Autobiographies in "The Promised Land": A Tradition of Female Representation of the Self

(Louisa May Alcott, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day and Sylvia Plath)

-Summary-

An interdisciplinary approach, this doctoral dissertation titled *Autobiographies in "The Promised Land": A Tradition of Female Representation of the Self*, approaches a genre marked by a long history -autobiography-from a feminist perspective. Consequently, this research aims to bring to the fore several fundamental aspects: the late critical reception of the autobiographical writings (notably in the 20th century), the exclusion of women's contributions to the development of the genre of autobiography and feminist criticism's struggles to retrieve them, and the numerous attempts at defining the genre.

Women are old practitioners of autobiography and their most frequent written records were the letters and diaries. Their preference for confessional writings stems from the social restrictions imposed by patriarchy. As a result, in their works, women have explored their selves, projected their dreams and hopes, and most important, calmed their rage against social injustice. The exclusion of women's texts was signaled by feminist criticism in the 1970s. Although many women had been prolific writers, their works have been undermined and largely ignored by the theoreticians.

An attempt to enlarge the tradition of writing about women's autobiography, this doctoral thesis concentrates on the following works: Louisa May Alcott's autobiographical tale *Little Women* (1868-69) which takes place during the Civil War and evinces women's courage during that period; Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935) and the semi-autobiographical short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull- House* (1930), Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* (1952), works which underline women's inherent need to be socially active; last but not least, Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), an illustration of the destructive effects caused by a sexist society in modern times. In fact, I want to mention that

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull-House* and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* and Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* have not enjoyed central attention in autobiography criticism. In addition, a thorough examination and interpretation of the autobiographical texts *Little Women*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Bell Jar* aims to emphasize the fragile line between fact and fiction and implicitly between autobiography and other literary genres like the novel or the short story.

In their autobiographies, where they tell the history of their physical and mental experiences, these women writers have created literary realms solely dedicated to themselves as a group and, in the process, they have contributed to the enrichment of the canon of American autobiography. Also, in the creation of the autobiographical female type characterized by unconventionality, they have succeeded in remodeling the patriarchal conception regarding their social status initially characterized by submissiveness and dependency. Moreover, this research which looks at the different degrees of female self-assertion and the aesthetic concerns in female representation of the self in modern times, reinforces the continuum of women's autobiography by dealing with matters of content, narrative structure and style. In short, we can say that this thesis focuses on the introduction of five exceptional American women writers, marginalized in their time.

The first chapter, *Autobiography: A Theoretical Approach*, refers to some of the most important theoretical voices that deal with the main concerns of autobiographical writing. In the first subchapter, *Autobiography: Defining the Genre*, I bring to the fore the principal definitions established in the critics' attempt to find an all-encompassing one that comprises the whole range of works written so far. To some, autobiography is a biography written by the subject himself/herself that offers an insight into his/her consciousness. To other critics like Georges Gusdorf, this type of writing is a second reading of life experience, truer than the first because the subject ponders on his past in order to reflect upon its meaning. Estelle Jelinek defines it as a life-story that reflects the life of the author, while to Philippe Lejeune autobiography is "A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his own individual life and especially the history of his personality" (Lejeune, 1975:13). Last but not least, to Roy Pascal autobiography is a mixture of design and truth, underlining the genre's fictional dimension.

In the second subchapter, *Historical Development of the Genre: A Critical Review*, I underline the fact that, having developed in parallel with the other genres, autobiography has a long history during which countless texts were written. In selecting the best works for the canon of the genre, the critics took into consideration the social position of the autobiographer, the referentiality between the historical/real "I" and the autobiographical "I", and the language employed in configuring the autobiographical self. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions*, though separated in time, are the first proper works that open the canon and the tradition of the genre. They were positioned at the center of the canon and served as models for the subsequent practitioners. In them, the autobiographers focus on answering two fundamental queries: who am I? how did I become what I am? Among the many works that populate the canon, the critics consider those of modern times as being more interesting due to the overwhelming changes in the evolution of humanity in the last centuries which have generated a general high interest in the self.

