict, is much more fragile, desperate and depressed than Anthony, the artist. His life story is chaotic and lined with acid, cocaine, syringes and dope-sickness at cheap motels, treatments at different rehabs which end up with relapses and then it all repeats again. This story is indeed a narrative of transformation, going downward in a negative spiral. Although Kiedis has been sober for five years when the story ends, there are still doubts whether he will manage to keep it up. At the end, he writes that he is "still making progress" (465), which indicates that he is not fully recovered.

The third story about Anthony, the lover boy, is interwoven with the others, but since Anthony's relations with girls play a major part in the autobiography, it deserves to be treated separately. It starts with a description of how he loses his virginity together with his father's girlfriend, and continues to describe how he falls in love and breaks up with different women. Every female is described with respect, many sexual encounters are almost glorified, and the emotional memories are told with sparkling energy. Sometimes, one has the impression that the narrator would like to revive some episodes when he speaks directly to girls in the text, "- If you read this, My Kentucky dream..." (251). However, the ending, where he lives alone in a house together with a dog instead of a girl, is depressing.

"Each time", he says, "[he] ended a relationship with a woman, it precipitated in a relapse" (381). These words reveal that the narrator is able to discern a pattern in his own behavior. He is also aware of the fact that writing can be therapeutic as he writes, "When you start putting

pen to paper, you see a side of your personal truth” (381). Undoubtedly, the major theme in *Scar Tissue* is dealing with drug abuse. The book might be a therapeutic project. The narrator tells you never “to put a needle in your arm” (179) and gives the reader advice of how to stay sober.

Kiedis’ own reflections and messages to the reader make an authentic impression. Moreover, the narrator creates intimacy with the reader through self-exhibitionistic episodes in motels and rehab dorms. Authenticity is also created when famous artists, such as Cher, Curt Cobain and Sinéad O’Connor are involved in the story. Beyond that, evidence, such as photos and lyrics, are also asserting the credibility of the author. When David R. Shumway writes about authenticity in rock, he points out that it is, “associated with the primitive, the rustic, the rough and the wild” (529). These nouns are also applicable to the life story of Anthony Kiedis narrated in *Scar Tissue*. Perhaps these components need to be involved when writing the authentic life story of a rock star?

5. Pedagogical Aspects

Scar Tissue is composed of many components which may catch the interest of teenagers, for example the descriptions of Anthony's first sexual experiences or his early encounters with drugs. Some students have a musical interest and may choose the book to learn more about the band, Red Hot Chili Peppers, while others are just fascinated by stardom. The language is not too difficult; it is clear and direct. To bring the story alive, memories are often rephrased into a dialogue and at some occasions the narrator addresses himself directly to the reader. Moreover, vivid descriptions and emotional episodes involve the reader in the story.

One negative aspect, however, is that a book of 465 pages might be too long for an inexperienced reader. Therefore, the teacher needs to support students with learning strategies for reading books and should carefully devote enough time to the assignment. To motivate further reading, the analytical questions may be introduced gradually, as a way to arouse students' curiosity about the contents. The critical approach will help students to make reflections while reading, which will deepen their understanding of autobiography as a genre.

Studying the autobiographical "I's" is a good method to diversify the picture of the author. When students seek information outside the work, they might come across a private portray or details which reveal facts not presented in the autobiography. To learn more about Anthony Kiedis one can listen to interviews in television shows or read facts on *Wikipedia*, only to discover that most of them refer to his own autobiography.

Further, it is easy to distinguish the dialogue between the older, mature narrator and the younger, naïve narrated "I". In *Scar Tissue*, the narrator is indulgent with his own behavior and tries not to moralize. Kiedis writes that he wants "to describe both sides of how [he] felt, but it's important to know that in the end all the romantic glorification of dope fiendery amounts to nothing but a hole of shit" (207). For teenagers, it may be interesting to listen to both voices, since they might have friends just as naïve and positive to drugs as Anthony was. His descriptions make the reader understand why some people start taking drugs, while his anti-drugs message is very clearly expressed at the same time.

Moreover, the term, multiple "I's", used in the analysis, might confuse the students. The teacher could rather ask them to search for different roles of the narrated "I", because young people can more easily understand that we play various roles in life, adapting our personality to a variety of contexts. This exercise gives a miscellaneous portrait of the author, which is one of the aims with the critical approach.

