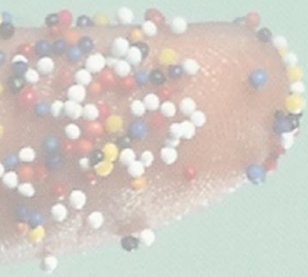

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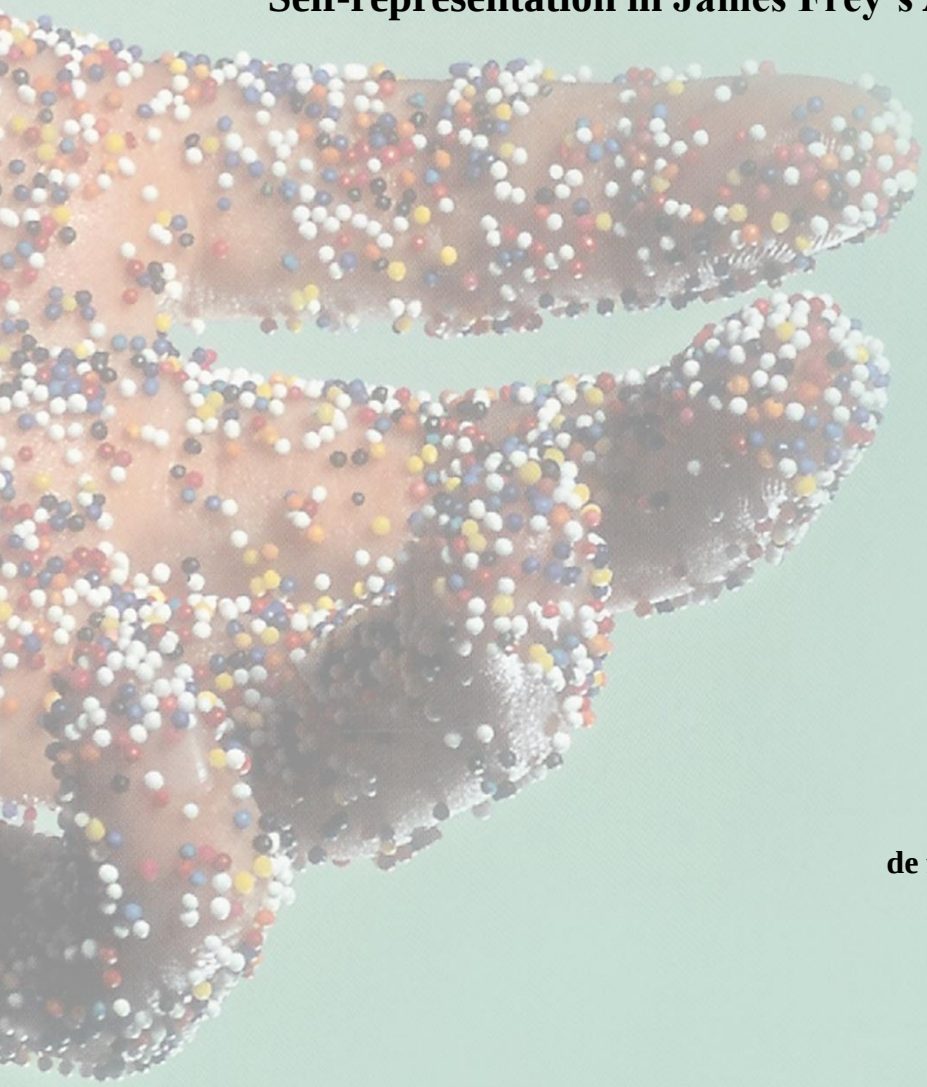
Self-representation in James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*



Masterproef voorgelegd aan

de faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte,

opleiding Taal- en Letterkunde,

Nederlands-Engels,

voor het verkrijgen van de Master

Vergelijkende Moderne Letterkunde

door Siska Lyssens

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“memories of the past are memories not of facts

but memories of your imaginings of the facts”

(Roth 8)

Table of Contents

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A Million Little Pieces

1. Introduction

On the twenty-sixth of October 2005, America's influential television host Oprah Winfrey presented *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) by James Frey as her *Book Club* selection of the month. Frey's debut book was introduced as a nonfiction recovery memoir of drug and alcohol addiction and rehabilitation.

The first edition of *A Million Little Pieces* attracted much attention, even before Oprah's involvement. It received critical acclaim from many newspapers and magazines, ranging from *Elle*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *GQ*, to more reputable, quality press publications. *The New Yorker* for instance described it as

> a frenzied electrifying description of an experience. We finish 'A Million Little Pieces' like miners lifted out of a collapsed shaft: exhausted, blackened, oxygen-starved but alive, incredible, mesmerizing, heart-rendering. An intimate, vivid and heartfelt memoir. Can Frey be the greatest writer of his generation? (Larry King, interview with James Frey 5)

In the *New York Post* Frey's memoir was hailed as

> one of the most compelling books of the year … Incredibly bold … Somehow accomplishes what three decades' worth of cheesy public service announcements and after-school specials have failed to do: depict hard-core drug addiction as the self-inflicted apocalypse that it is. (*A Million Little Pieces*[1])

These quotes from reviews show that the media considered *A Million Little Pieces* to be a memoir that offers a straightforward depiction of the life it narrates. In the case of memoir, which is the genre *A Million Little Pieces* was marketed as, much consideration is given to the

[1] Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Random House 2003. Subsequent reference *AMLP*.

veracity of the account. The book was lauded as authentic: “a stark, direct and graphic documentation of the rehabilitation process … the strength of the book comes from the truth of the experience” (*AMLP,* n.p.). Due to the genuine impact of the book’s message, the story is given credence. In addition to this profusion of praise, the book was elected by the editors of amazon.com as the number one book of 2003. Such a quick rise to success can also result in unfavorable attention, which Frey soon experienced when more critical voices began to make themselves heard. Other reviewers and journalists were wary of the rather crude descriptions of shocking and painful events. In 2003, Deborah Caulfield Rybak of Minneapolis’ *Star Tribune* questioned the factuality of some incidents that are related in the book. Among the suspect passages in the book she considers, for example, the mention of various criminal offenses, arrests, a scene where Frey is sexually assaulted by a French priest whom he injures severely and a three-month incarceration in an Ohio county jail. These initial contentions developed into a controversy of dramatic proportions. After Oprah Winfrey’s endorsement of the book it propelled to number one in *The New York Times* nonfiction paperback best seller list, which in turn contributed to the book’s sale of over 3.5 million copies. The agitation in the media gained momentum when a skeptical website, *The Smoking Gun,* subjected *A Million Little Pieces* to a thorough investigation. The website claims an authoritative status for its practices, insisting:

> The Smoking Gun brings you exclusive documents--cool, confidential, quirky--that can't be found elsewhere on the Web. Using material obtained from government and law enforcement sources, via Freedom of Information requests, and from court files nationwide, we guarantee everything here is 100% authentic. (The Smoking Gun)

The parts of the book which could be verified were thoroughly examined. Police reports and court records were collected to confirm Frey’s legal statements. Law enforcement personnel and various other people who knew Frey in the past were interviewed. Their versions of

incidents were compared with the versions of these incidents as they are recounted in the book. These other perspectives are presented alongside official documents which seems to lend them an authoritative nature, but they are no more reliable than the book's versions they question. The site published its findings in an article "The Man Who Conned Oprah", which was subtitled: "A Million Little Lies – Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction"(subsequent reference "TMWCO"). The article is unequivocally disparaging. It exposes inconsistencies in Frey's reconstruction of a few facts and aims to discredit *A Million Little Pieces* as a whole. The authors conclude that the evidence proves how Frey

> wholly fabricated or wildly embellished details of his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as an outlaw 'wanted in three states' … Frey appears to have fictionalized his past to propel and sweeten the book's already melodramatic narrative and help convince readers of his malevolence. ("TMWCO" 1)

The Smoking Gun goes on to inform potential readers that Frey has "fabricated key parts of the book" and warns the "discerning reader to wonder what is true in A Million Little Pieces" (2). As a result of these charges and under the public pressure of millions of disgruntled readers, Frey's publisher Random House issued 'A Note to the Reader' on the first of February 2006, which was to be included in all future editions of the book. It is Frey's mea culpa, in which he acknowledges: "I embellished many details about my past experiences, and altered others in order to serve what I felt was the greater purpose of the book" ("A Note to the Reader" 1). Frey apologizes to those readers who have been disappointed, but at the same time he defends his book. The text has since remained unaltered.

My personal appreciation for the book and the many skeptical opinions I encountered impelled me to investigate the work in relation to the conventions in autobiographical life writing. *A Million Little Pieces* challenges many principles and presuppositions underlying

traditional autobiographical theory and lends itself particularly well to the exploration of issues such as authorial intention, narrative reliability and the uncertainty as to where fact ends and fiction begins[2]. Narratives are perforce fictional representations which is manifestly ignored by *The Smoking Gun's* investigation. What interests me are the inevitable effects of the processes of narration in *A Million Little Pieces*.

My thesis critically examines James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* in relation to some central issues concerning life writing. The first chapter deals with the contemporary cultural mentality that has given rise to the type of narrative of which *A Million Little Pieces* is an example. Our Western culture's attitude towards unconventional behaviours and the tendency to communicate them has been termed "wound culture" (Seltzer) or "post-traumatic culture" (Farrell). This culture's features are manifest in Frey's memoir, both in the way in which the book has been publicized and received and in the particular representation of its autobiographical subject. The inherently related issues of narratology; authorial intention, referentiality and subjectivity will be addressed in the second part of this chapter.

The second chapter of this thesis demonstrates that *A Million Little Pieces* is a fictional representation of Frey's experiences and self. The representational image of the protagonist James is a fiction that is founded on my three main fields of inquiry: the fictional characteristics inherent to the narrative process, the confessional mode of autobiography and the identity construct that reflects a fantastical ideology of self-realization through the creation of a personal mythology. James' account is a 'mythos', which is a term that refers to "untrue stories, but also to any story, speech or plot, while also carrying with it the contemporary English meaning of a set of beliefs or ideology" (Hamilton "Mythos and Mental Illness" 233, subsequent reference "MMI") that serve to glorify the self for the purpose of gaining control over one's life.

[2] I wish to note that I do not suggest that a clear distinction between fact and fiction is possible. I aim to show, conversely, that it is precisely the narrative dimension of life writing that causes its inherent fictionality.

Throughout my thesis, I will most frequently use the formulation autobiographical life writing to typify *A Million Little Pieces*. It is appropriate because of its "*in*definition and lack of generic rigor, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability" to denote a narrative characterized by a focus on "the self writing and being written" (Olney xv). This interpretation of the autobiographical concept is consistent with my understanding of James' narrative as mode of self-representation that expresses Frey's sense of identity. Other terms that denote forms of life writing such as confession, autobiography and memoir will also be employed when they are relevant to clarify the aspects in which *A Million Little Pieces* contains influences or correspondences to these types of narratives.

My use of the words truth and fact is intended to refer to that which is *perceived* to be accurately described and objectively true, namely the "empiricist concepts of truth as correspondence to historical data or 'facts'" (Marcus 152), or "what is supposed to have actually happened" (Hamilton "MMI" 235). Fiction and fictional (ized) are used to indicate narrative representations of these facts. This is the "*depiction* of reality" (Bruner 27, original emphasis) in "the mediated factual (what some source represents as having actually happened), and the fictive (what is only imagined as happening)" (Hamilton "MMI" 235) are the result of narration and narrative techniques. I propose that the "literary forces that shape autobiography" (Bruner 27) construct fact to create fiction. The representation of a life in an autobiographical narrative therefore inevitably fictionalizes factual moments.

2. Authorial Intention and Subjectivity

This first chapter examines and interrogates the circumstances that have determined the way in which *A Million Little Pieces* has been perceived and criticized by journalists, reviewers, literary critics, scholars and the public at large. My approach is concerned with "the nature and expression of subjectivity; the generic specificity of autobiography; the truth status and referentiality of autobiography in relation to the fact-fiction dichotomy and the status of fictional entities" (Marcus 179). Firstly I will discuss the culture that has influenced the production and reception of the book. Secondly, I will indicate the theoretical assumptions on authorial intention and subjectivity that restrict the possible interpretations of autobiographical writing. Finally, I will put forward critical positions that are conducive to a more open-minded analysis of the book.

2.1. A Culture of Public Confession

One of the main reasons for the indignant reactions of the press to the fictionalizations in James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* was the lack of clarity concerning the generic classification of the book. Larry King provocatively tries to reprove Frey: "But it is supposed to be factual events. The memoir is a form of biography" (2). There appears to be a fixed conception of what it entails to write a memoir and subsequently of what the content of a memoir should be. Genre is "a specific type of artistic or cultural composition, identified by codes which the audience recognize" (sic, Anderson 136). Tzvetan Todorov's concept of genres as institutions considers the function of genre to be " 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models for writing' for authors" (qtd. in Marcus 233). In many theories there

is thus a social-literary agreement that the reception of a work is directed by the genre to which a work belongs. The "structure of recognition" (Marcus 233) that underlies the popular notion of the genre of the memoir is exemplified by Larry King's statement that stresses the presumed non-fictional foundation of the genre of biography, of which he understands the memoir to be similar in nature. This raises high expectations about a factual representation of the life it depicts. The total of genre markers termed the 'genre clause' will be further explored further in this chapter. The implications of the genre clause can be questioned but for now it will be understood in the unambiguous manner in which it has affected the way in which *A Million Little Pieces* has been received as described above.

The book's message of regeneration and mode of confession causes it to be associated with the prototypical works of the autobiographical tradition. The memoir is a type of autobiographical narrative that traces back to "the historical description of autobiography as a Western mode of self-production" (Gilmore 2). In this genre there has been constancy of expression rather than of form. "The tradition was never so coherent" as

> autobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself of himself within testimonial contexts as seemingly diverse as the Christian confession, the scandalous memoirs of the rogue, and the coming-out story in order to achieve as proximate a relation as possible to what constitutes truth in that discourse. (3)

The works of Augustine, Rousseau and many other precursors have functioned as models for later conversion narratives and confessionals, in which "sinners have to feel sorrow at having lapsed" and "must consistently make some explicit confession of their sins and sinfulness" (B. King 116). The traditional modes of autobiographical writing are valuable and relevant as a theoretical foundation for the analysis of *A Million Little Pieces*, as will be demonstrated in part 3.2.1.