After a rigorous analysis of a great number of works, the critics concluded that the principle elements that should be at the core of any such work remain sincerity and truthfulness. For this matter, as I have pointed out, Philippe Lejeune has proposed two pacts meant to reflect the author's intention to be truthful: *the autobiographical pact* which establishes the connection between the author and the narrator- protagonist as identical entities and *the referential pact* evinced through the presence of the word "autobiography" in the work's title. Even if the critics share different views in establishing the genre's rules, they submit to a fundamental one: autobiography should reflect the life-story of the author who pledges to tell how things happened.

The first part of this subchapter, *Narrative Structure: A Focus on Memory*, presents some of the general elements that are part of the autobiographical text: a vast number of characters that stretch over the entire life span, the closure which is open (the ending can be no other than the author's end) and memory as the main material for self-life-writing. Among them, memory is the most important one for it influences the truthfulness of such texts due to some important reasons. Firstly, memory is the locus where we continuously interpret our life experience in a subjective manner. In fact, it often suffers changes generated by the passage of time and the

individual's level of maturity in understanding the past. Secondly, it is limited by its incapacity to capture life experience entirely.

The section, *The Development of Autobiographical Writing in the West: A Men's Tradition*, analyzes and identifies the traits of the main works that are part of the American canon. I have noticed that, at first, by aiming to show that America had good leaders able to govern a country that struggled to become independent, the autobiographers tended to focus more on their achievements and public selves. This is the case of Benjamin Franklin who gives himself as a model of diligence and frugality, and of Thomas Jefferson who portrays himself as one of the founding fathers of America by focusing on his political life. Yet, in the tradition of this culture I also noticed the centrality of the inner self. In *The Education of Henry Adams*, although he speaks in the third person, Henry Adams explores his inner self and attempts to find the meaning of his existence. Another autobiographer, Mark Twain, opens his soul and allows the audience to enter his mind, preferring to wander through his memory and select the more ordinary facts. An unconventional autobiographer at large, unlike many of his predecessors, he dismissed the chronology and the momentous facts. However, because he seems to recreate rather than resurrect the past, we may conclude that he yields to the genre's rules only partially.

The section, *A Brief Portrayal of Women's Relationship to Autobiography*, looks at the old and close relationship between women and confessional writing, an important segment in the development of the genre largely ignored by traditional criticism. Also, I couldn't help noticing the fact that women have pioneered the genre as well and have created a tradition in parallel with that of men, enough proof that autobiography is not a genre dedicated to a particular type of subjects. Feminist criticism contests the man-based canon and proposes the rereading of the female works for the selection of the best ones. Moreover, they claim that women write differently from men and are unique writers and individuals; they also explain that their autobiographical activity has been stifled to a certain degree by some measures taken by patriarchy: they were prohibited from attending higher education and working outside the domestic realms.

The section *Women's Perspective on the Genre: A Women's Tradition* is built around Elaine Showalter's endeavor of imposing order in the evolution of women's contributions to the genre by pointing out three meaningful stages: the Feminine stage (1840-1880) during which we

witness women's urge to imitate men, the Feminist stage (1880-1920) which refers to women's reaction to patriarchy as a result of the attainment of fundamental rights (the right to vote) and the Female stage (ongoing from 1920) which is based on women's development of their own themes, literary styles and techniques.

Lastly, *The Role of Autobiography in the Evolution of Feminism* brings to the fore the fact that women's autobiographical acts rely on a different aesthetics from that of men's. Firstly, they develop a feminine writing which the feminist scholars describe as "borderless, subversive, volcanic and giving". Secondly, their works which are written in the first person, gain them confidence and authorship. Thirdly, their stories, which deal with oppression, ways of subverting it and gaining independence, bring women authority and challenge old images assigned to them in men's texts.

