

ANNE FRANK: FINDING THE TRUTH (AND LIES) IN DIARY-WRITING

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“**Y**ou betrayed millions of readers.” With these words, Oprah confronted the author who had aroused a storm of controversy in the literary world. His name was James Frey, and, in four short months, his new best-selling memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, had come under extreme scrutiny. The problem was that James Frey’s memoir was not a memoir at all—he had dramatized large sections of his life, in one instance expanding his hours in jail to three months. Frey fueled an already fiery debate over artistic license and dramatic rendering in the “non-fiction” genres of memoir and autobiography. How rigidly can and should authors adhere to the facts when recounting their life stories? By examining *The Diary of Anne Frank* as an emblematic work of the genre, it becomes clear that the faithful recounting of one’s own life is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The world of self-narratives is often chaotic and blurry. Author Tom Sykes ironically announced in the *Guardian* that “fake memoirs are all the rage,” and publishers have created genre after genre of “autobiographical novel,” “semi-autobiographical novel,” “roman à clef,” and “nonfiction novel.” The ambiguity lies in autobiography’s presentational aim. Autobiography involves not only the portrayal of one’s life, but also “the construction of a public self” (Goffman 26). Erving Goffman asserts in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that each person takes on a role that they present to the world. In the process of self-representation, a conflict of interest arises: an author is tempted “to lie and to exaggerate,” to construct his or her own character. Although autobiography implies a “true” representation of the author’s life, language “always contains the possibility of lying” (Spicer 386). In the attempt to fashion a life into an interesting, readable book, autobiography takes on an “uneasy relation to fiction,” and this makes its factuality highly questionable.

If the autobiography is stripped of its self-consciousness—the motivation to dramatize, shape, and inflate—a unique genre, objective and factual, presumably emerges. The diary seems to stand alone in its claim to pure introspection. Philippe Lejeune, a French specialist of autobiography, lists the four functions of a diary: self-expression, reflection, the suspension of time, and the potential for pleasure from the writing process (106). The author pens a diary not for another’s entertainment or guidance, but for him- or herself. There is an element of secrecy that autobiographies lack in their exhibitionism—many people have memories of hiding childhood journals from parents. Where the autobiography thrives in its outward direction, in its desire to communicate with a world of readers, the diary begins as an inward turn; the writer is “alone, unable to pour it out to a friendly ear” (106). Without the social obligation to

present a coherent face and personality, a diarist can theoretically be honest with their dullness, their shortcomings, and their contradictions. The vacuum of pretensions should expose the true human being, stripped down and humbled.

In practice however, capturing an authentic experience proves much more difficult. Anne Frank's diary points to the fluid relationship between the diary and the autobiography. The intertwining of the two genres begins with an author's shifting intentions. When Frank first receives a blank, plaid journal at the age of thirteen, she intends it for her personal support and perusal. She writes, "I hope I shall be able to confide in you completely, as I have never been able to do in anyone before, and I hope that you will be a great support and comfort to me" (177). The word, "confide," confers a secretive dimension to her writing. When she mentions that others, curious for a peek, have asked to read her diary, she describes their requests as breaches of her privacy. Frank seeks to relay her deeper feelings and thoughts through the most unassuming of mediums.

Frank first mentions the idea of publishing her work when she hears a radio reporter suggest "a collection of diaries and letters after the war" (578). However, she moves on from this idea, or perhaps misinterprets it, to instead muse upon "Een roman van het Achterhuis," or "a romance of the 'Secret Annex.'" The Dutch word, "roman," more accurately translates into "novel" in English (Caplan 81), and it is here that the reader first glimpses Frank's changing intentions. She sees that her diary will help with her "greatest wish . . . to become a journalist someday and later on a famous writer" (Frank 647). After constructing these plans, Frank's diary takes on a new dimension: it no longer serves a merely personal function, but now provides the catalyst for Frank's dream of becoming a celebrated author. She sees her diary as the foundation for a novel, a genre of fiction, and this vision, above all else, cements her decision to revise her entries.

Frank proclaims, "I want to go on living after my death!" (Frank 647). And so she begins editing her earlier entries, adding, deleting, and rewording. Her revisions mimic the process of producing autobiography by reflecting upon the past. Autobiography looks back, "so if something escapes you, it's the origin, not the ending" (Lejeune 103). In the act of revision, one inserts insights only later received and reconciles inconsistencies. In contrast, diarists are rooted in the present: there is no lapse in time between experiencing and reflecting on paper, and the diarist's stories—his or her life—obviously lack an "ending." The future "slips away . . . by showing up once again in the beyond." (Lejeune 103). Although Frank's original entries indeed unfold over the course of her time in the Annex and "she writes without knowing for certain the end of her story" (Caplan 81), she foresees an eventual ending. On May 20, 1944, she enthuses, "I have started my 'Achterhuis.' It is as good as finished" (Frank 653). The diarist always drives on, as the writing has no plot or form but the "shape of death" (Lejeune 103), Frank's work possesses a direction. Her *Het Achterhuis* cannot live past

her time at the Annex. In creating a conclusion for her diary, she enables herself to reflect, reexamine, and reshape her own story.

From May to July of 1944, Frank edited her two previous years of entries. The Critical Edition separates Frank's work into separate drafts—the a-text includes her originals, the b-text contains her own revisions, and the c-text the published version. These versions “set the Diary in a no-man's-land between fiction and memoir” (Caplan 81). What Frank seeks to accomplish in altering her diary is to enhance its drama and artistic value. She seeks “to make the Diary both more vivid (pleasurable) and more public (useful) (Caplan 82). She simultaneously recalls and creates reality by rewriting a more explicit experience of everyday life. She injects into paragraphs the interruptions of daily life, the casual exclamations, and spur-of-the-moment observations. In most cases, a small addition along the lines of “it is so peaceful at the moment” (Frank 185) suffices, but her edits involving her family's arrest prove much more heavy-handed.