Frey's memoir also derives from a particular discourse that has been termed a "culture of confession" and a "culture of testimony" (Gilmore 2). Frey's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* intensified the genre expectations with regard to his memoir. His interview with Oprah was an example of 'the media confessional', a relatively new aspect of popular culture which fits in with " 'real life' media that posit a naturalized speaker who is simply telling his or her story" (Gilmore 17). This contemporary phenomenon "is obsessed with confession as a source of dramatic production values. The pressure to confess, or at least engage in self-disclosure, is a centerpiece of talkshows" (B. King 115). These types of stories,

> have come to permeate contemporary culture … confessional practices pervade and, arguably, define mass culture … the efflorescence of talk shows and their mutating confessional forms has pushed forward another representative: neither celebrity nor statesperson, but the dysfunctional and downtrodden, the cheated-on and cheating, the everyman and everywoman of the bad times that keep on coming. (17)

Similar to written autobiographical narratives, such confessional stories seen on

> draw on the confession heritage of the Church for a set of background expectancies of what constitutes a 'true' confession, in order to nurture popular interest and engagement. The confessional ideal lives on in the notion of authenticity and the unquestioned value of openness that is the *raison d'être* of 'therapeutic' television. (B. King 120, original emphasis)

This guarantee of veracity is what made Frey's memoir so attractive to the general public, along with the sensationalistic content of his narrative. Frey's shocking and deviant life story and behaviour as revealed in his media performance and through James[3]' narrative were perceived as 'real life', true stories.

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[3] In my analysis, I use the name Frey to refer to the author of *A Million Little Pieces,* while James refers to the protagonist and narrator of the book who is Frey's imagined, fictional self

Especially in instances of overexposure in the media, a critical perspective is often lacking. Gilmore uncannily remarks: “there goes Derrida; here comes Oprah” (18). Judging by *The Smoking Gun*’s indignant reaction, a rather sensationalistic and populist approach was also the case for the reception of Frey’s memoir. Theories that examine how cultural conventions operate to construct narratives are useful to contextualize *A Million Little Pieces*. A perspective that acknowledges “the specifically therapeutic effect of autobiographical self-analysis” (Marcus 216) can be linked to the “confession practices” that “have been differentiated into a number of different modes that still exercise the imagination of the present” (B. King 117). The emphasis on autonomy and individual responsibility in James’ narrative is conventional of “the confessional autobiography as a literary genre” (118) which evolved in agreement with Luther’s rejection of priestly institutions as interpositions between individuals and God. This mode’s “conception of human freedom” is

> linked to purely inner experiences and their expression ... This conception, at the base of modern notions of the self, later transpired into a secular Romanticism, a movement that downgraded *sincerity* – the matching of the self to social conventions – in favour of *authenticity* – the assertion of the self against the perceived constraints of social conventions. (118)

James is skeptical of the tested methods of Alcoholics Anonymous and their reliance on religious beliefs. He states: “I find the philosophy [of AA meetings] to be one of replacement. Replacement of one addiction with another addiction. Replacement of a chemical for a God and a meeting” (*AMLP* 76). Frey writes that “drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome, and there is always a path to redemption if you fight to find one” (“A Note to the Reader” 3). The word ‘redemption’ resonates the religious connotations that Alcoholics Anonymous connects to the recovery of addiction. Frey has succeeded in battling his addiction his own way and is living proof that “true contrition is manifested by a change of

heart and a determination to sin no more" (B. King 117). The modern confessional autobiography thus focuses on the self's – and not God's – convictions of right and wrong. This is reflected in James' insistence: "I was weak and pathetic and I couldn't control myself … I need to change, I have to change, and at this point change is my only option, unless I am ready to die. All that matters is that I make myself something else and someone else for the future" (*AMLP* 302).

As such Frey's memoir is characterized by the typical "confrontation between pretence and 'authenticity' and the hybrid logic of revelation, situated somewhere between the public confession and the intimate scenarios of psychotherapy" (B. King 115). The above statement also indicates how the therapeutic project of self-transformation is central to the book. *A Million Little Pieces* is in the first place a chronicle of the process of James' self-realization, a story of "recovery, personal transformation and heroic self-reliance … radical autonomy as a personal ideal" ("MMD" 324-325). There is a stark contrast between the past James, a broken, degenerate individual, whom we meet at the outset of the book, and the James of the progressive present, a strong-willed and successfully rehabilitated young man. In the same therapeutic way as James' 'Recovery Program', which is the psychological counselling he is obliged to undergo at the centre, autobiographical life writing cultivates the process of self-reflection and self-examination. To successfully kick his heavy alcohol and drug addiction James is encouraged to examine himself:

> I think about my life and how I ended up this way. I think about the ruin, devastation and wreckage I have caused to myself and to others; I think about self-hatred and self-loathing. I think about how and why and what happened … (*AMLP* 26)

Frey's creation of James is psychologically motivated:

> I made other alterations in my portrayal of myself, most of which portrayed me in ways that made me tougher and more daring and more aggressive than in reality I was, or I am. People cope with adversity in many different ways, ways that are deeply personal. I think one way people cope is by developing a skewed perception of themselves that allows them to overcome and do things they thought they couldn't do before. My mistake, and it is one I deeply regret, is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience. ("A Note to the Reader" 2)

Frey exposed in public the persona that he created in his private mind. The concurrence of the private and the public in instances of painful or shameful self-disclosure has been observed to be a feature of a "wound culture" in which "the excitations in the opening of private and … psychic interiors: the exhibition and witnessing, the endlessly reproducible display, of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public" ("Wound Culture" 3) is typical. James is depicted as a wounded individual. The references in the book to types of rehabilitation therapies, psychological tests and trauma show that *A Million Little Pieces* is embedded in a culture that is familiar with a popularized concept of psychological injury. In his narrative James develops a self-image that is closely linked to his mental progression which gives proof of the therapeutic dimension of James' particular self-representation. Frey's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* mimics this in the talkshow's recognizable setting of a living room/therapist's office in which his intimate disclosures illustrate "the emergence of private trauma as something to be shared in the public scene" (Seltzer 113). To reveal one's painful life experiences in public is one way of dealing with the past but there are other "principal modes of coping with traumatic stress: social adaptation and relearning, depressive withdrawal or numbing, and impulsive force (beserking)" (Farrell 7). *A Million Little Pieces* makes Frey's recovery public in both these ways. Firstly, Frey has indeed published his

painful memories and secondly, James' rehabilitation is a 'relearning', and both his past and present behaviour and state of mind are either gloomily indifferent or explosively violent. The character of James can thus be interpreted as "Frey's imagined person or personified coping mechanism" ("MMD" 324), shared publicly in the form of a memoir.

While Frey can be considered an example of "the media cliché that ordinary people are only interesting or entertaining because unfortunate or outlandish things have happened to them (B. King 121), he was already a top-selling author before his appearance on Oprah. As mentioned in the introduction for instance, the memoir had already topped amazon.com's number one book list in the year of its first publication. His media appearance therefore also gives evidence of the "celebrity televisual confession" (119) which disrupts "the ideal speech situation by imposing a third syntactical position: the readership (or audience) to whom the interview is communicated" and through which "the journalist and the reader/audience might discover the "nature" of a famous individual" (120). In both cases it is true that "*AMLP* relies on the most macerated clichés in order to tell its story of redemption, but it does so cunningly, with enough ferocity and indefatigable insistence to satisfy the contemporary hunger for true tales of wounding" ("MMD" 325-326). This contextualization of *A Million Little Pieces* in a culture in which public confession is encouraged assigns much responsibility for the work on the author. I propose that Frey's choices concerning the presentation of his book in the media and the confessional mode of James' narrative show his awareness of the public's fascination with shocking stories. Therefore it is especially interesting to scrutinize Frey's possible authorial intentions.

2.2. Frey's Authorial Intention

Larry King asked Frey: "Why did *you* shop it as a novel if it wasn't?" (5, emphasis added). His question illustrates the importance of authorial intention for the classification of a work. Anderson defines intentionality and intentional meaning as " a fallacy, sometimes pursued in literary criticism, that a text may be defined in terms of its author's intentions" (137). In this view

> the author is behind the text, controlling its meaning; the author becomes the guarantor of the 'intentional' meaning or truth of the text, and reading the text therefore leads back to the author as its origin. (2)

This way of reading bestows the author of a work with all the responsibility for the interpretation of its contents. The concept of intentionality, addressed by Larry King, has been challenged by deconstructionist critics as well. Roland Barthes observes in his well-known text of literary criticism, "The Death of the Author":

> The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. (subsequent reference "TDOA" 99)

This line of reasoning is behind any interview or article that interrogates or relates to the author of a book. Barthes does not support this referential connection between author and work. He states: "linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing more than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject' not a 'person'" (98, original italics) and "the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate" (99). If this is so, the author's comments on his work are of no consequence. In the

case of *A Million Little Pieces* both approaches are problematic as Frey's statements are conflicting. Larry King provocatively asks Frey: "if you went into a bookstore and it said memoirs, you would think non-fiction?"(5). Frey agrees with King's insinuation. He replies that memoir is "a classification of non-fiction", but he also differentiates the understanding of the genre's parameters, as he stresses: "some people think it's creative non-fiction. It's generally recognized that the writer of a memoir is retailing a subjective story" (Larry King 5). This statement contradicts the genre of memoir's assumed authorial intention of objectivity and replaces it with an authorial intention that maintains the fallacy while blurring the author's possible intentions. Even though Frey explains: "I didn't initially think of what I was writing as nonfiction or fiction, memoir or autobiography" ("A Note to the Reader" 1), which implies a lack of authorial intention, he nevertheless appears to have classified his book as belonging to the category of fiction, because his original intention was to sell it as a novel ("TMWCO" 4). Demonstrably, Frey's authorial intentions are ambiguous. His personal conceptions are influenced by some conceptually conflicted issues about genre and autobiography.

Conventionally, autobiographical criticism takes as its models the so-called "seminal" autobiographies:

> the view that Augustine is the founding father of the autobiographical form becomes synonymous with the claim that autobiography is in essence an aspect of the Christian Western civilisation … The move then made within forms of autobiographical criticism … is towards the location of 'exemplary' texts which offer the 'fullest' account of individuality. (Marcus 2)

The great importance attached to the autobiographical works of for instance Augustine but also Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Marcel Proust has been noticed by Barthes, who finds the reason for such emphasis on the author to be Western culture's individualism and its idolatry

of ‘genius’ which he blames for the usual method of interpretation: “The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (“TDOA” 98, original emphasis). As mentioned above, the confessional mode of Frey’s memoir gives exactly this impression of it being a succession of outpourings of sincerity. As a result of which the public has sought indications for the text’s interpretation in Frey’s public statements. Alternately, Barthes advocates “the removal of the Author” in which a text is not “a line of words … but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (“TDOA” 98-99). Barthes rejects the idea that even an autobiographical work is intended to be interpreted autobiographically. The implication is that critics can no longer refer back to the author or even legitimately examine the text for a meaning because that would be to “ impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (99). While Barthes’ viewpoint is challenging and refreshing it is not entirely applicable to *A Million Little Pieces*. A more moderate formalist approach can however reveal some of the principles that (seem to) govern the work’s genre features. The deconstructionist critic Jacques Derrida has exposed assumptions concerning autobiography’s generic conditions. He discusses “the issue of the ‘contours’ or ‘borders’ of texts” (Marcus 246) and critically examines “the status of generic labels as they appear within the book as object” (247). According to Frederic Jameson, “genres are essentially literary institutions or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (qtd. in Marcus 233). This definition indicates outside entities that are presumed to govern the production of a text: the audience or public but also the author. In Derrida’s conception of genre there is a conspicuous absence of any such external regulating force. Genre seems to govern itself autonomously according to a “law”: the “genre-clause”, by which a text marks

itself as belonging to a particular genre (247). The genre-clause becomes manifest in the form of for example a preface and a title-page and is also present in the internal signals of the autobiographical writing. These markers seem to firmly establish a work's genre by indicating for instance the author's name on the cover and within the text or by referring to an authorial addressee, but they are not unproblematic indicators of either genre classification or autobiographical intention (247-248). There are several genre markers present in *A Million Little Pieces* which confirm this ambiguity of designation. Most notably, the book bears the superscription 'Memoir/Literature' on its cover. This label leads to an indistinct and vague notion of the text's nature by which it characterizes itself as both non-fiction and fiction. The book consequently causes its elimination from both categories, leaving the text with an unclear identity. Its attempt at legitimizing itself by way of relying on these external references in and on the book and by way of relying on reader's expectations concerning its status is in this manner negated.

A preface is a possible marker of genre identification. Frey does not make use of a preface but the text is preceded by a short prelude. It is a symbolical tale with a desperate, negative tone that does not anticipate the narrative's hopeful ending:

The Young Man came to the Old Man seeking counsel.

I broke something, Old Man.

How badly is it broken?

It's in a million little pieces.

I'm afraid I can't help you.

Why?

There's nothing you can do.

Why?

It can't be fixed.

Why?

It's broken beyond repair. It's in a million little pieces. (*AMLP*, n.p.)

This instance of "*hors-texte*" is "in some way 'outside' the narrative" and therefore "capable of commenting or reflecting on it" (Marcus 250). If the introductory text in *A Million Little Pieces* is supposed to prefigure the main narrative it communicates a contradictory message. Arousing a sense of despondency at the onset of the memoir suggests a troubling and unfortunate ending. Another such marker which comments on the narrative is the epilogue. It gives "a brief summary of what is alleged to have happened to the narrative's other characters. Many of these are dead or presumed so, furnishing a final touch of ostensibly brutal reality" (Hamilton "MMD" 330). Of James the epilogue states: "James has never relapsed" (*AMLP* 432). This is a technique routinely used at the end of movies based on 'true stories'. It gives these fictionalized accounts an air of verisimilitude and in this case reinforces the status of James the narrator as an unambiguous representation of Frey the author. Another outside marker is the picture of Frey on the back cover. It has the same referential effect, as Oprah comments: "I know that, like many of us who have read the book, I kept turning to the back of the book to remind myself, 'He's alive. He's okay." ("TMWCO" 5). The investigative reporters of *The Smoking Gun* have not failed to notice the potency of these markers and have acknowledged that "in essence, that is part of the book's narrative power and a primary marketing tool" (5). It also makes the supposedly unexpected ending more significant as Frey has survived his tough predicament and literally lived to tell of his experiences which contributes substantially to the autobiographical status of the book.

The presence of these markers does not facilitate a generic categorization of *A Million Little Pieces*, as "participation [of a work to a genre] never amounts to belonging" and "the law of genre is both a set of interdictions guarding the 'purity' of the genres and a transgressive and disruptive force" (Marcus 116). The ambiguous messages that these inconsistent markers send are precisely what make Frey's memoir a typical specimen of autobiographical life writing. Following Derrida's school of thought, the book grants itself inclusion into (and simultaneously exclusion of) both genres by not clearly marking itself as belonging to either memoir or literature.

Barthes and Derrida's deconstructionist views offer the possibility that in a text, there is a meaning to be understood and a structure to be discerned that is absolutely independent from the author's intentions. In the case of autobiographical life writing, I believe that it leads to a more complete interpretation of a work if this deconstructionist approach is combined with a view that takes into account authorial influences on the text. The author's intentions cannot be ignored completely, as Frey's construction of James is a conscious attempt at self-assertion. The pressure from the publishing industry in terms of promotion also has a significant effect on the eventual form in which a work materializes. This is apparent in the generic markers on the book itself as described above, that serve to direct the reception of the book on the literary market.

