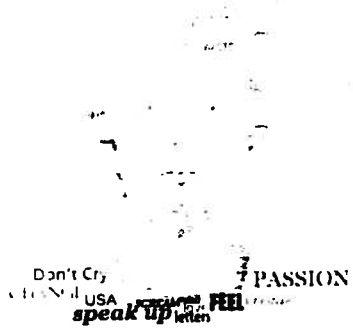
Self-portrait of Frida Kahlo

Self-portrait of Hokusai



Self-portrait of Saluum

The visual representations above remind us that the aim of autobiography is to portray the self. Sometimes the style and attitude of such portrayals convey that the artist intends to communicate to the best of their ability exactly how they see themselves and their evolution in life; at other times, the artist adds touches of irony or imaginative distortion. As viewers, we do our best to discern the nature of what we are seeing. The same holds true when we are reading the self-portraits known as 'autobiographies'.

Looking at the word 'autobiographical' in the 21st century, it can be observed to have taken on a wide variety of meanings over the years, including such traditional forms as diary, memoir and autobiographical fiction. In addition, with the wide usage of the internet, blogs and social networking sites have also become places where people create 'autobiography'. In studying autobiography in the IB literature course, you will ordinarily be looking at book-length accounts of someone's experiences – their presentation of self.

Definitions/descriptions of what is understood by 'autobiography'

Almost universally, 'autobiography' is defined or described as the story of a person's life written by that person.

The French writer Phillip Lejeune is often referred to when the study of autobiography as literature is discussed. His conception of autobiography is straightforward but includes some ideas worth pursuing: "A retrospective prose narrative (story) that a real person creates about his or her own

existence when he emphasizes individual life, particularly the history of his own personality" (Lejeune 1974).

There are several things worth noting here. Most often, autobiography is written in **prose**, but can be written in poetic form. *The Prelude*, written by William Wordsworth in the 19th century, is certainly considered to be a part of autobiography in verse. Here is a short selection from 'Childhood and Schooltime':

Childhood and Schooltime

. . . .My seventeenth year was come;
And, whether from this habit rooted now
So deeply in my mind, or from excess
In the great social principle of life
Coercing all things into sympathy,
To unorganic natures were transferred
My own enjoyments; or the power of truth
Coming in revelation, did converse
With things that really are; I, at this time,
Saw blessings spread around like a sea.

The Prelude: Book II

William Wordsworth

Here, we see the speaker, very likely Wordsworth himself, considering his close alliance with the natural world.

In 1960, the British poet John Betjeman composed a verse autobiography, 'Summoned by Bells'. 'Lives of X' (1971) is another autobiography in poetry rather than prose by the American poet John Ciardi. So there are other possibilities, but the usual expectation is that autobiography will be delivered in prose.

Story or narrative points us in the direction of the aspects of narration that are at the heart of other forms, the novel and short story. In fact, autobiographies often include those old standbys of fictional narratives, plot, character and setting. All of these become conventions of the autobiographical form as well.

Plot

The narrative usually (but not always) unfolds in a chronological way, as lives are believed to occur. In Ondaatje's account of his early life in Sri Lanka, *Running in the Family* (1982), he includes dialogues, photographs, poems and reflections along with separate historical accounts, although there is an underlying narrative line of his coming to terms with the lives of people in his family, particularly his parents. While 'plot' is more complicated, usually, than the linear narrative of a life, the way Ondaatje presents his account takes on the complexity we tend to associate with a plot.