Her original entry on the event spans two paragraphs and only briefly captures the shock. She summarizes her feelings with a concise, single sentence: “Of course I started to cry terribly and there was an awful to-do in our house” (207). When she revisits this text two years later, however, she unabashedly sells the fear and the despair of the situation. She alters the narrative structure, foreshadowing the soldiers' entry before the arrest. She ends it with a cryptic, “hurried interjection of the present tense” (Caplan 82): “There goes the doorbell, Hello's here, I'll stop.” The audience is later led to the horrifying discovery that this visitor is actually the policeman and feels like they are there to witness it all.

The revised entry detailing the actual arrest expands greatly beyond the original and spans five pages. This time, Frank recounts in vivid detail her heightened emotions, the hour-by-hour developments, and the arduous task of packing. She speaks in fearful language—“I picture concentration camps and lonely cells” (207)—and describes her surroundings with attentiveness: “The stripped beds, the breakfast things lying on the table, a pound of meat in the kitchen for the cat” (210). The palpable suspense and the colorful scenes that seemingly unfold in real-time dramatize the story for an audience. When, after the arrest, she writes in the b-text, “Years seem to have passed between Sunday and now,” one wonders if she saw the irony. Years did pass between that fateful Sunday and the penning of that sentence—two, to be exact.

With the decision to publicize a text, there suddenly appears the recognition of an audience. The process of composing a diary for presentation involves not only the enhancing of literary content, but also the censorship of sensitive entries. Frank never intends for her audience to glimpse the immaturity and idealism that comes with adolescence. She writes at fifteen, “When I look over my diary today, 1½ years on . . . I no longer understand how I could write so freely . . . I really blush with shame when I read the pages dealing with subjects that I'd much better have left to the imagination. I put it all down so bluntly!” (305). Her “shame” refers to her entries on puberty (567)

along with her romance with Peter van Pels, and she relieves this shame by removing a considerable number of these diaries.

Her original entries on Peter are long and detailed. She writes as a young teenage girl, infatuated and exuberant at her first taste of love. “Oh, Peter, just say something at last, don’t let me drift on between hope and dejection,” she gushes (526). Naturally, after her enchantment fades, she feels inclined to excise entire months of entries that reference her preoccupation with him. She recreates her own adolescence, turning a “private diary into a public document” (Caplan 79). Even as a young author, Frank understands how text and identity merge: the diary serves as her reader’s only source for judging her character.

In moving from the a-text to the b-text, Frank frequently censors herself to control her identity. However, one can only guess at her ultimate plan, as she was never able to finish her work. Publishers, however, continued where she left off, interpreting, editing, and repackaging the author to fit their perceptions and preferences. In particular, there is a “de-judaisation” of her work in moving from the b-text to the c-text, as Rachel Feldhay Brenner discusses in “Anne Frank’s Portrait as a Young Artist.” She champions *Het Achterhuis* as “an extraordinary piece of writing produced by an extraordinary writer under extraordinary circumstances” (Brenner 109). Frank herself testifies to the significance of her identity and acknowledges “awareness of the terrifying historical reality against which, as a Jew, she writes her life story” (109). In her diary, Frank comments, “It would be quite funny 10 years after the war if we Jews were to tell how we lived and what we ate and talked about here” (578). “We Jews,” she proclaims. Her work centers around her individual life story, but this story is inextricably connected to her Judaism. She recognizes her narrative’s indebtedness to this particular identity.

The publisher’s presentation of the diary largely overlooks her identification as a Jewish author. Of all translations, the Dutch edition alone preserves Frank’s original title. The English paperback, in contrast, calls itself, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. The first distortion is that of genre—Frank never intended to publish a diary, and her thorough edits reflect her intentions. Translators and editors, in “calling it a ‘diary’ . . . have perpetuated Anne’s own fiction of a day-to-day journal” (Caplan 79). More significantly, however, the title places “the content in the realm of the ‘normal’” (Brenner 106) when much of the diary seeks to relay the horrors of a war. Similarly, the synopsis on the back cover of the first English paperback edition suppresses the extraordinary for the ordinary, summarizing that “her story is that of every teen-ager” and focusing mainly on her relationship with Peter (Brenner 110). Frank loses her Jewish identity, and the book becomes a coming-of-age romance. She transforms into a generic “symbol of universal victimization and . . . prevailing humanism” (110) that fails to capture an essential piece of her story: she is Jewish and narrates a specifically Jewish experience. To deny this obscures “the difference between Anne and other teen-agers” (Bernstein 2).

The life story encounters obstacles to truth at every step of its formation. The diarist falls prey to bias from the start. Anne Frank's diary fails as a diary, as considerations for self-presentation are found within the text itself. The diary in full a-text form doesn't even exist—there are no multiple drafts of entries after the day she conceives of *Het Achterhuis*, implying that from then on she writes with full acknowledgment of an audience. How does one then confront the problem of inaccuracy in portraying the events of one's life? One may follow the lead of publishers and dissect the autobiography into minute, arbitrary, and often indistinguishable genres. One may lambast Anne Frank for her extrapolations and proclaim her a fraud. However, to argue in this manner misses the point. At the end of Frank's diary, one leaves not with the remembrance of the embellished details of the war, but with the sentiments she inspires that cannot be falsified. She remains alive today precisely because she is presented, albeit inaccurately so, as an ordinary girl coming of age in times radically different yet still somehow familiar. Texts, like both Frank's and Frey's, find their significance and power in more than the words themselves. It is the authenticity of the emotions that penetrate the minds of readers, with a little help from some harmless "lies."

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