It is significant to point out that Frey was studying at the Art Institute of Chicago when he wrote his debut book and that when he moved to Los Angeles he held several jobs as a screenwriter, director and producer of several films (*James Frey Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*). Frey's artistic education and professional background is often overlooked in popular criticisms but this information is highly relevant as it has influenced his writing. Frey's creative process is consistent with the aspect of authorial intentionality that approaches

a text as a writer's artistic expression. Frey makes clear that the fictitious nature of some recounted events is the result of his deliberate effort at constructing a skillfully crafted story. Even though he claims that: "[he] didn't initially think of what [he] was writing as nonfiction or fiction, memoir or autobiography", he does admit that he had aesthetic literary motives for modifying his experiences in his narrative. Frey states: "I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require. I altered events and details all the way through the book" ("A Note to the Reader" 1-2). He also explains: "I think of the book as working in sort of a tradition – a long tradition of what American writers have done in the past, people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Kerouac and Charles Bukowski." (Larry King 5). This shows that Frey's text has been shaped by the conventions of narration and genre. It explains the use of fictional techniques in the text and it does not conflict but agrees with the deconstructionist view of a text as being a composite of "quotations drawn from innumerable centres of cultures" ("TDOA" 99). In the conception of his memoir Frey has consciously neglected the traditional genre distinctions between fiction and non-fiction and has adopted a more modern, novelistic notion of life-writing to ultimately arrive at a distinct form for his memoir. Frey has handled his versions of the facts as stories, and has used techniques associated with fiction to create James' narrative. It was conceivable for him to do so, because of the unclear delineation of the autobiographical genre. He states:

> there is much debate now about the respective natures of works of memoir, nonfiction, and fiction. That debate will likely continue for some time. I believe and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. This memoir is a combination of facts about my life and certain embellishments. It is a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering

> drug addict and alcoholic. Ultimately, it's a story, and one that I could not have written without having lived the life I've lived. ("A Note to the Reader" 2)

In the Larry King interview he explains his view of the position of memoir on the autobiographical spectrum as it being

> a classification of non-fiction. Some people think it's creative non-fiction. It's generally recognized that the writer of a memoir is retailing a subjective story. That it's one person's event. I mean, I still stand by the essential truths of the book. (Larry King 5)

These statements again illustrate the contradictory nature of Frey's intentions, because he did originally conceive of his book as fiction, as mentioned previously. The ambiguous nature of his memoir caused problems to publishers. He tells Larry King: "we initially shopped the book as a novel and it was turned down by a lot of publishers as a novel or as a non-fiction book" (4). In all, the book was rejected by seventeen publishers. Eventually, Nan Talese, the editorial director of Doubleday, purchased Frey's fictional narrative, but then "declined to publish it as such"(5). Instead, the manuscript was edited and eventually promoted as a nonfiction memoir in April 2003. These circumstances demonstrate that a work is created by an author but it is also to some extent determined by the publication process. On the reception of life writings Marcus rightly observes that

> the question of the perceived degrees of 'seriousness' of autobiographical texts is in fact not separate from perceptions of the literary market. … attacks on commercial publishing and the literary market-place are closely linked with vilifications of 'commercial' autobiographies. The mercantile aspects of writing are viewed as particularly insidious in an authentic and autonomous expression of an essentially private self. (4)

One of the reasons *A Million Little Pieces* has been considered dubious can be found in its great popular appeal. Generally "popular, 'commercial' autobiographies" are seen as lacking 'integrity', as debasing the self by commodifying it" (Anderson 8). The book's commercial success is held to be the result of Frey's media skills and ability to sell himself. As "television selectively exploits and manipulates the confessional process" (B. King 123) Frey's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was negatively interpreted by some and his memoir was perceived as inauthentic. It must be acknowledged that the circumstances are in part the author's responsibility and therefore the result of his intentions. However much they are influenced by the publishing industry who is responsible for the publicity in the press, the author is the second party who agrees upon these media performances. These appearances are highly staged. It is "a variously managed and fabricated performance that centres on self (or product) promotion, image repair and damage control" (122). Frey nevertheless continues to place responsibility on publishers concerning the way in which his memoir was marketed. He says:

> Publishers want to make money by selling these books with compelling narratives and want them to be structured in the way that novels are. There are no specific guidelines … In many ways publishers' concerns are about the bottom line, which is fine. For them that genre [memoir] tends to be easier to promote and market. A lot of books fall into this grey area – they are not really novels and they are not really autobiographies. (Neill "Bright Shiny Frey" 3, subsequent reference "BSF")

The interplay between audience and author, marketplace and creative process is complex. The above exposition of the culturally determined reception of *A Million Little Pieces* and theoretical views on authorial intention and genre indicate the importance of a variety of factors that can surpass the author or affirm his intention in writing the book. In both cases the author is all but absent.

2.2. Subjectivity in *A Million Little Pieces*

The interpretation of autobiographical life writing tends to be constrained by what is presumed to be "autobiography's project": "its almost legalistic definition of truth-telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria" (Gilmore 3). For example, it is difficult to interpret what Frey means when he says that he "used supporting documents, such as medical records, therapists' notes, and personal journals, when I had them, and when they were relevant" while he also insists that: "as [he] wrote, [he] worked primarily from memory" ("A Note to the Reader" 1-2). The referential quality of his narrative is invoked by the first statement and then weakened by the latter. In the traditional conception of the relationship between language and reality, narration can be defined as "a verbal act … consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened" (Rimmon-Kenan 8). Reality is given priority and representation is equated with reference which can be transferred by language unambiguously. Deconstruction attempts to reveal the fallacy of this belief in the possibility of adequate representation by means of language and narration. Barthes asserts that in all instances of writing a "disconnection" occurs with what is perceived to be a fact, since "as soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively" it is "finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself" ("TDOA" 97). Language is in this view incapable to represent the outside world and this world's presumed existence prior to the act of representation is questioned. Narration rather "replaces, rather than reflecting or even conveying, this absent reality" (Rimmon-Kenan 8). In this sense there is no possible way in which there is an objective reality, because "a sense of the subjective self must always be prior to a sense of the objective world" (Olney *Metaphors of Self* 14).

The deconstructionist perspective on authorial intention, narrative and representation offers a partial explanation for the subjectivity in *A Million Little Pieces.* Their conception of subjectivity rejects or at least underestimates the possibility of a subject that can define its own identity autonomously. Other theories of narratology and subjectivity highlight individual autonomy and the possibility of transgression of narrative conventions. The concept of subjectivity is a problematic issue in narrative theory, seeing as it has two different meanings. They are differentiated as "deconstruction and fundamentalism" (Worthington 75). Deconstructionists defend "communicative determinism" which is the belief that human beings are "subjected by their social embeddedness", while in fundamentalism the notion of "liberal essentialism" is put forward, which maintains "subjective autonomy to be the fundamental condition of personhood" (75).

The more pragmatic conception of deconstruction incorporates both of subjectivity's meanings. It takes into account the cultural frame of reference of narratives, what Barthes refers to as "this immense dictionary" from which "the Author … draws a writing" ("TDOA" 99), and which can be related to what Seltzer and Farrell identify as the popular imagination's tendency to narrate experiences in a set pattern. This intertextual approach also accounts for the creative representations in narratives that are the expression of one individual but are still references to this dictionary, which I believe is an appropriate position to assume with regard to autobiographical narratives.

This view does not have to be paradoxical but adds an interesting dimension to the complexity of narration and authorship. It entails an acceptance to some extent of referentiality, as "the death of the author" does not exclude the presence of a "mediator, shaman, or relator whose "performance"" can be interpreted as "mastery of the narrative code" (Barthes "TDOA" 97). The strict deconstructionist approach thus shows how it is impossible to deconstruct the terms which support the mimetic project (truth, reference, etc.)

without recourse to these terms (Rimmon-Kenan 16). Consequently, even though the theory of "The Death of the Author" is insightful about crucial notions, a more moderate theoretical framework is desirable. I will therefore employ the deconstructionist view but mitigated by an approach "that attempts to go beyond a view of the narrator as a structural position to a consideration of his/her subjectivity" (128). The "reborn author" should be treated as "the agent whose act of production is responsible for the fictional narrations" (128) but who does not dictate their meanings. As such, " the 'subjectivity' of a discourse is given by the presence, explicit or implicit, of an 'ego' who can be defined 'only as a person who maintains the discourse'" (White 3).

In this conception a certain degree of referentiality between author and narrator is inevitable. In autobiographical writing the narrator's identity is a way in which an author can express the subjective identity he or she chooses to make known. In autobiography, subjectivity is often an experience in which "the ego is orientated around two poles: affirmative self-recognition and the paranoic knowledge of a split subject" (Marcus 218), and the subject is "never more than a fantasy of a unified subject" (Anderson 65). This means that the subject has an outside reference but its representations are not to be understood unambiguously.

The autobiographical subject's self-representation is shaped by the conditions of that individual's subjective conception of him or herself. Frey, as also quoted earlier, explains how his own self-image and hence fictional self-representation came about:

> I made other alterations in my portrayal of myself, most of which portrayed me in ways that made me tougher and more daring and more aggressive than in reality I was, or I am. People cope with adversity in many different ways, ways that are deeply personal. I think one way people cope is by developing a skewed perception of themselves that allows them to overcome and do things they thought they couldn't do

> before. My mistake, and it is one I deeply regret, is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience. ("A Note to the Reader" 2)

A Million Little Pieces' narrator James and the narrative itself are fictional representations created by Frey. As with other works that express what is "subjectively experienced" narration is a method "by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling" (Olney *Metaphors of Self* 30). The creation of such a fictional self is also extrovert and typical of wound culture's "notion of sociality … the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle"(Seltzer "Wound Culture" 2). Frey says: "I wanted to write, in the best-case scenario, a book that would change lives, would help people who where struggling, would inspire them in some way" ("A Note to the Reader" 1). To recreate his recovery process in a fictionalized memoir is therapeutic for Frey, but he also believes that sharing this narrative offers support to others.

Approaching *A Million Little Pieces* in accordance with the theories explored above allowed me to (re-) evaluate the level of subjectivity in the work within the parameters of autobiographical criticism without having to resort to a myopic fact/fiction dichotomy. The two notions of subjectivity are at work in Frey's memoir. As a creative subject Frey can be said to have disobeyed the "intersubjective protocols" of a "community of discourse" (Worthington 89) because of his ambiguity about his authorial intentions concerning his book's genre but his memoir also contains elements that are the result of cultural expectations to which he is subject. This subjectivity has lead to *A Million Little Pieces* as a particular type of autobiographical life writing. James' account is a confessional narrative which entails a particular kind of self-representation of which the protagonist James is the result.

In the following part of my thesis *A Million Little Pieces* will be analyzed as a fictional work of autobiographical life writing that reflects Frey's life experiences through the narrative of James.

3. Fiction in *A Million Little Pieces*

This third chapter aims to demonstrate that *A Million Little Pieces* can be considered as a fictional work. Firstly, the text contains devices that are considered to be typical of fictional literary texts such as invention, the construction of a plot, imagery, metaphor and tropes. Secondly, in accordance with theories of subjectivity and narratology, the issue of narrative reliability will be addressed. The fictitious construction of James is a creative, imaginative act regulated by the course of narration. In this sense, *A Million Little Pieces* locates the truth about its subject in its fictional representations. My analysis is principally text-based, without losing sight of both the fictional and referential connection between Frey the author and James the protagonist and narrator. Lastly, I will explore in particular the meaning of the fictional protagonist James' self-representations in the context of the confessional tradition and the therapeutic significance of narrative and self-representation, which is a more conventional position to assume in autobiographical criticism.

3.1. Formative Features

Literary theories attempt to define autobiography and its parameters. Marcus comments on the developments in autobiographical theory:

> the attempt to fit autobiography out with formal and linguistic pacts and functions violates the freedom and fluidity of self-expression and self-representation. Autobiography lies between 'literature' and 'history' or, perhaps, philosophy, and between fiction and non-fiction; it becomes an acute expression of the already contested distinction between fact and fiction. (229)

Marcus is in favor of an approach to analyzing autobiography that recognizes its possible literary properties. To consider autobiography as a fictional genre opposes a novel-oriented view of prose fiction and instead shifts from theories of the novel to theories of narrative (Marcus 234). In this view "reality and fiction, history and autobiography, are no longer antithetical structures" (Marcus 244). This implies that these categories cannot be distinguished on the strength of conventional generic features. Consequently, the distinction between factual and fictional narratives is invalid, because "fact or reality shares the same form as fiction or narrative" (244). Hayden White remarks in this respect:

> Obviously, the amount of narrative will be greatest in the accounts designed to tell a story … Where the aim in view is the telling of a story, the problem of narrativity turns on the issue whether historical events can be truthfully represented as manifesting the structures and processes of events met with more commonly in certain kinds of 'imaginative' discourses, that is, such fictions as the epic, the folk tale, myth, romance, tragedy, comedy, farce and the like. (White 27)

My examination aims to show that James' narrative is also structured as a fiction.

A Million Little Pieces, as established previously, adequately demonstrates how the genre clause or genre markers are not "unproblematically indicative of generic status or as codifications of an 'autobiographical intention" (Marcus 248). The text contains elements that are considered to be typical of prose fiction and elements considered to be typical of non-fiction. An autobiographical work can abandon the old genre conventions while simultaneously reproducing them and these transgressions can justifiably be interpreted as generic affirmations in disguise. Many works of life writing that would previously not have been considered valid autobiography are now re-evaluated as a result of these shifting limits of genre categories. The appropriation of narrative techniques has brought into existence an array of protean texts, such as *A Million Little Pieces*. This approach to narrative "has

produced a wealth of hybrids which mix fiction, memoir and biography, books which fruitfully explore the border between fact and fantasy" which has resulted in the recently recognized, wide and inclusive category of creative nonfiction proclaimed a "fascinating supergenre" (*The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* 177, subsequent reference *CICW*). It is "simply an evolved term for something that has been with us for some time, but that we called other names such as 'belles lettres', journals, memoirs and essays" (178). The 'new' genre is hardly as innovative as most of its authors would like to present it as. It is equivalent to the concept of "subjective autobiography" which has developed since the eighteenth century, when "an audience of curious citizens encouraging the production of memoirs and autobiographies led to a greater awareness of the structuring of life-accounts and hence to the development of an autobiographical convention" (Marcus 237). This subjective kind of autobiography is characterized by a "collapse or merging of the autobiography into the novel" (236). These works that are now denominated as creative nonfiction are constructed with the same methods as fiction is:

> story-like qualities such as hooking the reader with the first sentence (the device is more permissible than in literary fiction); developing convincing real-life scenes and characters; using linked events and narrative; writing description vividly and tautly; creating and maintaining a believable point of view and setting; and using speech and dialogue compellingly. (*CICW* 178)

In what follows, I will elaborate on these narrative qualities that are fundamental to *A Million Little Pieces* as a work of autobiographical life writing that is also a creative nonfiction novel.