The second chapter, *Gender Performativity: Paradigms of Female Identity* identifies some types of women that emerged in America starting with the 19th century: the Victorian spinster, the new woman, the modern independent woman and the woman of the 1950s and 1960s. The Victorian spinster is remarkable through the fact that she rejects the idea that women are inferior to men, evinces a high interest in intellectual growth, wishes to earn her living and make decisions on her own. The new woman distinguishes herself as the first generation of women to attend college, to be entitled to vote, to be strong feminist activists, social reformers and writers. She is a radical mainly because she aims to occupy central social positions at the cost of her private life. Less radical, the modern independent woman goes to college and desires apart from a career, a family of her own. Last but not least, the woman of the 1950s and 1960s is a special case because she does not go all the way on the road to emancipation. She attends college and has dreams, yet, due to the economic growth and the great influence of the media which was advising women how to be good wives, she finds fulfillment within the domestic sphere.

In their attempt to emancipate (contrary to the social expectations which asked women to be docile, passive and seductive, and exert the traditional roles of mothers and wives) and obtain success on the professional level, we notice that C. P. Gilman, Jane Addams and Dorothy Day do not hesitate to keep their real names in their autobiographies, whereas Sylvia Plath and Louisa M. Alcott choose to be represented by their protagonists, Esther Greenwood and Jo March.

Moreover, in order to understand the factors which have determined them to reject being traditional women, I have looked at the relationships with their family members and followed their evolution from childhood to adulthood.

The first subchapter *Jo March: an Unconventional "Little Woman"* evinces the sexual politics so prevalent in the male-female relationships during the 19th century. *Little Women*, a book written for adolescents, portrays the maturation of four sisters who live in a society that encourages the early preparation of women into becoming good wives. Jo March is the most remarkable because she chooses to be a spinster and longs to become a successful writer. Perceived as a tomboy due to her rebellious spirit, Jo March sees herself as the protector of the family in the absence of her father. In fact, in her journey to discover herself, she employs a masculine behavior, uses a direct and volcanic language, represses her femininity and develops the strength of her body and mind. Encouraged by a mother with feminist views (who believes in the equality between the sexes) and a wise father largely appreciated by the community for his role as a minister, she aims to obtain rights denied to women: access to formal education, the liberty to be self-assertive, the ability to earn a living and contribute to the house expenses, and to be a free writer. An atypical character, Jo explains the social importance of the spinsters and calls for respect, underlining their spirit to sacrifice and contributions to society as educators.

The subchapter, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Achieving Public Recognition*, explores another type of unconventional women, the *new woman*. C. P. Gilman illustrates the type being a radical feminist, remarkable through her desire to act and contribute to the advancement of society. In forging her way into society, she represses her femininity, sexuality and maternal instinct. Although society marginalizes the new women and finds them unfeminine and eccentric, Gilman shows determination in her endeavor to spread her beliefs about human equality and social progress based on cooperation. In addition, she cultivates a passion for books since childhood and manages to educate herself and develop a unique mentality. At adulthood, she dislikes the concept of marriage due to her irresponsible and absent father, and her mother who, in his absence, is forced to support the family on her own. However, she yields to the social pressures and marries a talented painter. Moreover, she starts losing her individuality and suffers from a nervous breakdown that intensifies after the birth of her daughter Katherine. She divorces

and moves with her daughter to the West coast where she gains her "self" back. Here, her lectures and writings bring her the fame of an influential intellectual leader.