The ideological “I” is much more difficult to interpret. Even the most advanced students may have problems to understand what an ideology is. Instead, I suggest they study the ideal “I”. Giving examples of different ideals in today’s society could be a way to explain the meaning of the word “ideal”. Students should be able to refer to the ideals of a rock star, whereas Keidis’ attempts to become the ideal son may be harder to understand, since it is more complex. However, the exercise is in line with English course 7 where students should be able to analyze values and understand implicit meanings.

Studying how self is constructed brings up questions of identity and makes us reflect on what experiences are central in shaping our own personalities. These issues are essential to many teenagers, so the analysis may be a way for them to explore their own self. Authenticity and truth are other aspects which may interest young people. Like detectives, the students can analyze how the narrator places evidence into the story and look for devices which undermine the reliability. In *Scar Tissue*, photos, lyrics and encounters with famous artists give credibility to the narrated Anthony. Moreover, self-exhibitionistic features and direct comments by the narrator make an authentic impression.

An observant student may, however, question how the narrator is able to remember all the details depicted in the story. The teacher could take this opportunity to discuss the similarities between fiction and non-fiction. To study how the narrator reflects upon his/her memory will make students attentive to the remembering process. As an additional exercise, the teacher may ask them to describe a specific episode from childhood. This will make them aware of how difficult it is to remember minutely, but also how memory is evoked by different senses. Analyzing how fragments of memories are told encourages students to pay attention to shade of meanings, which will improve their vocabulary. They can easily refer to senses; therefore, this exercise is also suitable for close reading. Further, an advanced reader will be challenged to analyze style, attitudes, and perspectives in the text, which is mentioned in the syllabi of the English course 6.

Lastly, students may find it difficult to describe the narrative plot, although the memories are told in a chronological order. This is due to the disclosure of the “multiple I’s”, which makes the reader discover that the diverse characters of the narrated “I” develop into different directions and hence create their own narrative plotting. In *Scar Tissue*, multiple “I’s” implies multiple plots. Consequently, this analysis will make students realize that it is impossible to tell one single true life story. It will raise their awareness of the concepts of self and truth and give them a better understanding of the autobiographical genre as a whole.

6. Conclusion

This essay encourages teachers to study autobiographies in English class in Upper Secondary School. The autobiography project, which I have completed in Swedish class, shows that the genre engages students in the reading process. Moreover, it consists of assignments that allow students to practice writing, reading, speaking and listening. Since these issues are emphasized in the syllabi of the English subject for Upper Secondary School, the project can easily be transferred to English class. Reading autobiographies is in line with the syllabi of all the three English courses 5, 6 and 7. It is established in the course contents that both nonfiction and fiction should be read, including contemporary literature of different genres. A progression of literary analysis is also recommended, which implies that the teacher needs to support the younger student with strategies for reading while challenging older students with analyzing questions. Moreover, close reading will encourage students to observe shades of meanings, which will improve their vocabulary and develop their linguistic skills.

This essay presents a critical approach which may serve as a guideline when interpreting autobiographies in class. Since teenagers often hope to read the exclusive true story of a person they might admire, extensive reading should help them adjust their expectations of the truth. Studying how self is constructed will give them a broader picture of the author and a better understanding of the genre as a whole. Therefore, the set of analyzing questions provided in this essay focuses on the autobiographical “I’s”. Since a life story is based on fragments of memories, it is also essential to study how memories are told and how the author constructs authenticity.

Applied to Anthony Kiedis autobiography *Scar Tissue*, one realizes that most of the questions are easy to find answers to in the text. For example, the self-critical voice of the narrator is explicit and the dialogue between the narrator and the narrated “I” is easy to follow. The analysis helps the reader to distinguish Kiedis’ different roles, but their development in different directions makes it hard to describe only one narrative plot. In *Scar Tissue*, multiple “I’s” implies multiple plots. This supports the idea that it is impossible to tell one single true life story. Consequently, studying the autobiographical “I’s” brings up questions of identity, which may engage students who are in the middle of the process of shaping their own personalities.

Furthermore, analyzing how the narrator reflects upon his memory and how fragments of memories are described will place authenticity into question. One realizes that the author has

the pressure to *create* authenticity, both through his own comments and through evidence such as photographs and lyrics inserted in the text. However, to catch the reader's attention, the author needs to bring the life story alive through vivid descriptions and emotional episodes, sometimes too minutely pictured to be realistic. This shows that the genre is very close to fiction. By focusing on the remembering process, demonstrating how difficult it is to remember, students understand that everything they read is not true. This analysis will therefore give them a different view upon autobiographies and a better understanding of the autobiographical genre as a whole.

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