3.1.1. Devices of Narration

The journalists of *The Smoking Gun* may have tried and succeeded to bereave Frey of all authorial credibility but despite their accusation of Frey having produced "outlandish stories" ("TMWCO" 6), they give him unintentional praise for his fictional writing skills.

> When recalling criminal activities, looming prison sentences, and jailhouse rituals, Frey writes with a swaggering machismo and bravado that absolutely crackles. Which is truly impressive considering that, as TSG discovered, he made much of it up. ("TMWCO" 4)

A former student at the Art Institute of Chicago and a relatively successful screenwriter, director and producer of films prior to publishing his memoir, James Frey is well trained in the strategic use of narrative devices. Frey's use of narrative devices can be partly interpreted as his authorial intention, as discussed above, but the devices are also a result of the foundational postmodern belief in narratology: "there is no history apart from the narrative event in which it is told" (Freeman 286). The act of narration can be characterized as "making the disjunct pieces of experience shape themselves to a pre-existing yet always changing form, a followable … story with, in some sense, a beginning, middle and end" (Olney 286). *A Million Little Pieces* can be considered a combination of two forms of autobiography. Firstly, as the "natural or everyday forms of autobiographical discourse" that are "based on a story of development" (Brockmeier 248). As such, the text "shares some features of traditional narrative genres… generally characterized by closed plots, a standardized repertoire of genres, and other common narrative techniques" (248). Secondly, "the constructive forms and stylistic devices used by modernists and post-modernists" are also present in *A Million Little Pieces*, for example in the "fragmentary, fleeting, and open-ended array of events and non-events" (248). These features comprise the "plot of a narrative" that "imposes a meaning on

the events that make up its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events all along" (White 20).

James' narrative begins *in medias res*. On the first page, the twenty-two year old James ingloriously awakens from a blackout.

> I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin. I lift my hand to feel my face. My front four teeth are gone, I have a hole in my cheek, my nose is broken and my eyes are swollen nearly shut. I open them and I look around and I'm in the back of a plane and there's no one near me. I look at my clothes and my clothes are covered with a colorful mixture of spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood. (*AMLP* 1)

James fell from a fire escape and severely damaged his teeth and face. He does not remember exactly what happened, only "bits and pieces" (4), but the friend who brought James to the hospital told his parents that, "he didn't know what [James] was on, but he knew there was a lot of it and he knew it was bad" (4). The accident is a brutal end to his ten years of alcoholism and three years of crack addiction. His parents are taking him to a Minnesota clinic, which is renowned as "the oldest Residential Drug and Alcohol Facility in the World" with the "highest success rate of any Facility in the World" (7). James' rehabilitation will consist of a medical detoxification period that treats his physical addiction and facilitates his withdrawal, after which he will start with a recovery program that includes group sessions and private conversations with counselors and psychologists. James' experiences in the rehabilitation clinic primarily constitute the content of the book. During his stay, his days are nearly indistinguishable and uneventful:

> All around me, People are going about their day. Patients are going to counselling and to therapy, Doctors and Therapists are giving them whatever they need. People are either getting help or giving help and they are all doing it willingly. Their bodies are

> recovering and their minds are recovering and they are rebuilding their lives and they are following the Program and they are trusting the Program. (93)

James' past is dealt with in therapy sessions and conversations and sometimes the narrative is interrupted by dreams and flashbacks. As they are converted into a narrative that James is constructing about his own life in the novel, they take on meaning. This is how narrative, "by emplotment, … can produce the significance of 'configuration' out of the insignificance of 'succession'" (Olney 294). James can leave out events because they do not contribute to his selection of determinative events in his life story. Conversely, he mentions other events that he interprets as "providential, a major link in the chain of his destiny" (317). There is a rationale that underlies James' choice of events. His life course is presented as teleological: a build-up of transgressions that led to addiction which led to more misbehaviour. James' lifestyle is ended by the disastrous accident that is the onset of James' road to recovery and redemption. His process of recovery is marked by experiences and events as well the recall of certain experiences and events that are positioned with the narrative purpose of furthering the action in a dramatized and meaningful manner. James' sense of this teleological meaning behind his life experiences is translated into the structuring use of the plot which is a pattern he perceives to exist from which his life meaning emerges (Olney *Metaphors of Self* 31).

Experiences and events that are highlighted in autobiography are "turning points … episodes in which, as if to underline the power of the agent's intentional states, the narrator attributes a crucial change of stance in the protagonist's story to a belief, a conviction, a thought" (Bruner 30). An example of an event that can seem trivial but that becomes significant is the moment when James is about to give up his rehabilitation and wants to walk out of the clinic. Leonard, a fellow patient who has taken a particular liking to James, gives him advice and convinces him to stay. The insights James gains after making his acquaintance with Leonard are crucial to his recovery, as he gradually begins to regain his self-confidence:

> I have considered my options to be Jail or death. I have never considered quitting to be an option because I have never believed that I could do it. I am scared to death to try. I stare at Leonard. I don't know him. I don't know who he is or what he does or what he has done to arrive at this moment. I don't know why he is here or why he has followed me or why he gives a shit. What I know is his eyes. What I know is an anger, a hardness, a resolve and a truth. (*AMLP* 108)

As yet in the text no additional information is given about Leonard but it is implied that because of his past experiences he is someone James can identify with. From now on Leonard will be his friend and mentor and eventually his adoptive father. It is due to Leonard's support that James begins to take his rehabilitation more seriously. This incident closes off the first of the four chapters, which is an indication that it is an important moment in the structure of the narrative. There are many other such conveniently placed pivotal moments, which critics have perceived as "implausible scenes", "brimming with improbable characters" ("TMWCO" 6). For example at the end of the third chapter James courageously brings Lilly, the girl he falls in love with at the clinic, back to the rehabilitation centre after she has ran away to find drugs. This scene indicates another step in James' recovery. It is again a formal end to a chapter and also a psychological breakthrough for him. A new chapter then begins, in which he makes his confession with a priest and is finally capable of letting go of his past to start new: "I let it [his confession] out slowly. As it leaves me, so does everything I wrote, everything I said, everything I have done. It's gone. All of it" (*AMLP* 407). He also says goodbye to Leonard in this last chapter whom he accepts as his adoptive father. The last scene of the book is equally momentous. James puts himself to the test by intentionally exposing himself to liquor which allows him to finally prove his recovery and strength of character to himself and his family. The plotline is marked with incidents that are explicitly presented as meaningful and which lead to an ending in which James ultimately succeeds in his project of

self-transformation. James ends his narrative with the affirmation: “I touched it and I smelled it and I felt it, but I didn’t drink it. I’m done drinking. Won’t ever do it again” (430). When afterwards his brother asks him to play pool it is symbolic of his attitude towards the rest of his life: “he asks me if I’m ready and I smile and I tell him that I am. He asks me again he wants to make sure. I tell him yes, I’m ready. Yes, I’m ready” (430). The events related in James’ account become meaningful because of their narrative sequence: “a sequential order in time” that “becomes a causal or teleological order of events” (Brockmeier 252). The incidents are only relevant in connection to James’ development, as it is the self in autobiographical discourse that is “the center of the plot and determining the storylines” (250). The plot in *A Million Little Pieces* revolves around James and his struggle to arrive at a point of recovery and self-transformation. James’ achievement at the end of the book is the culmination point of “telos realization” (252) after which his life is apparently no longer susceptible to change: “James has *never* relapsed” (*AMLP* 432, emphasis added). The dénouement is an ending that is hopeful, positive and that functions as a confirmation of the referential connection between James and Frey. As a final turning point it represents “a way in which people free themselves in their self-consciousness from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality. In doing so, they [turning points] mark off the narrator’s consciousness from the protagonist’s and begin closing the gap between the two at the same time.” (Bruner 32).

The “preposterously stereotyped supporting cast” and “relentlessly maudlin plot twists” (“MMD” 325) are the effect of the creative act of narration that attempts to give an internal coherence and culturally followable shape to the content of stories (Olney 297). A way in which this is accomplished is by presenting the secondary characters in the book not as fully developed characters but as functional personages. Among the most important are James’

mother, father and his brother but the most stereotypical descriptions are those of Leonard, his love-interest Lilly and his fellow patients. James describes Leonard as follows:

> He's about fifty, medium height, medium build. He has thick brown hair that is thinning on top and a weathered face that looks as if it has taken a few punches. He's wearing a bright blue-and-yellow silk Hawaiian shirt, small round silver glasses and a huge gold Rolex. (*AMLP* 39)

Further in the text, James says of Leonard's profession: "I don't know what he does for a living, but I know it's not legal and I know he does it well … He is a Criminal of some sort" (*AMLP* 40). Leonard is thus typified as "the cliché of the hardened mobster", who also has "a tender inner core" ("MMD" 326). Lilly is portrayed as another type, the drug-addict:

> Her Mother needed drugs. Her Mother sold her to the man for two hundred dollars. Sold her for an hour and sold her for a lifetime. Sold her virginity for a syringe full of dope. Two hundred dollars for a syringe full of dope.
>
> She tells me about the men after that man. How her Mother sold her regularly and stopped working herself. She tells me about the pain and the misery and the horror. Man after man. Day after day. Violation after violation. There were always syringes full of dope. Paid for with her body. She tells me how she started using them. How she hated them and how they helped her. Man after man. Day after day. Violation after violation. The syringes helped. (*AMLP* 276-277)

In the epilogue Lilly is said to have "committed suicide by hanging in a Halfway House in Chicago … She was found the morning James was released from Jail, and it is believed that she was sober until she died" (431). This information only adds to the tragic yet romanticized part she plays in James' life. The description of his fellow patients is also obviously stereotyped. Their characterization has a rather comedic effect: "Drunks sit together, Cokeheads sit together, Crackheads sit together, Junkies sit together, Pillpoppers sit together

… One group is made of the Hardcore … The other group is made of the Wussies" (88). James' characterization ironically points out the actuality of these stereotypes. In James' depiction of his interactions with them, they enable him to evidence the point he tries to bring across concerning his exceptional character. These passages will be addressed in the more specific discussion of James' self-representation. In other instances these interactions indicate how an event has determined the course of his life. In this sense they constitute the moving forces that progress the plot. This is one of the "modes of emplotment" (White 44) based on a "notion of causation" that is "narratological in that it takes the form of agents acting as if they were characters in a story charged with the task of realizing the possibilities inherent within the 'plot' that links a beginning of a process to its conclusion" (White 150). A good example is James' acquaintance with Lilly. When he meets her for the first time, he is standing in line for his medication. He is instantly affected by her. As they shake hands he thinks "I don't want to let go, but I do" (19). Initially James thinks of her as the perfect girl: "her lips are thick and blood red, though she is not wearing lipstick … her teeth are straight and white, and they are straight in a way that came without braces and white in a way that has nothing to do with toothpaste" (90). James idealizes her to create a reason to better himself, to try and become just as perfect. Lilly is James' main motivation to rehabilitate, so that they can build a future together. Whereas James first says "I told her I didn't have any [plans for the future] and I didn't know what I was going to do" he considers moving to Chicago after leaving the rehabilitation centre because "that is where she is going to be living" (286). After hearing of her past he identifies with her, "this hard, damaged, drug-Addicted Badass Girl" (236), who has become

> more than I expected her to become and more than I was looking for her to become … as I know she is starting to love me, I am starting to love her. I don't care what she's done or who she's done it with, I don't care about whatever demons may be in her

> closet. I care about how she makes me feel and she makes me feel strong and safe and calm and warm and true. (255)

James' portrayal of Lilly changes as he gains self-confidence. He begins to see her in a more realistic light and acknowledges her faults. It makes James want to be strong for her. After Lilly's relapse for instance he decides: "I could still run. Run from jail and run from my past. Run with Lilly run until we're safe and run until we find ourselves a life. Running is still an option, but I don't want to run I have run my entire life I am tired of running … it is a morning full of new beginnings" (386). Such passages are meant to illustrate James' evolution of character and will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.2.2. on self-representation and personal mythology.

Another narrative device is the setting of *A Million Little Pieces*. The clinic is a residential drug and alcohol treatment facility in Minnesota. It is a real, not invented location, which Frey has identified as the reputed Hazelden rehabilitation facility in Minnesota ("TMWCO" 5). Anderson indicates how settings which are enclosed worlds, such as the rehabilitation center, "often operate like little islands with their own rituals, jargons, and system of sanctions and rewards. Such settings can generate stories by having characters as initiates, power grabbers, mutineers, victims and so on" (*CICW* 94-95). One of the first scenes in which James interacts with a fellow patient is an illustration of James' status of initiate. As a newcomer, he has unknowingly taken a seat in a chair which is customarily occupied by another patient. James is practically paralyzed by the effect of his detoxification drugs and the man has the opportunity to treat James as he likes:

> He reaches out and he grips my wrists and he drags me along the floor. He drags me away from the chair and into the corner of the Room and he leaves me lying facedown on the floor. He leans over and he puts his mouth next to my ear.

I could have beat your fucking ass. Remember that. (*AMLP* 14)

This passage sketches James' difficulties to adjust to his new environment. As these incidents succeed each other, however, James slowly positions himself as a respected individual. The image James ultimately conveys of himself is the identity construct he needs to believe in order to recover. This identity construct is superficial in the sense that James, similar to the secondary personages, is also a character of whom only certain dominant aspects are brought to the foreground. The scenes of James' repeated conflicts with Roy, an ex-patient who is now a staff member at the facility, depict both of them in one-dimensional roles. James is portrayed as the victim of Roy's abuse of authority and Roy performs the role of power-grabber. When James has not done his daily duty of cleaning the 'Group Toilets' well enough, Roy instantly seizes his chance:

I turn around. Roy is standing at the door.

You did a shitty job yesterday.

…

They were dirty. Do a better job today or I'm telling on you.

…

I'LL GET YOU THROWN OUT OF HERE ON YOUR FUCKING ASS, YOU LITTLE SHIT.

I reach up and I grab Roy by the throat and I squeeze him and I throw him against the wall of the Bathroom and he hits with a thud and starts screaming.

…

HOW CLEAN ARE THEY NOW MOTHERFUCKER? (49-50)

As the story progresses James becomes more and more esteemed among his fellow patients and even feared by some. At one point Leonard tells him: "I'm not scared of anyone and you scare the shit out of me. Ed and Ted won't eat with me anymore 'cause they're worried that

you might snap on them … As much as I admire it in a certain sense, it's no good being the way you are" (106). This statement is presented by James as Leonard's opinion but as it is narrated by James it is an example of his self-representation as an "Alcoholic … Drug Addict and … Criminal" (62), the dangerous and violent individual out of wound culture's repertoire.