The subchapter *Jane Addams: an Ideal Woman* illustrates the same type of woman. Born in a family of educated people and politicians, Jane Addams received the best education for a woman at that time. Since childhood, she showed an increasing care and solidarity for the poor, feelings instilled in her by her father. Her only parent after the death of her mother when she was only two years old, he became her role model and inspired her through his rich social and political life. She attended the Rockford Seminary but failed to find an occupation that matched her potential. With the inheritance form her father, John Addams, she erected and administered the Hull-House, an institution destined to the poor and immigrants. Here, where she moved and spent the rest of her life, Addams gave herself entirely to the community's needs, failing to have a family of her own. Remarkable through her energy and skills as an orator, she constructed a social self that is unheard of among the women living in that period.

The subchapter *Dorothy Day: Replacing the Private with the Public* concentrates on another type, *the modern independent woman*. An independent spirit, Dorothy Day goes to college, works to pay her tuition and builds a career. Her father, a journalist, inspires her that is why she follows this path that very few women did at the beginning of the 20th century. Prohibited by her authoritarian father to dedicate herself to an occupation viewed as masculine, Day separates from her family and starts a life guided by her own rules. As a result, she passes through a long experience marked by poverty and loneliness; yet, driven by perseverance, self-confidence and eventually, strong faith, she encounters financial and spiritual stability. In contrast to the new woman, this one wants to start a family (views marriage as a union based on principles of equality) and reconcile the professional life with the personal one. Although Day does not marry because her life partner is not able to respect her individuality and personality, she gives birth to a girl, Tamar Teresa. Profoundly disappointed in men, and, in order to fill the gap created by many loved ones left behind, Day finds fulfillment in loving and helping the poor people living in her community.

The last subchapter, *Esther Greenwood: Going beyond "the Feminine Mystique"*, identifies the woman of the 1950s and 1960s. This type emerges after World War II, a period which meant for some the loss of their jobs and a return to the comfort and security of their

homes. This made them suffer from the "feminine mystique", a concept coined by Betty Friedan in the book with the same title which refers to women's sense of dissatisfaction with their domestic lives. Therefore, because they comply with the social regulations and limitations, the women of the 1950s and 1960s end up repressing their social self. Esther Greenwood, a brilliant Smith college student, is torn between social obligations and her career dreams. In fact, Esther's drama centers on the fear of not becoming a suburban wife, picturing the traditional marriage as the tomb of a woman's aspirations. We notice that her fear transforms into a destructive obsession as she touches upon several cases of traditional wives: her mother, her neighbor, Dodo Conway, and Mrs. Willard. She presents them as intelligent women who graduated from prestigious universities but who dedicated their time to the happiness of their families. Esther observes that her mother does not enjoy her job of teaching shorthand writing at the university, it being a simple source to provide for the family. On the other hand, aspiring to become an intellectual (a role that society finds eccentric), the protagonist turns her attention to her boss, Jay Cee, her psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, and her benefactor, the writer Philomena Guinea, women whose professional lives grow her confidence in the future. Yet, the social pressures which dictated women to explore their femininity and sexuality are so pervasive, that Esther gives in. As a result, because she grows alienated from herself, she regrets her mistakes and returns to her old self. We may say that, in the end, the protagonist reaches a certain level of maturity but not before she suffers from a breakdown, attempts to commit suicide four times and becomes institutionalized in a mental hospital.

Chapter three, *Autobiographical Practices: Types of Autobiography*, approaches some autobiographical modes employed by women and brings to the fore their incontestable literary talent. We notice that, in showing how important it is to women to be socially active, C.P. Gilman, Jane Addams and Dorothy Day create impersonal autobiographies at large. Louisa M. Alcott, who also aims to raise consciousness about women's inherent need to be social beings, adopts the third person narration and employs a nameless omniscient narrator, a technique imposed by the literary constraints of the 19th century. Sylvia Plath, although addresses the audience in the first person, does not identify with the narrator- protagonist whom she names Esther Greenwood, a measure she adopts in order to speak easily about some traumatizing

experiences undergone at twenty years old, and to fictionalize her characters inspired from reality.

