

The Epistolary Form and Art in Modernist Literature

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ANNOTATION: In this study, letter writing in other words epistle writing is focused

This paper gives an overview of the epistolary genre and its role in literature. The attempts to define this genre, its characteristics that make it different from the other genres (autobiographies, memoirs, journals etc.) are being analyzed and its most important characteristic of having a dialogue nature is being emphasized. This paper also presents the modernist authors whose fiction is often inspired by autobiography.

KEYWORD: Letter Tradition, Epistle, modernist literature, epistolary form, epistolary tradition, letter writing and novel writing.

Introduction. The epistolary form in modernist literature, which challenge the character element of the epistolary tradition, create a connection between letter writing and the artistic process. The characters' deliberate misrepresentation of their personal experiences in their letters is similar to writing fiction. The accounts of events that characters present in their letters are partially imaginary and not solely based on fact. Like the modernist authors whose fiction is often inspired by autobiography, the letter writers in *Howards End*, *Jacob's Room*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *Miss Lonelyhearts* write about events that have their origins in the reality of the storyworld, but deliberately misconstrue what actually happens. Like fiction, their letters create a new reality. In addition, the emphasis on and depiction of composition, draws parallels between letter writing and novel writing. These connections between art and letters, lead these authors to view the letter as a *mise en abyme* of literary works.

Making connections is an important concept to Virginia Woolf's aesthetic philosophies. In her memoir *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf attempts to describe herself by describing some of her earliest memories, especially those epiphanies that have inspired her art. One particularly poignant memory is when she sees a flower and thinks, "That is the whole". Woolf believes that this wholeness is present everywhere, but is hidden by our mundane everyday experiences of living: "From this I reach what I call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern". Art, she says, is one of the things that allows us to see the patterns and connections in life and thus she thinks that "by writing I am doing what is more necessary than anything else".

Letter writing in *Jacob's Room* also tries to create connections, which is why the narrator calls letters at one point "the unpublished works of women". Female letter writers are like authors, because like Virginia Woolf, they try to look past the cotton wool and reach the patterns that bind us together.

Methodology and literature review. Betty Flanders' association with letters is exaggerated to a fantastic level in one of the most surreal scenes of *Jacob's Room*. One night Florinda comes to Jacob's apartment and

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brings a letter from his mother up with her, and the narrator, instead of reporting what happens, “creates another history”. The narrator begins to imagine that the letter is more than an inanimate object, that it has the thoughts and feelings of a loving mother, and speculates what the letter would think and what it would do if it knew that Jacob, its son, was having sex with a girl in the next room.

But if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit-box had the feelings of a mother, the heart was torn by the little creak, the sudden stir. Behind the door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence, and terror would come over her as at death, or the birth of a child. Better, perhaps, burst in and face it than sit in the antechamber listening to the little creak, the sudden stir, for her heart was swollen, and pain threaded it. My son, my son—such would be her cry, uttered to hide her vision of him stretched with Florinda, inexcusable, irrational, in a woman with three children living at Scarborough. And the fault lay with Florinda. (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 79)

Then the narrator completely stops talking about the letter and speaks directly about what Mrs. Flanders, the writer of the letter, would do if she were in the situation that the letter witnesses: **“Indeed, when the door opened and the couple came out, Mrs. Flanders would have flounced upon her—”** (Woolf, Jacob’s Room 79). In this episode, the letter completely takes on the writer’s (Mrs. Flanders’) identity, parodying the character element of the epistolary tradition. Letters were originally used in literature because their form allowed an author to record a character’s thoughts. Here, the object of the letter momentarily gains its own subjectivity.

Like Mrs. Flanders, Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is also an artist figure because of his early foray into creative writing, although he eventually abandons his ambitions as a writer and devotes himself to industry. However, the way his letters to Connie are described are a reminder of his earlier literary ambitions: **“Clifford wrote regularly. He wrote very good letters: they might all have been printed in a book. And for this reason Connie found them not very interesting”** (Lawrence 283).

The Result. Previous descriptions of Clifford’s writing are extremely similar to what he includes in his letter to Connie: **“He had taken to writing stories; curious, very personal stories about people he had known. Clever, rather spiteful, and yet, in some mysterious way, meaningless. The observation was extraordinary and peculiar. But there was no touch, no actual contact”** (Lawrence 14). The metaphor in Clifford’s letter is inspired by his experience of listening to Mrs. Bolton and is used to relate a personal story. But it is disdainful, malicious, and prejudiced. Clifford fails to connect with his reader, Connie, who already violently hates his class biases and is more concerned about the fate of Mellors than she is about her husband’s clever wording. The similarity between the descriptions of Clifford’s short stories and the content of his letter, draws suggests a parallel between the letter and his artistic endeavors. The style of Mellors’ letter, which is similar to Clifford’s, also creates connections between letter writing and art, but his writing echoes the style of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, making his letter a *mise en abyme* of the novel itself. In her article, Joan Peters argues that *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* has two distinct narrative threads that represent Clifford and Mellors specifically. The prose in the Clifford section, at first appears to be metaphorical, but lapses into cliché: **“Convenient cliché replaces vital metaphor within the fabric of the narrative itself, so that the text of the novel reflects, at the same time it fictionally creates, the tired spirit of Clifford’s world”**.