Another narrative technique in *A Million Little Pieces* is the use of gaps. A memory that James seems to have repressed but then relives due to the stimuli of his new environment in the treatment center is the encounter with a homosexual Catholic priest in Paris who makes an attempt at physical contact to which James reacts with brute force, leaving the priest severely injured. It is an instance in which James above all projects an image of himself as aggressive and dangerous. Not only is James a victim, he is also "a man with the potential to inflict wounds" (Hamilton "MMD" 325). This paradoxical aspect of his self-representation will be addressed in chapter 3.2.2. When James formulates his imaginary obituary (*AMLP* 93) he makes no mention of the incident. Later on, when he is given the assignment to write down his 'Inventory', there is the suggestion of a withheld recollection: "I look down, think, remember" (367). After finishing his 'Inventory', James revises:

> I read the pages. Slowly and carefully I read them. As I do, I think about whether I am leaving anything out is there anything I have forgotten is there anything I'm scared to face or acknowledge, is there anything I am scared to admit. I want to come to terms with my past and leave it behind me is there anything I have forgotten left out is there anything that scares me. There is one thing. One thing that haunts me from page one to page twenty-two. I have never spoken of it. I have never told another Person what I did to that man, how violently out of control I was, how badly I hurt him. It haunts me. (397)

The incident with the priest is then included in his narrative, but James does not write down the incident along with his other divulgences. He makes his 'Admission' orally, administered by a priest. James undergoes the experiences all over again: "I relive them in my mind. Each and every one of them. I relive them in my mind … the Fury is up up up. I feel what I felt that night" (404-405). Within the framework of James' narrative in the confessional mode, his 'Admission' is a crucial moment at the end of James' process of reform and regeneration, as it closes off his sinful past.

Other flashbacks are of a short, fragmentary nature and disrupt the continuity of the narrative by their seemingly arbitrary frequency. These scenes do not follow the chronology of the story but contribute to the plot because they are part of the "structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole" (White 9). These flashbacks are also mainly important for James' characterization, as they show the various aspects of his personality, from his self-destructive behaviour to his romantic disposition. The flashbacks sometimes overtake James without any immediate provocation. There is often no connection with the scenes in which they occur. For example, they befall James in the shower (*AMLP* 38; 79), when he has trivial conversations with other characters (60) or when he wants to clear his mind and purposely tries not to think about anything at all by taking a walk (114). However, there is a series of three flashbacks that are interconnected. They are about a girl with whom James was deeply in love but who left him because of his drug use and illegal activities. They are written in a simple style that gives the impression of an objective recording. The sense of nervous energy that the following passage conveys characterizes James as an adolescent with a negative self-image and low self-esteem which are both cause and effect of his ineptitude at normal social interaction with the opposite sex:

> I didn't know Lucinda and I didn't know she lived with Lucinda and I couldn't speak and she was standing there. She was standing there.
>
> …
>
> I started to open my mouth and my mouth didn't work and my heart was pounding and my hands were shaking and I felt dizzy and excited and scared and insignificant. (60)

James experiences this flashback when he is looking out the car window on the way to the dentist on one of his first days at the rehabilitation center and thus suspends the continuation of that day's description. Another manner in which the continuity of the narrative is interrupted is by the insertion of James' nightmares. James recounts having a "User Dream" (53) four times. One of his counselors Ken explains: "When Alcoholics and Addicts stop drinking and using drugs, their subconscious minds still crave them. That craving is sometimes manifested in dreams that can seem startlingly real and, in a sense, are real" (53). The frequency and intensity of these dreams indicate James' progress towards recovery. The position of these dreams in the narrative mirrors this process and thus provides a meaningful structure. The first two dreams occur in the first chapter, not too far apart in time (46; 83). The second chapter is comparatively uneventful and makes no mention of such a nightmare, while the third and fourth dreams are strategically placed at the beginning of the third and fourth chapter. The dreams are progressively shorter and less powerful, but in the last one James uses drugs with Lilly, which signifies how much his recovery is connected with hers.

The examination James' narrative reveals that it is structured according to the principles of "autobiographical storytelling, both natural and fictional" (Brockmeier 252). *A Million Little Pieces* "starts in traditional fashion with a concrete frame story or preliminary narrative to bind the story of a life into the present situation … something extraordinary has occurred, a turning point in life, success or crisis" (252). This is the frame story of James' stay at the

rehabilitation centre after his disastrous accident. James' account is regulated by the "retrospective teleology ... an implicit consequence of this [teleological construction of linear time] transformation" (252) in autobiographical narrative. The particular sequence of events which is the plot of the narrative, suggests a significance that goes beyond their literal meaning. The formal structure therefore enhances the content of the narrative.

The narrative structure is also the result of Frey's deliberate effort to construct a skillfully crafted story. As quoted previously he avows: "I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require" ("a note to the reader" 2). I support the mitigated deconstructionist view that the author is autonomous and capable of individual expression. The use of these narrative devices are also the result of Frey's authorial intention, as he states he wanted to produce a work that could match itself to for example "On the Road or Tropic of Cancer" which he describes as "memoirs containing fictional elements" ("BSF" 3).

3.1.2. Stylistic Devices

The style of a work is a second formative feature that determines what genre a book is perceived to belong to. Works of fiction are traditionally allowed more freedom concerning the way language is used. This aspect of fictional works is also at work in James' narrative, which contains some conspicuous syntactic and typographic characteristics. The many raving reviews of *A Million Little Pieces* almost without exception signal the book's singular style of writing. The reviewers at *Kirkus Reviews* for example express their appreciation as follows:

> Our acerbic narrator conveys urgency and youthful spirit with an angry, clinical tone and some initially off-putting prose tics – irregular paragraph breaks, unpunctuated

> dialogue, scattered capitalization, few commas – that ultimately striking accruals of verisimilitude and plausible human portraits. ("A Million Little Pieces")

James' narrative is marked by idiosyncratic stylistic features in the punctuation and syntax of his prose that can be connected to his personality and his mental constitution as a recovering yet still addicted individual. In particular the distress of kicking his habits is conveyed and also the anxiety of his thoughts. Not all sentences are grammatically correct: "How I have arrived in this place at this moment on this day with this feeling history future problems life this horrible fucked-up good-for-nothing waste of a life how" (*AMLP* 170). Most sentences are asyndetic: "Going back means leaving her hand her body her eyes her lips her pale skin her hair long and black her hair long and black" (314). There is a lack of punctuation marks and except for full stops, the majority of sentences are written without pauses. The phrases continue at a steady pace owing to the use of coordinating conjunctions such as 'and':

> I stand and I open the door and I step out and I'm still smiling and I walk back toward my Room and John asks me if I want to play cards and I tell him I haven't slept since yesterday and I'm tired but I'll play another time and he says okay. I go back to my room and I'm still smiling and I climb into bed and I pick up the books my Brother gave me. (143)

This passage also illustrates the capitalization of certain words. The word 'room' is capitalized seemingly arbitrarily, while throughout the book the designations for family members, 'Brother', 'Father' and 'Mother' unvaryingly appear with a capital letter. Other words that are consistently capitalized are, among others: 'Clinic', 'Lecture', 'Addict', 'Alcoholic', 'Criminal', 'Home', 'Patient', 'Lawyer', 'Prison'. This capitalization has the effect of bestowing these words with a greater meaning than usual:

> Normal people have Jobs … when it was over they would go Home and they would be in a condition to walk or to drive, and if they were lucky, they would have a Wife to kiss or a sleeping Child to check and they would go to bed. (332)

These capitalized concepts are ordinary but to a recovering addict for whom normalcy is hard to attain, the capitalization of these words conveys the sanctity their emotional meaning holds to James. In the context of the tendency of the addict to exaggerate and self-aggrandize, as will be further discussed in 3.2.2., the capitalized words give James' opinions a quality of inviolability since James is supposedly more knowledgeable on the subject of drugs:

> They don't sell crack in Mansions or fancy Department Stores and you don't go to Luxury Hotels or Country Clubs to smoke it … There will be Dealers and Addicts and Criminals and Whores and Pimps and Killers and Slaves. (102)

Sometimes the significance of a statement is made more explicit typologically, for instance by the use of bold type:

> I pick up the beautiful Black crayon and I write **I** in a large, simple, block style, starting at the top of the page and finishing at the bottom, crossing over and ignoring any and all of the outlined figures. On the next page I write **Don't.** On each following page I write **Need This Bullshit To Know I'm Out Of Control.** (200)

It can also be an indication of emphatic speech, yelling or screaming:

> Lincoln smiles, raises his voice.
>
> Leonard.
>
> He does it again, but louder.
>
> **Leonard.**
>
> He yells.
>
> **LEONARD.** (374)

The absolute absence of dialogue tags and quotation marks is another remarkable feature of the text. There is no formal distinction between a passage that is an expression of James' thoughts, a passage that is purely dialogue or a passage that is plain narration. The effect of seemingly showing and not of telling obscures the fact that it is a narrator's imaginary point of view that is offered, rather than an objective recording of real events.

These unmarked transitions also contribute to the book's uniform and relatively monolithic constitution. The division of the chapters by means of lay-out and the partitions within these larger unities, are another unconventional element in the structural arrangement of *A Million Little Pieces*. The text is divided into four 'chapters' and are preceded, not by a title or number, but by a graphic image; a scribble or doodle of sorts. On the page with the copyright and publishing information, it is identified as "interior art by Terry Karydes" (n.pag). This striking feature interrupts the text. Considering its holographic semblance I would posit that the scribble is intended to evoke the original manuscript:

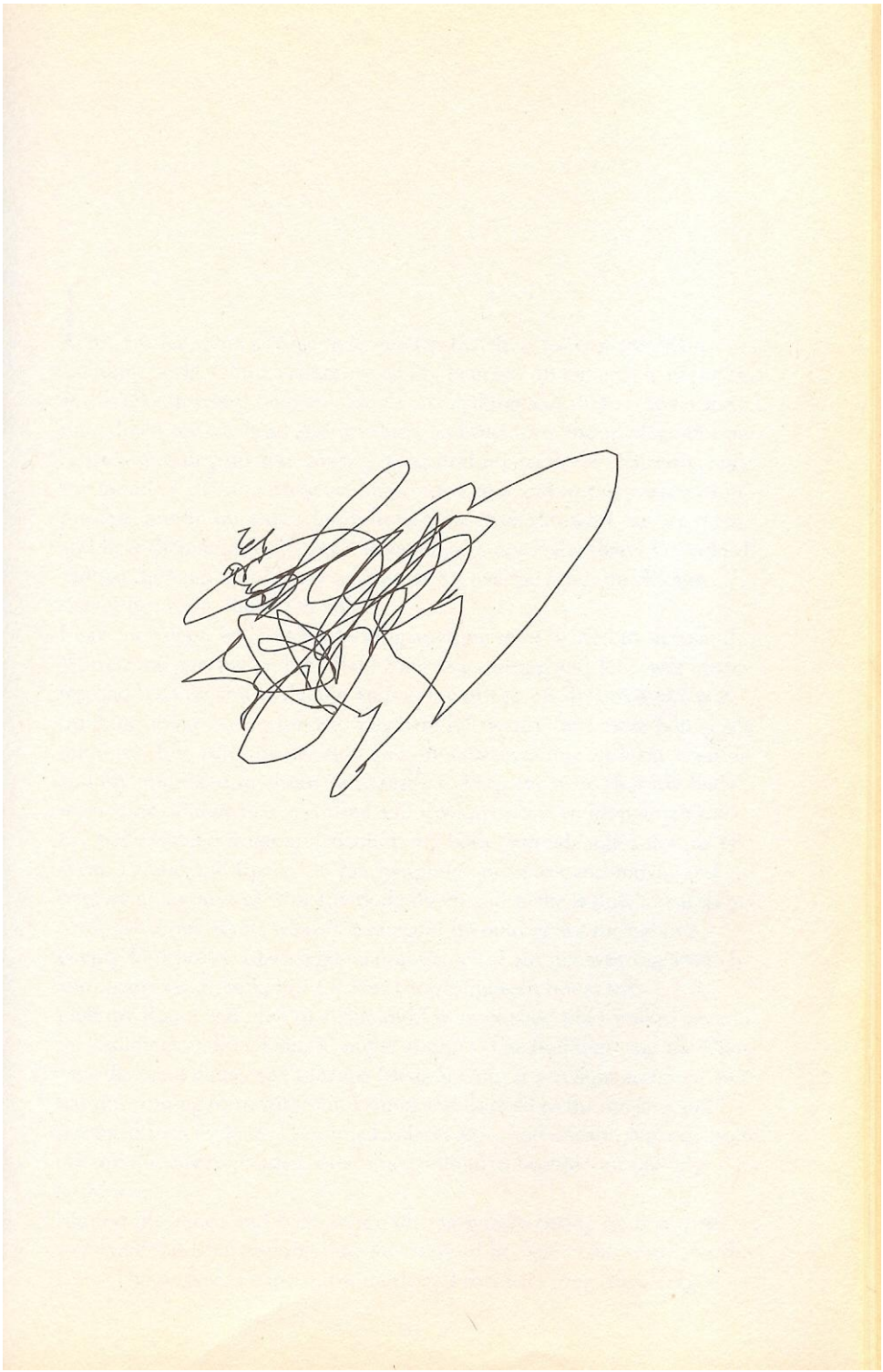

Fig. 1. Interior art by Terry Karydes. (*AMLP* 111).

The tangible existence of the text is, then, supposed to bring assurance and guarantee the genuine nature of the account. Another or supplementary interpretation of the indeterminable scribble is the view that it is a symbolic rendition of James' attempt to write down his experiences. The instrument by which we convey verbal images, language itself, can fall short when chronicling something as complex as a life. The scribble is then testimony to his frustrating efforts and perhaps failure to communicate his life story, thus reflecting the deconstructionist problematic of adequate representation.