In the first subchapter, "*Little Women*: A Feminist Bildungsroman", I identify the autobiography disguised as a novel, the one that embeds the first signs of feminism in the 19th century's literature and that presents the artistic evolution of the female protagonist. In *Little Women*, Jo March singles out as an artist for she focuses on achieving literary recognition. Amy, the youngest sister struggles to become a talent painter, yet, she turns her skill into a mere passion, while the other two sisters dream of becoming exemplary wives. Through Jo's special case, the narrator underlines the difficulties that women had endured in entering the male dominated world of literature. Aiming to become a renowned writer, Jo trades the small community for the big city, in search of opportunities. However, in the attempt to publish her tales, she faces rejection and hostility on account of her gender. Determined to succeed, she accepts to make compromises that ensure her acceptance into the system. For instance, she replaces the humor and the moralizing nature of her texts with violence and immorality. Ashamed of the quality of her works, Jo decides to use pseudonyms (Flora Fairfield) and in some cases even to remain anonymous. Despite her increasing success, Jo grows disappointed in herself, as well as her parents. Eventually, she changes the style of her works and writes stories for children, an initiative which brings her an unexpected success. Also surprising is the fact that her professional accomplishment determines her to think about starting a family. As a feminist bildungsroman, *Little Women* stands out through the touch of unconventionality in its ending: though we witness the marriage of the protagonist, Jo March, it fails to be traditional for it is envisioned as a partnership, community remaining central. Indeed, the ending is unexpected; however, a tale for children, *Little Women* ends on an optimistic note in order to meet the expectations of the public and of Louisa Alcott's publisher.

In the subchapter "*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*: A Life-Narrative" we notice that *The Living* celebrates the author's perception of her "living" as a performing act, as a process of continuous individual and professional growth. In the first part, Gilman describes herself as an unhappy and unaccomplished woman while, in the second part, she is a strong, tenacious and prominent person. Published in 1935, *The Living* is fundamentally grounded in realism and describes in a truthful manner the vicissitudes and personal limitations that the

author encounters in mounting onto the social scale (poverty, loneliness, a feeble memory). The main conventions of realism employed in this text are: the objective point of view, the reliable narrator, the technique of omissions and the closed ending. The narrator's objective point of view stems for instance from Gilman's confession about the mental problems that she had during her first marriage; she does not accuse anyone for her mental illness which she presents as a natural cause, as an event beyond her control. Moreover, in terms of her husband, she highlights his supportive and loving nature. Yet, she does not refrain from condemning doctors' inefficient treatments based on bodily and mental passivity. Gilman can be considered a narrator that proves reliable for she admits her experience with a person of the same sex and admits that "Dora" is a fictional name attributed to her in order to protect her identity. We notice that the narrator-protagonist respects the intimacy of her friends, revealing only personal details. The technique of omissions, common in the second part, hides some events that Gilman does not find relevant. For instance, given that the text focuses on her social self, she mentions her second marriage only towards the ending when she feels the need to point out the great friendship that characterizes this one. Widespread in the second part, the intertextuality which consists in fragments taken from her journals, indirectly point out Gilman's memory problems acquired at a young age. The ending reveals the severe illness that she suffered from (breast cancer) and her shocking decision to take her life as a measure to avoid physical degradation and idleness. The suicide note inserted in this part by her publisher, reiterates the author's perception of life as "living", as activity and usefulness.

In the subchapter "*Twenty Years at Hull-House" and "The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House": Socio-Historical Narratives*, I distinguish another autobiographical form, the memoir. This type of writing is an autobiography in which the author focuses on the public events that portray him/her as an observer and/or participant into the life of the community and, for this main reason, the critics haven't shown a particular interest in Jane Addams's works. Indeed, *Twenty Years* and *The Second* are built on a poetics of impersonality. As stated in the "Preface" of *Twenty Years*, Addams identifies with her social activity and her family stands for the people that are part of her work circle. She writes these memoirs in which she records the most representative moments in order to show her readers that the new women's dedication to dissolving social inequalities through their work in settlement houses deserved deep appreciation