Character

Character is certainly an element of autobiography. Often, there are many minor and some major characters other than the 'I' subject of the autobiography. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Orwell offers memorable sketches of people he encounters, Paddy and Bozo, other men 'on the road' – a life Orwell chose to follow for a while. Ondaatje's portrait of his grandmother, Lalla, is constructed in several different scenes, perhaps most notably her death. Here is the conclusion of the extract that describes Lalla's death by drowning:

Running in the Family

Below the main street of Nuwara Eliya the land drops suddenly and Lalla fell into deeper waters, past the houses of 'Cranleigh' and 'Ferncliff'. They were homes she knew well, where she had played and argued over cards. The water here was rougher and she went under for longer and longer moments coming up with a gasp and then pulled down like bait, pulled under by something not comfortable any more, and then there was the great blue ahead of her, like a sheaf of blue wheat, like a large eye that peered towards her, and she hit it and was dead.

Michael Ondaatje

While it is often the history of the writer's own **personality** that lies at the center of autobiographical accounts, other people, who may in fact become quite memorable, enter the narrative.

Setting

Setting is also an important element in autobiography; indeed, some autobiographical writing seems almost as interested in conveying a sense of the social and cultural backdrop as the personality of the subject of the autobiography. In Orwell's account of life 'on the road', he conveys a vivid sense of the 'spikes' or hostels where nights are spent; in Paris, his accounts of the restaurants where he works range from the comic to the horrifying:

Down and Out in Paris and London

In the kitchen the dirt was worse. It is not a figure of speech, it is a mere statement of tact to say that a French cook will spit in the soup – that is, if he is not going to drink it himself. He is an artist, but his art is not cleanliness. To a certain extent he is even dirty because he is an artist, for food, to look smart, needs dirty treatment. When a steak, for instance, is brought up for the head cook's inspection, he does not handle it with a fork. He picks it up in his fingers and slaps it down, runs his thumb around the dish and licks it to taste the gravy, runs it round and licks again, then steps back and contemplates the piece of meat like an artist judging a picture, then presses it lovingly into place with his fat, pink fingers, every one of which he has licked a hundred times that morning. When he is satisfied, he takes a cloth and wipes his fingerprints from the dish, and hands it to the waiter. And the waiter, of course, dips his fingers into the gravy – his nasty, greasy fingers which he is for ever running through his brilliantined hair.

George Orwell

In Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (2003), an account of her girlhood in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), one comes away from the autobiography with a strong sense of both the backdrop and the trials and adventures of growing up in an unstable political situation.

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood

Dad says, "Okay, kids, that's enoughtofthat."

So we sit there on each side of the back seat with a big hole in the middle where Olivia should be and watch Mum's eyes go halfmast.

We are driving through a dreamscape. The war has cast a ghastly magic, like the spell on Sleeping Beauty's castle. Everything is dormant or is holding its breath against triggering a land mine. Everything is waiting and watchful and suspicious. Bushes might suddenly explode with bristly AK47s and we'll be rattled with machinegun fire and be lipless and earless on the road in front of the burned out smoldering plastic and singed metal of our melting car.

The only living creatures to celebrate our war are the plants, which spill and knot and twist victoriously around buildings and closed down schools in the Tribal Trust Lands, or wrap themselves around the feet of empty kraals. Rhodesia's war has turned the place back on itself, giving the land back to the vegetation with which it had once been swallowed before people. And before the trappings of people: crops and cattle and goats and houses and business.

Alexandra Fuller

In both Orwell's and Fuller's extracts, we get some sense of another element from Lejeune's description of autobiography, "A real person['s]... existence" gets back to the issue of truth and invention in autobiography, and this is indeed a point of much discussion when people talk and write about autobiography.

Generally, it is presumed that there is what Lejeune calls an 'autobiographical pact' between the writer of autobiographies and the reader. The writer tells something that is presumed to represent his 'individual life' and the reader presumes they are receiving a fair representation of that life.

However, much depends, of course, on how far writers even *want* to convey the truth about themselves with any exactitude and how far they *can*. Memory is not a fully reliable archive, and so many things – fantasy, desire, self-protection and guilt, for example – can intrude upon the writer's intention. We tend to re-write our lives at different stages of our life, and that is only one of the elements that is in play when a writer sets out to deliver autobiography. Indeed, that is why some contemporary critics prefer the term 'life narratives' or 'life writing' to autobiography. These terms seem to leave more room for the inexactitude of memory and the variability of the impulse to 'tell the truth' about the self, and the personality of the writer. How does one objectively convey the history of one's 'own personality'?