A prominent stylistic feature of *A Million Little Pieces* is the use of repetition. Numerous sentences begin with the personal pronoun 'I', and are further built up of a sequence of short, similarly formed constituents: "I get dressed and I make the coffee and I pour myself a cup and I drink it … I change and I get another cup of coffee and I walk to breakfast and I get some oatmeal and I cover it with sugar" (161). This technique is termed "anaphora, the repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses for rhetorical effect" (*CIC W* 124). This is a logical consequence of the point of view of a story told by a first-person narrator and in combination with other words it has the effect of stalling the dramatic action. In the following example, the word 'alone' is repeated to convey the monotony of his continuous self-deprecation:

> I am alone. Alone here and alone in the world. Alone in my heart and alone in my mind. Alone everywhere, all the time, for as long as I can remember. Alone with my family, alone with my friends, alone in a Room full of People. Alone when I wake, alone through each awful day, alone when I finally meet the blackness. I am alone in my horror. Alone in my horror. (*AMLP* 79)

At a certain point in the text there is a powerful passage that combines the repetition of words and fragmented incomplete sentences:

> The screams soak in and they echo, echo, echo and I lie back and the jackets get wet and the back of my head gets wet and I close my eyes and I listen and I think. I allow myself to feel to feel completely and the feeling brings lucid, linear streams of thought and image and they run through and out and back and through and out and back. They run through and out and back and they run. (159-160)

The repetition of certain images and situations, but also of single sentences and words is an example of how the narrative code draws from poetic discourse by employing a "patterning … of the rhythms and repetitions of motific structures that aggregate into plot structures" (White 43). The meaning that is produced conveys primarily the compulsiveness of James' thoughts. It is perhaps a way in which James tries to convince himself of his goals, by constantly reminding himself that it is this spiritual focus on himself which he strives for. The repetitions also convey the restlessness of James' mind, for example when he relates a 'User Dream':

> Any pretense of experiencing pleasure disappears … I grab rocks, stuff the pipe, hit. I grab rocks, stuff the pipe, hit. I grab rocks, stuff the pipe, hit …
>
> Breathe in, breathe out, go faster and faster and faster and faster. (46-47)

The unsatisfactory effect of the alcohol and drugs does not decrease his cravings for them in the dream and causes him to use them against his own liking or better judgment. Every time James has the urge to use intoxicating substances, the style of writing takes on this nervous, jarring pitch:

> The Fury takes over … I want something anything whatever as much as I can. Want need want need I want need enough to kill annihilate make me lose make me forget dull the motherfucking pain give me the darkest darkness the blackest blackness the deepest deepest deespest most horrible fucking hole. Goddamn it to fucking Hell, give it to me. Put me in the fucking hole. (170-171)

James' thoughts are engrossed with drugs and also dominated by an obstinately negative self-image. His exaggerated yet pertinacious belief in his own malevolence is reflected by the phrase "I am an Alcoholic and I am a Drug Addict and I am a Criminal" (62) which is repeated up to eight times in the book. This motif reinforces the significance of James' ability to be the opposite of who he used to be.

Importantly, James' narrative is written in the verbal form of the present tense. The " 'present-tense' aspect of autobiography has to do with … 'evaluation' – the task of placing those sequential events in terms of a meaningful context" (Bruner 29). This formal choice is part of the narrative technique of plot. It clarifies how autobiography is "not only about the past … if it is to bring the protagonist up to the present, it must deal with the present as well as the past" (29). The autobiography therefore establishes a teleological connection between James' past and present. The use of the present tense also "creates a strong sense of immediacy" (*CICW* 294) and conveys the tedium of his stay in the rehabilitation center:

> I get up and I open the door and I see I'm in the Medical Unit. I get in line and I go about my day … I take my antibiotics and they go down easier than they have been going down and I walk through the clean bright empty Halls to the Dining Hall. As I enter the glass Corridor I see that I am late and I see People look up and stare at me and I ignore them and I get a bowl of gray mushy oatmeal and I dump a large pile of sugar on top of it and I find a place at an empty table and I sit down. (*AMLP* 56)

Especially when James experiences moments of clarity, the run-on sentences are reminiscent of 'stream of consciousness', a kind of writing which reflects "the ceaseless, random flow of thoughts, ideas, memories and fantasies in people's minds" (*CICW* 122).

> Another day another cycle here gone back tomorrow gone again … The Lake is the same as it is each day the same. Sheets of ice, life below, birds above. Noise

> destroying silence, silence overwhelming noise. Reflections slowly move along the water distorting what is real the object or the image. They are both real and it is all real. It all is in front of me life is in front of me and behind me above me below me surrounding me. I can see it and feel it and hear it and touch it. Inside and outside. (*AMLP* 229)

3.2. Narrative Reliability and Self-Representation

The previous chapter identifies several features that justify a view of *A Million Little Pieces* as a fictional autobiographical narrative. In the narratological and deconstructionist methods of theories that I have used as a methodological framework for my analysis that I have suggested so far, representation is considered as quasi-synonymous with constructing reality (Rimmon-Kenan 17). The view that "narrative imposes unity and meaning on life" implies that "the identity of the self is a function of 'linkages' that somehow get made between the discrete episodes of experience: identity … is constructed" (Freeman 295). If narration is inadequate as an attempt at objective representation then therefore a narrator is unreliable because representation is ultimately fictive. The identity constructs of all a narrative's characters, are multiple and variable, "produced, and re-produced anew" (290). For autobiographical life writing this means that in the narrative process of "teleological linearization", there takes place "a kind of transformation" that "shapes our ideas of self and identity" (Brockmeier 253). Before moving on to a discussion of *A Million Little Pieces* that is largely text- and narrator-based, I would like to emphasize that "in the process of deconstructing the possibility of representation as well as of literal meaning … it would be quite foolish to assume that one can lightheartedly move away from the constraint of referential meaning" (Rimmon-Kenan 15). In the case of autobiographical life writing this means that in the first place there exists a coreferential relationship between author and narrator even though it will be inevitably biased

because of the subjectivity of the representation. Representation is considered possible even if it is in a limited sense and even more: "representation is everywhere, but its meaning is completely changed" and shifted to the "plural" (17). There are thus multiple possible representations of a referent. This chapter explores *A Million Little Pieces'* metaphorical representations. A narrative "endows sets of real events with the kinds of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature", which makes it a "product of *allegoresis*" (White 45, original italics). The representation of the narrator is also allegorical in this sense. The representation of the primary referent in autobiographical life writing, the narrator, produces a meaning that goes beyond a literal representation of the author. In the originally deconstructionist but now general perspective in autobiographical criticism

> the 'self' is only discovered through its writing of itself and only exists as an effect of writing … 'fictions' – the stories that the individual constructs about his or her life and identity – are to be understood as the truth of that life or self: the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (Marcus 243)

In relation to the subjectivity of his narrative, it is significant that James seems convinced of the correctness of his recollections. Early on he says : "It has always been a fault of mine. I hold my memory" (*AMLP* 15). His accounts are often preceded by claims that his memory is accurate:

> I climb into bed and I climb under the covers and I close my eyes and I try to remember. Eight days ago I was in North Carolina. I remember picking up a bottle and a pipe and deciding to go for a drive … I remember a House, a Bar, some crack, some glue. I remember screaming. I remember crying. (21)

James' self- representational project is a fitting example of an "autobiography in which 'I' is both subject and object, standing in for past and present selves", as it "serves to confirm the

prerogatives of the present 'I', which describes how it became what it is out of what it was" (Marcus 195). As will be discussed in the following examination of James' self-representations, the main significance of the metaphors is the construction of James' identity. Olney, a traditionalist but narratologically inclined autobiographical theorist writes about "metaphoric creation in autobiography":

> the self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we "know" the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing. (Olney *Metaphors of Self* 34)

James is an unreliable narrator because his representations are subjective self-conceptions. Their meanings can be understood, but, as "understanding something does not mean accepting or believing it; in fact, understanding is a prior condition for the possibility of … disbelief" (Worthington 81), James' self-representations are not necessarily to be believed in. Initially James thought of himself: "I am an Alcoholic and I am a Drug Addict and I am a Criminal" (*AMLP* 62), and did not think himself capable of being anything else. He admits: "I have no self-confidence, no self-esteem, no sense of self-worth. My sense of self-preservation was gone a long time ago" (52). He progresses to finally think: "if I hold on I will be fine. I know I am strong. I know I am strong enough to hold on until the fear goes away. I believe this in my heart" (417). In order to convey this message of self-transformation convincingly, James draws on various conventions, images and tropes that aggrandize the transformation of the personality traits that he attributes to himself. The difference between his former and present self emphasizes the magnitude of his decision to stand by his nonconformist beliefs and his subsequently achieved recovery. The character that James constructs is inevitably mediated

due to language but it is also based on an exaggerated image aimed at confirming a process of self-actualization which makes James unreliable as a narrator.

All secondary characters are shown through James' eyes. Throughout the book, only James' perspective is given as he is both protagonist and first-person narrator. James' narrative is not validated or contradicted by other viewpoints in the book. As a result, a limited amount of neutral information is available. On the occasion of a lengthy enumeration of all his vices and wrongs, James assures himself of the truthfulness of his exposition:

> In *my mind* my obituary is done. It is done and it is right. It tells the truth, and as awful as it may be, the truth is what matters. It is what I should be remembered by, if I am remembered at all. Remember the truth. It is all that matters. (*AMLP* 95 emphasis added)

This statement expresses James' belief his subjective truth and his conviction of the constancy and veracity of his memories. With truthfulness as a criterion and not referentiality in the traditional sense James can be considered reliable as a narrator because, in a remarkably similar wording as the epigraph to this thesis, Olney writes "in any piece of life-writing … reference … is never to events of the past but to memories of those events" (7). In addition, "accuracy of recall is less important than the reconstruction of the past in the present of memory and/or writing" (Marcus 196). This perspective on representation rejects the claim that autobiography should have as its principal concern referentiality. James' account is drawn from what can be called "symbolic memory … the process by which man not only repeats his past experience but also reconstructs his experience" (Olney *Metaphors of Self* 37). Since "one can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being imaginary" (White 57), the question of James' reliability as a narrator becomes to an extent superfluous. His subjective truth is what matters to interpret the significance of his narrative, which is why all James' statements can be accepted as truths.

In *A Million Little Pieces* there are a number of aspects to James' personality that are given prominence. To name a few, there is his initial weakness and insecurity, his propensity for transgression and defiance, his growing self-possession and his capacity for bravery. The composite of all these traits adds up to the fictive character James, who can be interpreted as a symbolical or metaphorical rendering of Frey's own image of himself – or of how he wishes to be perceived. Autobiographical writing is a process of "'specular moments' when an author becomes the subject of his own understanding" in which "he must also depend on the trope or rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia or personification", because he is "confronted once again by the inevitably rhetorical nature of language" (Anderson 23). Frey's personification is the metaphorical protagonist and narrator James. In the following subchapters I will interpret the self-representation of James against the background of the confessional tradition and the psychological coping mechanism of creating a personal mythology.

3.2.1. Self-Representation in the Confessional Mode

The genre of "literary figuration" (White 47) that Frey models his life experiences after is that of the "master narrative of Christian redemptionism" (151). It can be found in confessions and stories about religious conversions of the sort described by Augustine. *A Million Little Pieces* contains many elements that are manifestly derived from the traditional confessional modes of writing. As mentioned previously, scholars regard Augustine's *Confessions* as the origin of modern Western autobiography, granting it the status of an exemplary text. The confession is typical to the paradigm of the autobiographical genre, a "crucial narrative design where incidents, trivial in themselves, become representative moments in the growth of a personality" (Anderson 19).

What happens in *A Million Little Pieces* is like a conversion. Hayden White explains: "willing backward occurs when we rearrange accounts of events in the past that have been emplotted in a given way, in order to endow them with different meaning or to draw from the new emplotment reasons for acting differently in the future" (150). During his stay at the rehabilitation clinic James undergoes an evolution analogous to the cathartic process described in the model texts of conversion, after which James' decision to reform results in radically different behaviour. His addictions and missteps can be regarded as the equivalent of the sins in confessional texts. In these narratives, the sinners "have assumed or had imposed on them some kind of penitential exercises" which is how James' stay at the treatment center can also be considered. Finally, James has also "participated in some ecclesiastical ritual performed with the aid of priests who pronounce the penitents absolved from sin" (116), namely his final 'Admission' administered by a priest. James' mental distress is revealed in passages that show his soul-searching and his struggle for reformation:

> Waves of emotion begin streaming through me and I can feel the welling of tears. Everything and everything that I know and that I am and everything that I've done begins flashing in front of my eyes. My past, my present, my future. My friends, my enemies, my friends who became enemies. Where I've lived, where I've been, what I've seen, what I've done. What I've ruined and destroyed.
>
> I start to cry. Tears begin running down my face and quiet sobs escape me. I don't know what I'm doing and I don't know why I'm here and I don't know how things ever got this bad. I try to find answers but they aren't there. I'm too fucked up to have answers. I'm too fucked up for anything. (*AMLP* 48)

As one of the finishing steps of his recovery program James is asked to make "a searching and fearless Inventory" of himself in which he is supposed to admit "to God, to ourselves, and to

another Human Being the exact nature of our wrongs" (367). The inclusion of this religious element conforms to the traditional convention in confessional autobiography to direct oneself to a higher power. The form is conventional, but instead of addressing God, James focuses on himself. His confessional narrative is more accurately defined as "post-confessional", as James' "individual ego takes center stage rather than God" (Freeman 285). James describes his confession as

> all that I have done and all that I have done that was wrong … Twenty-two pages filled with my wrongs, my mistakes, my lapses in judgment and my bad decisions. Twenty-two pages filled with my anger, rage, addiction, self-hatred and Fury. Twenty-two pages documenting my disgraceful, embarrassing and pathetic life. (*AMLP* 394-397)

The parts of his life that are emphasized are the ones in which he commits actions comparable to the sins and trespasses recounted in confessional narratives. They are supposedly representative of James' usual behaviour. At a time when alcohol and drugs were not yet an issue, James claims to being "bad even then, as young as I can remember … I was four. Hit a boy with a schoolbag full of books and broke his nose … I was seven. Stole a pack of menthol cigarettes … Smoked them and threw up" (394). The age of ten was apparently when he

> started to lose control. Thinking back it seems like maybe I didn't do the things I did, that someone else did them and I just watched. I wish it were so. I started to lose control at ten. Snuck out of the house and got drunk. Stole liquor from my Parents more times than I can count or remember … At twelve the memories start to lose themselves in a haze of liquor and drugs. At twelve my life was blurred. (395)

James' ensuing teenage years were "more of the same. Drinking and drugs. Sneaking out and vandalizing. The level of my addictions grew, the level of my self-hatred grew, the level of my destructions grew" (396). His erratic behaviour led to eleven arrests by the age of

nineteen. In college he was under investigation by the police and at the time of his admittance to the treatment facility the amount of arrests had climbed to fourteen and he was wanted in three states ("TMWCO" 4). In a manner characteristic to the confessional mode of life writing, James' life experiences are significant in that "retrospectively, he picks out those [events] which reveal a providential design … or illustrate his extreme sinfulness, later to be redeemed" (Anderson 29). The exploits James recounts almost always involve him displaying his former depraved ways: "the truly horrible Person" (*AMLP* 263) he was.