from people pertaining to all social classes. Because there is hardly any detail about her inner self, we may conclude that the omissions and selection techniques stand at the core of her books. In addition, Addams suppresses her female identity, yet, instead, she plays an important part in the campaign against gender discrimination. Feminist criticism finds her works inferior and calls her a "phallic woman" because she is seen to be speaking from the posture of the universal male subject. In short, she focuses on her involvement with the social problems (has many leading positions in the administration of Chicago) and adopts an impersonal style characteristic to the male autobiographers. We may conclude that *Twenty Years at Hull-House* and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House*'s main value consists in the proof they bring about some women's extraordinary achievements.

The subchapter "*The Long Loneliness*: from Confession to Conversion" looks into the modern conversion narrative. Dorothy Day's autobiography is a conversion to Catholicism described as a journey from sin towards a spiritual enlightenment followed by *Imitatio Christi* (a concept which denotes the converted individual's dedication to a life of imitating Jesus Christ). Addressed to a female audience, *The Long Loneliness* is an invitation to spirituality and religious practice as a means to attain personal fulfillment in a society dominated by men. In Day's narrative, the journey from a sinful existence to a virtuous life implies an exploration of the self and a confession of the sins which, in her case, are minor for she brings to the fore only those committed during childhood and adolescence (theft, a vulgar language, smoking, drinking). During her life, Day undergoes a series of experiences which alternately approach and distance her from Providence (the hypocrisy of some religious people). Her physical and spiritual loneliness come to an end when her daughter Tamar Teresa is born and whom she considers a divine gift and a sign that she ought to convert. The ending portrays Dorothy Day as deeply immersed in the community's problems and meditating on the daily issues, invoking faith as the main source of power when confronted with the unknown future.

The last subchapter *"The Bell Jar": from Madness to Suicide* centers on Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. In exposing the dehumanizing treatment of women by a Western misogynistic society, Plath resorts to a series of modern elements. In her exploration of themes such as sexism, discovering the self, alienation, loneliness, nervous breakdown, Plath employs the first person narration, the unreliable narrator, the non-linear narrative and an

uncertain and ambiguous ending. In the search for her self and discovery of her female identity, Esther Greenwood, the protagonist, encounters the superior attitude with which men treat women. Affected by reality, she falls into depression and loses the control of her life especially when she is rejected from a creative writing course. Institutionalized in an asylum, Esther faces again the superior attitude and shallowness of men.

Chapter four, *Autobiography: A Genre at the Crossroad between Fact and Fiction* centers on the fine line between fact and fiction in autobiography. I leave from the premise that fiction is an integral part of literature, underlining the subjectivity of truth and its alteration in the transformation into writing. According to some critical voices, these are the main aspects which establish the difference between the real/historical "I" and the autobiographical "I". To these, Sidonie Smith adds the memory's incapacity to capture the experience entirely and the selective nature of the remembering process.

In the first subchapter, "Fact and Fiction in *Little Women*: the Story behind the Story", I identify the main fictional elements in *Little Women* and provide the truth hidden behind them. Indeed, the majority of the characters and episodes are real, however, there are also alterations and modifications that Alcott resorts to in order to comply with the requests of the audience and her publisher, but also to gain popularity. Among the fictional elements, one of the most important is the rendering of the father as an episodic character meant to hide his idealist views which in reality prevented him from being a good provider for the family. Consequently, I regard the cheerfulness of the sisters as exaggerated since Alcott was too affected by the family's problems to enjoy herself. Moreover, working hard to help with the daily expenses, Alcott never lived the romantic experiences that her protagonist Jo does. In fact, Laurie, the neighbor that falls in love with Jo, is a young Polish man named Ladislaw that Alcott befriended on one of her journeys to Europe. Therefore, Laurie/Ladislaw's marriage with Jo's youngest sister, Amy/May, at the end of the book never happened, for she married another European man and sadly, died shortly afterwards. Most important, Jo's marriage with Professor Bhaer (a fictional character) is an invention if we think that she was a spinster who spent her entire life writing as a means of providing for her family.