So when we enter the world of autobiographical writing, we are in uncertain territory. We expect, surely, some truthful account of a person's life and experiences, but it is also wise to be wary; we will only learn from the person what the speaker chooses to deliver and omit.

Some of the related issues about 'autobiographical' writing' that arise in this study

Fiction or autobiography?

One issue is the frequency of works most often called 'autobiographical novels' or 'fictional autobiographies'. In these forms, the life of the writer and, usually, the central character are often conflated or blended. It is easy, with a little research, to discover that certain events in the novel are very close to actual experiences of the writer. Such is the case with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Here is one description that is clearly based on the year Plath was herself a guest editor at *Vogue* magazine:

The Bell Jar

There were twelve of us at the hotel.

We had all won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and as prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexions.

Sylvia Plath

What we have here is a somewhat fictionalized but fairly accurate reflection of what occurred in Plath's life. However, as her work proceeds, there is always likely to be a mixture of what has 'really happened' and what is developed in a novelistic fashion of highlighted or exaggerated moments and representations of what the writer thought on a particular occasion.

As George Misch, the German scholar, points out in his study of this kind of writing, *Autobiography in Antiquity* (2003), autobiography itself is a genre unlike any other form of literary communication, since its boundaries are so fluid. Works such as *The Bell Jar* create real problems of 'naming'. Is this work to be called a novel, a work of fictional autobiography or 'autofiction'? Sometimes, the subject of the work is even referred to in the third person. But the borders of almost every genre are perhaps equally susceptible to being permeated so that, in cases like *The Bell Jar*, the reader is free to choose how to read and 'receive' the work. There are no easy answers, nor is there ever universal agreement about either the labels or particular works – *The Bell Jar* represents some of these problems.

The conventions of autobiographical writing

In studying this genre and preparing to write about it in Paper 2, you may expect questions that will focus on the conventions of the genre you have read. If this genre is autobiography, you will see that many of the conventions of narratives such as the novel will also be involved in your works. We have mentioned that **plot**, **character** and **setting** are often elements found in autobiographies. Since some of the works you study may blend into the territory of the fictional, other conventions such as **flashbacks** and **flash forwards** may also be relevant.

Although it might be expected that the life story will follow a **chronological order**, there are also possibilities for a **disrupted narrative**. An autobiography might even be structured in **circular** fashion, tying together an event that is briefly related in the opening and more elaborately examined at the end. **Suspense** can certainly appear in autobiographies, as the reader waits to learn how a decision or an event will conclude for the good or ill of the subject.

Very often, the construction of a **personal** or **archetypal myth** (hero, victim, pariah) will be apparent in a work studied. The autobiographer will sometimes work to construct an overall profile of a life in this way, which can fit into one of the archetypal life stories. Another factor in differentiating one autobiography from another, which will have a substantial impact on the reader's perception of the work's subject, will be the **tone** in which the writer speaks about their experiences and judgments. How the writer conveys their attitude will matter a great deal to the reader's impressions, as will that all important factor, **diction**, or the choice of words.

Anecdotes that elaborate the understanding of the 'I' subject are also very common in autobiographies. Particular experiences that mark the stages of the evolution of the character recur frequently enough in autobiography to be considered an important element of the form. In the *bildungsroman* or 'growing up' narrative, as in other autobiographies, moments that mark a move from **childhood understanding to adult** are conventional. Accounts of **schooling** and **stages of intellectual development** are other conventional aspects of these works, as are **romantic relationships** with their anticipations, consummations and broken hearts.

This list does not comprehensively cover all the stylistic aspects of autobiography, but it will give you an initial sense of some strategies used to convey the story of a life to readers.