Augustine often combines fact and fiction in his account of his life experiences, and yet their truthfulness is not contested. In fact, theorists have pointed out the literary motifs present in many scenes, explaining them as the result of experiences that are "*from the moment itself* an act of literary interpretation" (Anderson 24). Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, and his intentional use of literary devices is therefore accepted as rather self-evident and valued positively. As I have proposed in subchapter 3.1, Frey's artistic schooling and early career in the entertainment industry has similarly directed many self-conscious aspects of James' narrative. As shown above, a comparison of both texts reveals some interesting similarities between various aspects of the nature and representation of events. They both address themes conventional to the confession and the incidents related in the text are always a selection of life experiences which are then converted into a coherent story. Both Augustine and Frey pick out incidents that specifically demonstrate the deplorable condition of their lives and character. Childhood experiences in particular serve as proof for their deeply ingrained waywardness. Anderson draws attention to a passage in which a series of events occur, a number of decisive moments propelling Augustine's development toward conversion. They are memories that have burdened him with feelings of sin and shame. One of these memories relates Augustine stealing pears as a young boy. Anderson remarks that

> what seems particularly shameful in retrospect about this apparently minor episode is its sheer wilfulness. He steals the pears neither from need nor greed … Augustine describes himself as delighting in transgression for its own sake … "it was only my own love of mischief that made me do it". (21)

The childhood memories that James relates are of a similar nature. He is seemingly unrepentant:

> As I write the wrongs of my early childhood, most of them make me laugh. They were stupid, the actions of a kid who didn't know any better, or who didn't give a fuck if he did know better. I write four pages of them. Things I did. They make me laugh. (*AMLP* 395)

Although James feels relief after confessing, he does not reform out of a feeling of obligation towards a higher power or because he feels particularly sorry. The focus is always on the fact that he makes his own decisions, with full conviction, whether they are bad or good. In this sense, the correspondence between *A Million Little Pieces* and the confessional models lies mostly in the narrativization. James' narrative is an example of a discourse that

> directs the reader's attention to a secondary referent, different in kind from the events that make up the primary referent, namely, the plot structures of the various story types cultivated in a given culture. When the reader recognizes the story … he can be said to have comprehended the meaning … (White 43)

In the case of *A Million Little Pieces*, the story that can be recognized is that of a secular sinner. The self-representation of the subject in James' and Augustine's narrative emphasizes their transgressive character traits and are both declared in the form of confessions. The meaning of James' narrative, however, is more directed upon his personal accomplishment, independent from any imposed doctrine.

3.2.2. Self-representation as a Personal Mythology

James' narration of his achievement of battling his addictions by simply exerting willpower gains a specific significance because of its construction. The meaning of the plot of James' narrative is especially exemplary of "the seizure … of a past in such a way as to define the present as a fulfillment rather than as an effect" (White 146). The narrativization of James' life experiences can be seen as "a sequence of historical events so as to reveal every thing early in it as a prefiguration of a project to be realized in some future … a specific kind of human agency" (149). In the case of autobiographical life writing, that human agent is the author who creates a fictional self and the "narrative is itself the source of the self's identity" (Freeman 296). I have proposed that James is a referential and fictional representation of Frey. As autobiography is where "we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts and place in the world" (Bruner 25), this process of self-creation is one in which "identity … is constructed … this implies … that the identity of the self is *also* to be regarded as a fictive imposition … and identity, like narrative, becomes relegated to the status of an imaginary creation" (Freeman 295). *A Million Little Pieces* emphasizes James' process of "recovery, personal transformation and heroic self-reliance" (Hamilton "MMD" 324) in which he "constructs himself as a paragon of independence – honest, tough and clear-eyed, blaming no one, a rugged individualist" (325). It is this self-representational character of James that functions as a personal mythology to Frey. The story James narrates is structured, as I have demonstrated in 3.1.1. as a teleological plot with a culmination point that creates an image of James as an exceptional individual. This manner of self-representation is typical for our "wound culture" in that it stresses James as "troubled, swaggering, prone to violence, intimate with death" but at the same time "in hot pursuit of a radically autonomous selfhood"

(Hamilton "MMD" 324). To represent himself in this manner is a way in which Frey can deal with his past and fashion himself a future.

Frey wrote *A Million Little Pieces* about three years after finishing his rehabilitation program successfully. During this emotionally difficult time, he tried to build a new life free of addiction. Regarding this period he recalls: "I first sat down to write the book in the spring of 1997. I wrote what is now the first forty pages of it. I stopped because I didn't feel ready to continue to do it, didn't think I was ready to express some of the trauma I had experienced. I started again in the fall of 2000" ("A Note to the Reader" 1). Frey's mention of trauma is significant for the meaning of his memoir as a whole, as "our vocabularies about extreme experiences are biased toward descriptions of trauma" (Gilmore 32). The popularized concept of trauma is used to interpret narratives that relate unconventional experiences since "the term has become metaphorical even as its clinical significance persists, contributing to the increasingly psychologized and medicalized explanations for behavior" (Farrell *x*). Seltzer writes: "the popular understanding of trauma makes the binding of trauma to representation clear enough" ("Wound Culture" 10). In his narrative, James approaches the medicalized explanation for his addictions in a remarkable way. He reports the results of his MMPI-2 test:

> the second edition of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. It's an empirically based assessment of Adult Psychopathology used by Clinicians to assist with the diagnoses of mental disorders and the selection of appropriate treatment. It can also provide Clinicians or appropriate Interpretive Personnel with a general psychological assessment of any given individual … It is a standardized and widely uses test and is generally considered the best universal diagnostic tool currently available. (*AMLP* 147-148)

It seems that Frey is well aware of theories of psychology that work with personality and behaviour profiles, and I propose that he deliberately uses this knowledge to strengthen the realism of his representation of James as a psychologically troubled individual. James' counsellor Joanne tells him that according to the test:

> You're depressed. You have very low self-esteem. You're confrontational and tend to be aggressive, you sometimes react to confrontation with violence. You engage in self-defeating behaviours, you have a low tolerance for frustration, you internalize stress and deal with it through a process of self-destruction. You're irresponsible, resentful, manipulative, hostile and you have a psychological predisposition to addiction. (148)

The test is supposed to give "definitive evidence of character" (Hamilton "MMI" 232) and thus James' mention of this scientific frame as a possible and valid explanation for his behaviour makes it more admirable of him to have beaten his addictions. The psychological dimension to his addiction and rehabilitation is central to illustrate the mythological proportions of James' personality. For instance, James rejects the biological determinism of Alcoholics Anonymous' concept of addiction . The possibility that James' alcoholism is a genetic disease is supported by his parents who tell him about his grandfather's drinking problem, but James does not want to accept a medical theory as an excuse for his behaviour. James expresses his unconventional mentality in the conversations he has with his parents and his counsellor Joanne. They characterize James hyperbolically as possessing an almost superhuman willpower. One of the other counsellors, Lincoln, points out to James after he has rescued Lilly: "you aren't supposed to be able to do what you did" (*AMLP* 362). James simply replies: "Just one rule: don't do it. No matter what happens no matter how bad I want it, don't do it"(362). James attributes his successful first refusal to use drugs to this determination and strength of character. Seltzer points out this indicative trait of self-representation by the addict as it being "the formula for male self-making" (Seltzer 90) which in the "culture of narcissism

and self-inflation" is simultaneously and paradoxically "a failure of distance with respect to representation", as "reality and fantasy change places" (114). The fictitious self-representational image is "a prominent type in the literary canon" ("MMD" 324) who fits Seltzer's description of that certain character which "wound culture" generates:

> the injured soul who overcomes daunting challenges, manages to heal, grow strong, and flourish, and who brings his pain and redemption to the public as abject confession and spiritual guide. (325)

It is a fictitious construct that reflects the addict's psychological need for an identity that provides both a reason for his past behavior and explains the realization of his current mentality . The "mythos" of this exaggerated self-image thus reflects "a set of beliefs or ideology" ("MMI" 233). Frey has admitted to creating a certain image of himself and has recognized psychological reasons for creating a fictionalized and exaggerated image of himself as previously quoted from 'A Note to the Reader'. He has admitted: "I was in rehab. I am a drug addict. I am an alcoholic. I embellished. I exaggerated" ("BSF" 3). Lev Grossman is one of the few amongst Frey's critics to allow for this reading of *A Million Little Pieces*. He estimates:

> Nobody questions that Frey was an alcoholic and a drug addict. And one of the habits addicts pick up is bending and breaking the truth on a regular, routine basis. If you look at the distortions in Frey's book not as acts of cynical calculation or self-aggrandizement but as symptoms of his disease, they have a pathos to them. If Frey is still lying, if he can't face his life as he lived it, he's not whole yet. Redemption is a wonderful thing, but it's possible that the man whose life became A Million Little Pieces may not have quite put himself back together again. ("The Trouble With Memoirs" 4)

This view interprets James as "Frey's imagined person or personified coping strategy" (Hamilton "MMD" 324) and *A Million Little Pieces* as a "a story, above all of self-creation", a "narrative claim on his own torn body and psyche" (325).

The passage in which James describes how he undergoes root-canal surgery without anesthesia is an example of such a mythic exploit. The scene conveys the meaning of the greater picture of the memoir: the depiction of James as a severely wounded yet awe-inspiring individual.

> The electric pain shoots and it shoots at a trillion volts and it is white and burning. The bayonet is twenty feet long and red hot and razor sharp. The pain is greater than anything I have ever felt and it is greater than anything I could have imagined. It overwhelms every muscle and every fiber and every cell in my body and everything goes limp. (*AMLP* 66)

On this scene Frey comments:

> there has been much discussion, and dispute, about a scene in the book involving a root-canal procedure that takes place without anesthesia. I wrote that passage from memory, and have medical records that seem to support it. My account has been questioned by the treatment facility, and they believe my memory may be flawed. ("A Note to the Reader" 2)

With this statement he blames his faulty memory, but as he has admitted to exaggeration it is valid to interpret these scenes of 'false memory' as contributing to the creation of his personal mythology. If "mythos" is "where 'fact' ends and 'fantasy' begins" (Hamilton "MMI" 231) then these self-representational images of James are a fictional enhancement of some of the facts of Frey's life. James' descriptions of his arrests and altercations with the police and law enforcement officers are similarly meaningful. They are not truth-claims but representations

of violence and disorder. These events are invariably fictionalized and dramatized to illustrate the gravity of James' past behavior.

As mentioned previously there are many conflicting and incompatible forces at work in Frey's memoir, such as the ambiguity concerning genre and Frey's contradictory statements. His protagonist James' mindset is equally paradoxical. In the process of his recovery James struggles to acquire a conception of himself that can further him in pursuing a positive future lifestyle based on responsibility and strength of character. It is remarkable how James sees himself as a victim and yet simultaneously as a survivor and how he adapts psychological theories to create a personal system of beliefs. He chooses to believe those insights into his psyche that fit in with his conception of himself. He rejects A.A. but then does accept some other possible causes for his addictions that can be equally valid or ill-founded. Especially interesting is James' counsellor Joanne's introduction of the hypotheses of an actual physical childhood trauma as the cause for his addiction. In literature, trauma can be used "as a trope … to relieve suffering … but it can also rationalize dependence or aggression" (Farrell 349). Addiction is recognized as a possible symptom of trauma in the form of "dissociative and personality disorders … impulse-control and substance-abuse disorders" (6). It turns out that James had a medical condition as an infant, an ear problem which had not been properly treated and diagnosed:

> It went on for almost two years. James just screamed and screamed … James had terrible infections in both of his ears that were eating away at his eardrums. He [the doctor] said James had been screaming for all that time because he was in tremendous pain and that he had been screaming for help … He just screamed and screamed and all that time we didn't know he was screaming because he hurt. (*AMLP* 305)

Joanne indicates the relevance of this information. The physical trauma brought about feelings of animosity towards his parents and environment that caused James' psychological distress. It is a medical explanation for James' addictions:

> It helps explain, or perhaps, entirely explains, why you say your first and earliest memories are of rage and pain … When a child is born, it needs food and shelter and a sense of safety and comfort. When it screams, it is usually screaming for a reason, and in your case, it seems you were probably screaming because you were in pain and you wanted help. If those screams went unheeded, whether consciously or unconsciously, they might have ignited a fairly profound sense of rage within you, and might very well have led to some long-term resentments. That rage would help explain both your feelings of what you call the Fury, and also your particular feelings of it in regards to your Parents and in regards to issues of control with them. (306)

This psychologically founded theory provides scientific and therefore credible proof for James' rationale of 'the Fury', an inexplicable and overpowering feeling of rage which he acknowledges as one of the incentive emotions behind his compulsive behaviour and addictions. He thinks: "I have never heard about my screaming before, though it does not surprise me. I have been screaming for years. Screaming bloody fucking murder" (305). Though James realizes that 'the Fury' can be related to his ear problem and is as such a valid reason for his behaviour and addictions, he rejects and adapts the cultural cliché of the drug addict as victim of genetics or circumstance. He uses the stereotype but places himself above it, thus creating a persona of mythical proportions. Even though he claims "I do remember the pain. That is all that remains. The pain" (305) he also thinks "I try to decide if I am willing to accept genetics and ear infections as an explanation for twenty-three years of chaos. It would be easy to do so" (306). Instead he takes responsibility as he tells his parents and Joanne:

> it's an interesting theory. It probably holds some weight. I can accept it for what it is, which is a possibility. I won't accept it as a root cause, because I think it's a cop-out, and because I don't think it does me any good to accept anything other than myself and my own weakness as a root cause. I did everything I did. I made the decisions to do it all. (306)

Perhaps James' attitude: "I call it being responsible. I call it the acceptance of my own problems and my own weaknesses with honor and dignity. I call it getting better" (307), can be viewed as a critique of the 'wound culture' upon which his narrative is built, as shown before. He explicitly rejects the theory of victimhood when he says: "I'm a victim of nothing but myself, just as I believe that most People with this so-called disease aren't victims of anything other than themselves" (307). As James refuses to blame his addiction on deterministic factors such as genetics he insists that "addiction is a decision" (291). In doing so, he imagines himself as an exceptional individual. James is extraordinarily confident he can recover without the assistance of the world-renowned 'Twelve Step Program' of Alcoholics Anonymous. To him its principles are deceptive and ineffective:

> I have been to AA Meetings and they have left me cold. I find the philosophy to be one of replacement. Replacement of one addiction with another addiction. Replacement of a chemical for a God and a Meeting. The Meetings themselves made me sick. Too much whining, too much complaining, too much blaming. Too much Bullshit about Higher Powers. There is no Higher Power or any God who is responsible for what I do and for what I have done and for who I am. (76)

In these passages James takes the confessional concept but adapts it. His empowering journey of self-realization is not indebted to the conventions of religion or A.A., which he views as a kind of religion. His personal vision shows his courage to be held accountable for his own

actions. When Joanne asks him how he will stay sober without A.A. or any other support system, he explains his rather precarious method to cure his addictions:

> Every time I want to drink or do drugs, I'm going to make the decision not to do them. I'll keep making that decision until it's no longer a decision, but a way of life … As soon as I get out of here, I'm going to find a way to test myself, either in the presence of alcohol or drugs or both, to make sure that I can. (326)

Joanne objects to his idea, saying "it's an incredibly risky plan, and the probability of relapse is astronomical. The stakes are way too high" (326), but also admits that "despite the fact that I can't really endorse or condone your philosophy, I am gradually becoming a Believer" (307). Since the book's epilogue confirms that "James has never relapsed" (432) and Frey's road to recovery, from what he tells in public, has indeed been relapse-free so far, the magnitude of James' accomplishment is again emphasized. It demonstrates how the creation of the self-aggrandizing protagonist James is crucial as a coping mechanism for Frey. Frey's self-representation in the guise of James is a demonstration of the logic of addicts' "forms of self-production" (Seltzer 91) by which to imagine himself as capable to be sober James actually achieves sobriety.