The second subchapter "Mental Disturbances Rendered in Fiction: "the Madwoman in the Attic" metaphor in *The Yellow Wallpaper*" emphasizes the role of fiction in the process of

consciousness raising; this short-story is built on a figurative language meant to describe the reality of female creativity. This short-story is rooted in a sad episode from Gilman's life, i.e. her breakdown caused by the bodily and mental passivity described by her psychiatrist that led to the neglect of her artistic side. In *The Yellow*, Gilman accentuates the importance of writing for women, its therapeutic role and the unusual circumstances in which women wrote (in secrecy), away from the watchful eyes of the family members. The narrator's obsession for the wallpaper and the tearing of it at the end of the text, suggests women's escape from the constraints of male textuality as well as the urge to build a literary tradition and authorship.

The last subchapter *The Invention of the Self in "The Bell Jar": Esther Greenwood vs. Sylvia Plath* identifies the similarities between Sylvia Plath and her protagonist, Esther Greenwood, an enterprise undertaken as a consequence of the many autobiographical events inserted in *The Bell Jar*. The resemblances between the author and the narrator-protagonist, which far exceed the differences between them, refer mainly to: the love for writing obstructed by the inferiority complex of a limited life experience, the satisfaction of having the control of one's life and the despair as the events don't happen according to one's expectations, the opposition and rejection of the social conventions, the need to be a popular woman, the negative feelings for one's mother as a result of the conflict between generations, the feeling of insecurity because of the loss of the father (Plath/Esther's father died when she was nine years old), these being important aspects from Plath's life when she was twenty years old.

All in all, we can state that autobiography is a complex genre. Apart from being an important site of information on people and social events, autobiography has a great potential as a literary genre, self-reflection being the main characteristic that distinguishes it from the other literary modes. As stated in chapter one, this genre has widely spread in the Western world, where, at first, writing autobiographically had meant taking pride in being an American. Today, writing in this formula as an American citizen means to have the audacity to speak about one's sinuous journey in overcoming individual and/or collective limitations. In other words, a pervasive modern literary practice, autobiography expresses the subject's concern for discovering the self, being at the same time a narcissistic practice designed to increase the self-confidence of the individual.

In my opinion, in the case of the works under discussion, autobiography is a reflection of reality which reflects women's response to the social constraints. As shown in the second chapter, the female subject creates an identity marked by unconventionality. Jo March succeeds in becoming a popular writer in an era when patriarchy was most influential, C. P. Gilman resists and becomes an influential intellectual leader in a man-made world, Jane Addams presents herself as an important political leader in a society highly corrupted by men, Dorothy Day dedicates herself to eradicating poverty and promoting good, and Esther Greenwood evinces courage in the discovery of her inner self.

In these works, the subjects aim to change old mentalities (starting with their own) in demonstrating that there is no superior/normative gender and that, in fact, both gender categories "differ from the human norm, which is social life and all social development" (Gilman, 1971:91). In addition, they strove to bring proof that women are indeed gifted writers. To do so, they explained that women write differently from men, that in their life-stories they have a tendency to depict their lives from the interior to the exterior and aim to be perceived mainly through the relationships they have. In fact, their authority stems from their speaking about the many injustices they experienced as marginalized human beings and the changes they brought to society to make it a better place.

In short, women's autobiographies have all the necessary ingredients to be included in the canon. They excite and incite for they have conflict, action and drama; also, they captivate and impress for they are insightful. Inevitably, they also contain dull and trivial details for life is not always exciting. If at times their stories lack excitement, it is because to the women autobiographers it is important to be perceived as common human beings yet who strive to be unique and to exceed their limitations.