The style of this last letter in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* also serves another purpose in later editions of the novel. After the first printing of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was pirated by several presses, Lawrence wrote an essay called “My Skirmish With Jolly Roger,” explaining his disgust with the pirating of the novel, but also providing a larger explanation of key issues in the text, such as the harmony of the mind and body, the need for sex, the counterfeit state of modern emotions, the importance of marriage, and the need to return to the natural cycles of life. Currently most editions of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* end with Lawrence’s essay, which

has been re-titled by critics “A Propos of Lady Chatterley’s Lover.” So, as we experience the novel today, the high rhetoric that Mellors uses creates a bridge between the style of the novel and the essay. Viewed in light of the reader element of the epistolary tradition, letters are a way of presenting information from the storyworld to the reader. Mellors’ letter reaches outside the boundaries of the fictional world and serves as a bridge for readers between the ending of the novel and the essay; it allows readers to make connections between the issues in the novel and Lawrence’s real world concerns.

Analysis. In the character element of the epistolary tradition, letters were used to develop the character of the letter writer, because they presented that character’s thoughts to external readers. However in Miss Lonelyhearts, the letters in the text develop the character of the letter reader instead of the letter writers, because the letters written by minor characters are the source of Miss Lonelyhearts’ identity. His whole existence revolves around them. His real name is never revealed to the external readers of the book, because he is only addressed as Miss Lonelyhearts.¹⁶ The only conversations he has with other characters are about the letters. For example, Shrike constantly ridicules Miss Lonelyhearts’ job, his attempts to cope with the suffering he sees everyday, and his desire to speak to his readers about Christ. In the very first scene of the book, the clever but sadistic Shrike tortures the conscience of his columnist by satirizing a Catholic prayer, the Anima Christi, and leaving it on his desk. The other workers at the paper follow Shrike’s lead and berate him as well. The interactions between Miss Lonelyhearts and his girlfriend Betty are either directly or indirectly about the letters. He has her tell him about her childhood in order to forget the stories he reads. She thinks that if he changed jobs, he would go back to normal, but he knows that he can never escape what he has already read. All of Miss Lonelyhearts’ actions throughout the story (drinking, seducing women, avoiding work, going to the country, and being emotionless) are attempts to deal with exposure to the suffering in the letters, because the letters make him, for the first time, **“examine the values from which he lives”**. The idea that the letters in the novel contribute to Miss Lonelyhearts’ identity is illustrated by a fantasy he has as he tries to write his column. His readers write his name out of trash they find in the desert.

A desert, he was thinking, not of sand, but of rust and body dirt, surrounded by a back-yard fence on which are posters describing the events of the day. Mother slays five with ax, slays seven, slays nine . . .

Babe slams two, slams three . . . Inside the fence Desperate, Brokenhearted,

Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband and the rest were gravely forming the letters MISS LONELYHEARTS out of white washed clam shells, as if decorating the lawn of a rural depot.

In William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! letters are a way of preserving the past. As Judith Sutpen explains to Quentin Compson’s grandmother, letters are a physical record of a person’s thoughts and, unlike the ephemeral art of storytelling, can be physically passed down from generation to generation. In Absalom, Absalom!, the letter that Charles Bon writes to Judith Sutpen is the only thing that remains after the implosion of Thomas Sutpen’s dynasty. Throughout the novel Sutpen is driven to create something, like a house or a family that will live on after he is gone. His grand design ultimately fails, but the presence of this single letter, which shattered his dreams, is the sort of material evidence of his presence that he was seeking. It fulfills part of his desire for immortality by ensuring that the story of him at least will keep being told.

Discussion. In Jacob’s Room, the narrator describes letters as being “infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost.” The epistolary form itself isn’t “forlorn,” “lost,” or abandoned in early twentieth-century novels, because letters continue to be used in modernist fiction, but the character element of the epistolary tradition is gradually forsaken. One of the main reasons letters were originally used in literature is to represent character subjectivity, but letters in Howards End, Jacob’s Room, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Miss Lonelyhearts, and Absalom! Absalom! all explore how the relationship between language and interiority breaks down, challenging, and even rejecting, the idea that written language can represent subjective experience. However,

the letter in modernist fiction is also “infinitely brave,” because form is taken in new directions. The writers of the early twentieth century view the letter as a *mise en abyme* of prose fiction, creating a connection between letters and art. This association is the modernist’s contribution to the epistolary tradition—it is what separates their uses of the letters in fiction from previous uses of letters in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It also separates the epistolary form from other communicative media, which lead to miscommunication in modernist novels; the letter is a part of a theme of miscommunication that runs through the literature of the early twentieth century, but it is distinguished from face-to-face meetings, telegrams, or telephones because of its connection to the genre of fiction.

Conclusion. The article provides a more general overview of the letters’ use in modernist fiction. It uses the works of James Joyce as a case study, examining how one author’s use of the letter develops over his artistic career. According to the previously stated, it can be concluded that the epistolary genre has its ancient historic background. Based on the author's integration regarding communication either with real or with imaginary reader, the dialogic nature is dominant, as well as the subjective form of perception, i.e. the intimate provenience. It was established in this paper that the number of definitions for this literary genre, its theoretic considerations, its characteristics as well as its classifications are numerous. However, besides all of these, the fact that epistolary genre is specific narrative form which offers a lot of perspectives and opportunities for further researches remains.

The letter writers write about events that have their origins in the reality of the storyworld, but deliberately misconstrue what actually happens. Like fiction, their letters create a new reality. In addition, the emphasis on and depiction of composition, draws parallels between letter writing and novel writing.

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