The popularization of psychoanalysis and trauma theory in literature has equipped the general public with knowledge of conventional ideas about trauma (Farrell 2). The use of this increasingly familiar framework contributes to the depiction of James as a generalized and pathologized traumatized subject, namely, the addict (Seltzer 90). Frey fruitfully exploits the sensitivity of the reading public to these images of violence, pain, anger and aggression generated by 'wound culture' by employing the concept of trauma as an indication of the intensity of his experiences. The result of James' mythologizing of his life as an addict is that he becomes, similar to the cultural cliché of the psychopath, "a familiar *type* … a *character*, unusually generative of drama, conflict and intrigue" (Hamilton "MMI" 234, original

emphasis). This personality, who's addiction is a possible result of trauma, provokes many confrontations, which are a large part of the sensationalistic appeal of the book. It is indicative of 'wound culture's' fascination with "the popular understanding of trauma" which turns its focus on "the violent impact of images or reproductions of violence" (Seltzer "Wound Culture" 7). During the first days at the treatment center for instance, James' demeanor is rather indifferent but his reactions can be unexpectedly explosive. He becomes furious at the slightest conflict and a savage rage overwhelms him several times when something happens which he cannot deal with. Whereas before this aggression, "a seething will-to-destruction within him" ("MMD" 325) was aimed at himself as unleashing 'the Fury' meant using drugs, it is now redirected outwards. No longer solely self-destructive, he now takes out his frustration and anger on his surroundings.

> I want to drink and I want to do some drugs and I can't control myself …
>
> I see a tree and I go after it. Screaming punching kicking clawing tearing ripping dragging pulling wrecking punching screaming punching screaming punching screaming. It is a small tree, a small Pine tree, small enough that I can destroy it, and I rip the branches from its trunk and I tear them to pieces one by one I rip them and I tear them and I throw them to the ground and I stomp them stomp them stomp them. (*AMLP* 171-172)

The scenes in which James' aggression is projected on an external object or subject have a metaphorical meaning. It is "a crucial hyperbole, as the description is of a metaphorical opponent" (Hamilton "MMD" 327). James' attack on the tree conveys "the agony of addiction" which "involves an immortal foe who endlessly returns to enrage and be slain" (327). James almost completely destroys the tree, but is stopped by Lilly's voice. This can be interpreted as a symbolic scene in which the idea is presented that James can overcome his addictions without continuing to resort to violence with Lilly's gentle help.

Controlling the Fury equals recovery, and "by continually struggling against this dark force … James can fashion his individuality" ("MMD" 325). Many scenes prove that there is still violence in James' behaviour and attitude. When he showers he intentionally uses scalding hot water because "although it hurts, it feels good … It hurts but I deserve it" (*AMLP* 21). After a tense, emotional and frustrating conversation with his parents, James self-mutilates out of a feeling of inferiority:

> My Mother is crying, my Father staring at the floor. Joanne is down on one knee and she is whispering kind words to them, words that I do not deserve to hear …
>
> With the thumb and forefinger of my right hand, I start pulling at the nail of the second toe of my left foot. I know it's sick, a sick fucking symptom of an infected mind, but I do it anyway. I pull. I pull at the nail.
>
> It is always this toe, always this nail …
>
> It starts to break away at its tip. It starts to hurt. The Fury inside of me howls with delight. Give me more. Give me more. (266)

The focus on the body illustrates once more wound culture's display of wounded bodies and wounded psyches through which the psychological need to confess and share painful life experiences is met. In James' narrative, the Fury is personified as a force that "howls" (266) and "speaks": "the Fury speaks it says no. The Fury speaks it says turn and run" (284). This way of representing his feelings allows James to give them some sort of identity, which makes it easier to address them. He explains: "I have known the Fury for as long as I can remember. I am starting to learn how to deal with it, but until recently, the only way I knew was through drinking and drugs" (303). James learns to resist this dark force within himself. From now on, when the Fury enrages him, he bravely responds: "I say fuck the Fury. My Mother is crying. Fuck the goddamn Fury" (284). By creating this metaphorical antagonist,

and achieving that which "was always the goal, to kill it" (303), James once more mythologizes himself.

In another disturbing scene, equally emblematic for his self-destructive tendencies, James decides to remove the stitches from his jaw himself, by hand:

> If I pull them out the scar will be worse, but I don't mind scars and another scar isn't going to hurt me … As I hold my lip with one hand, I use my other hand to bring the clipper down and in and I insert the blade between the flesh and the stitch and I squeeze the clipper and the stitch snaps and I wince and a small trickle of blood starts to flow from the entry points of the thread. (118)

In the same scene, James fails to look himself in the eye when he deliberately examines his reflection in the mirror. The first time he sees his injured face since the accident, he is only capable of seeing it part by part. He is able to look at his lips, his nose, his cheek and the bruises underneath his eyes but he cannot look into his eyes. He tells us,

> I try to look at myself again. I want to see my eyes. I want to look beneath the surface of the pale green and see what's inside of me, what's within me, what I'm hiding. I start to look up but I turn away. I try to force myself but I can't. (32)

This motif is repeated three times in the book and is clearly a literary device that structures James' narrative. It figures as a litmus test for his growing self-acceptance and readiness to, literally, face himself. Only at the very end of the book, when James leaves the rehabilitation centre and goes to a bar to order a strong drink to test himself, he can muster the courage to confront his reflection. As he stares at the tall glass filled to the brim with Kentucky Bourbon and manages to pull himself away from it without taking a sip.

> There is a glass of alcohol in front of me … I put my hands around it. My hands are on the glass. I look into myself. Into the pale green of my own eyes …

> I look into myself. Into the pale green of my own eyes. I like what I see. I am comfortable with it. It is fixed and focused. It will not blink. For the first time in my life, as I look into my own eyes, I like what I see. I can live with it. I want to live with it. For a long time. I want to live with it. I want to live. (428-429)

The scene signals the completion of James' recovery and is the start of his new life.

The way in which James handles his food is also indicative for the extent to which he is in control of his compulsive tendencies in relation to substances. He frequently eats to deal with his emotions, or in other instances the food acts as a substitute for drugs or alcohol:

> My need to get fucked up has grown exponentially … Get something. Fill me. Get something. Fill me … I start devouring the food. I don't look at what it is and I don't taste it and I don't care what it is or what it tastes like. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I have something and I'm going to take as much as I can as fast as I can. Get something. Fill me. (87)

At a certain point James is capable of restraining his desires, which is a sign that he is nearly recovered:

> I eat slowly … It is a fight not to eat more, to eat three of four pieces at a time, to eat five steaks or maybe ten or as many as I can get, but it is not a difficult fight … What I have is all I need. I am happy with it … I finish and I am happy and I am full … I will resist my urge to eat everything I see, to eat myself into a coma, to eat so that I no longer feel anything, to eat until I'm beyond feeling anything. (377)

This indicates that James' lack of self-control gradually makes way for a disciplined and rational attitude towards life.

In addition to his violent personality traits, other aspects of James' personality are also displayed and emphasized. Hamilton remarks that "while complicating the construction of James' archaic manliness, the narrative's emphasis on emphatic displays further consolidates its exemplary position in wound culture" (Hamilton "MMD" 325). James' emotional side shows itself in the passages concerning the few women with whom he was involved. For example, this is how he remembers the first time he saw the girl who will become his college girlfriend. She remains nameless at this point but is described as "tall and thin, long blond hair like thick ropes of silk, eyes cut from the Arctic" (*AMLP* 60):

> I was eighteen and at School and I was sitting by myself under the orange and yellow of a fading October tree. I had a book in my hand and I as reading and for some reason I looked up. She was walking alone across the lawn of the School with an armful of papers. She tripped and the papers fell to the ground and as she bent over to get them she looked around to see if anyone had noticed. She didn't see me, but as she scrambled to pick up her papers, I saw her. She didn't see me, but I saw her. (38)

It is a stereotypical romantic scene, with an almost cinematographic singularity that betrays its embellishment and can therefore qualify as fictional. The romantic relationship between James and Lilly is likewise enhanced by the use of stereotyped images. As noted previously, the depiction of Lilly evokes a sentimentalized image of a tragic, drug-addicted young woman, so that she becomes more of a cliché than a realistic individual:

> This Girl with addictions to crack and pills. This Girl who used to sleep with men for money and hitchhiked across the Country on her back. This Girl who has been through things of which she cannot speak. This Girl with nothing. This Girl with nothing but her own strength and a desire to be free. (316)

When James portrays Lilly this way, it allows him to assume an identity in connection with her, an identity which magnifies the character traits necessary for his recovery.

In a scene especially targeted and severely judged by *The Smoking Gun*, James is portrayed as emotionally hurt by his environment. It concerns a train accident that occurred in 1976 in the Cleveland area of Michigan where James grew up ("TMWCO" 20-24). When comparing Frey's version to the verifiable facts, the fictional nature of James' story is blatant. Elements such as the death count, the time sequence and the names of the persons involved are manifestly changed and the incident itself is nearly completely invented. *The Smoking Gun* writes: "Frey's alternate reality, as you might have guessed, is not reflected in the final 16-page police report on the 1986 fatalities. There is no mention of him in the document ..." ("TMWCO" 22). The fact that Frey wrote a scene so clearly different from the real events is an indication, in my opinion, that the passage is not meant to deceive or mislead but that it is a deliberate fiction created for the benefit of the characterization of James. The memory illustrates James' view of himself as a malicious teenager. He warns Michelle, one of the accident's victims: "beware: I am as awful as people say and worse" (*AMLP* 81). The scene also depicts James as the perennial underdog, duped and misunderstood by an unfair world:

> I didn't relate to any of the Kids in the Town, they didn't relate to me. I didn't lift weights, I hated heavy metal, I thought working on cars was a waste of fucking time. At first I made a effort to fit in, but I couldn't pretend, and after a few weeks, I stopped trying. I am who I am and they could either like me or hate me. They hated me with a fucking vengeance. (80)

Michelle dies, and the emotional shock aggravates James' low self-esteem and further effectuates his psychological descent into self-hate and self-destruction which will eventually end in addiction. *The Smoking Gun* remarks how "for the fabulists' narrative purposes", a real event is turned into "narrative gold in the hands of James Frey" ("TMWCO" 22). The

flashback gives James a role that is emblematical of the self-image of a troubled individual he portrays.

James also handles this situation bravely: “I took a lot of punches for that bullshit, and every time I threw a punch back, and I threw one back every single time, I threw it back for her” (*AMLP* 82). James’ courageous disposition is also illustrated in the scene where he heroically intervenes when Lilly leaves the treatment facility after hearing that her grandmother has cancer. In her desperation, Lilly has given up all hope for the future and she has gone to Minneapolis to find drugs. Against the advice of his counsellors, James goes to find her, and the episode ends with an intensely emotional rescue. He succeeds in taking Lilly back to the facility, and admirably resists the urge to use drugs despite of being in the presence of crack.

Many passages consolidate James as morally superior and consequently add to the magnitude of his role as autonomous, self-reliant individual. For example the scene of Roy’s relapse suggests that despite Roy’s arrogant attitude, the principles he imposes on James are unreliable and even counterproductive, just as James predicted. In addition the scene shows James, “the addict … abnormally normal in his premises – ‘somehow more sane than the people around him’ ” (Seltzer 90). The scene is dramatic and contains the psychological notion of insanity as a strong image.

> He is waving the stick around, swinging at invisible enemies, and screaming at the top of his lungs. His clothes, which are old and torn, are covered in dirt and blood, as are his arms and his face and his hair, and his eyes are wide and empty, the whites a deep furnace red, the pupils and endless black …
>
> **I AM NOT ROY …**
>
> **My name is Jack and I’ll kill you. I’LL KILL YOU,YOU MOTHERFUCKER.**
>
> (*AMLP* 182-183)

After witnessing Roy's relapse and breakdown, despite his being a successful A.A. member, James calmly reflects on the incident: "I don't have a theory … I listen to the ticking of an unseen clock and I think about how a malfunctioning mind might finally lose all" (184). James "resists being contaminated by the 'savagery' he confronts, and it is in confronting it that his exceptional character is made" (Hamilton "MMD" 328).

3.2.3. Conclusion

This thesis has explored James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. The book is a work of autobiographical life writing that has been critiqued for its alleged misrepresentations and fictional passages. The work is embedded in a culture of public confession, which raises interesting questions about the contemporary literary marketplace and lays bare some correspondences with the literary tradition of the confessional.

Firstly, I have addressed the concept of authorial intention and subjectivity. James Frey's intentions are ambiguous because of his artistic background and because of the fact that any narrative representation is subjective. This means that the author's intentions can be governed and surpassed by the nature of narrative discourse. In addition, James' narrative is characterized by the inclusion of elements taken from the confessional tradition and from stereotypical stories of 'wound culture' in which private pain becomes a public spectacle. I propose that narratives can represent real events, but that especially in autobiographical life writing, the author, who is an essential referent, describes his subjective experience. The deviation from what is perceived as 'fact' is reflected in the narrator's choice of events to relate. The narrator is therefore reliable in the sense that, though subjective, his account is truthful.

Secondly, I have explored the fictional elements of the narrative in both its form and content. Stylistically, James' narrative shows some remarkable language features usually associated with prose fiction. Formally, *A Million Little Pieces* is structured with the help of devices typically also found in what is considered fictional literature. The narrative's inevitable plot structure endows meaning to the sequence of events, which culminates in James' self-representational image.

Finally, I have linked the image James projects of himself to the psychological coping mechanism of an addict/sinner who is determined to reform. *A Million Little Pieces* emphasizes those character traits of the narrator that have been crucial to his recovery. The depiction of James relies primarily on those personality features valued in both confessional narratives and in 'wound culture'. James constructs himself as a psychologically unstable individual, prone to addiction and violence, but also as sensitive and strong-willed and most importantly, capable of self-transformation. I assert that Frey has created the fictional persona of James to help him deal with his addiction and recovery in a manner that mythologizes his past and himself.

In conclusion, with this thesis I hope to have offered a response to the critiques of *The Smoking Gun*. A search for absolute referentiality in a work of autobiographical life writing diverts attention from the meaning of the narrative. In the case of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, the significance lies in James' mythical personality. To both the author and the reader the fictional identity of James has a therapeutic effect, namely, the belief in the strength of an exceptionally strong human character as a coping mechanism in the struggle to overcome addiction.

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Images

Fig.1. Terry Karydes. Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Random House, 2003. 111.

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