



WRITING THE NOVEL OF LETTERS AND THE ANALYSIS OF LETTER FICTION AND DIARY FICTION

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the features of letter fiction and diary fiction, the definition of trends in its development in English literature on the example of scientific and theoretical studies of writers' creativity. The article clarifies the essence of the concept of letter fiction and diary fiction, identifies the main features this direction, theoretical views and the essence of research on these issues are outlined.

Keywords: Epistolary Approaches, the private letter, the letter strategy and the diary strategy, letter fiction and diary fiction.

Аннотация: Статья посвящена анализу особенностей письменной и дневниковой прозы, определению тенденций ее развития в англоязычной литературе на примере научно-теоретических исследований творчества писателей. В статье уточняется сущность понятия литературного и дневникового промысла, выявляются основные черты этого направления, излагаются теоретические воззрения и сущность исследований по этим вопросам.

Ключевые слова: Эпистолярные подходы, частное письмо, стратегия письма и стратегия дневника, вымысел письма и вымысел дневника.

The epistolary novel is a unique storytelling method that blends a nonfiction medium with a fictional narrative. Though writing an epistolary novel can feel restrictive due to its rigid formatting, it actually allows for a nearly boundless amount of creative expression and storytelling techniques.

Even with a definition that is not always set, there are a number of attributes found in the private letter that are not found in the diary or the blog entry, and which in many cases will influence the narrator(s) of the novel of letters in ways that sets it apart from the other varieties of fragmented, personal writing. In *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form*, Janet G. Altman argues that there are a number of narrative and thematic structures particularly salient in letter novels, and their presence can be credited to how the letter works in communicating between people: "In numerous instances the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influences the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works" (Altman 4). She singles out a number of contradictory motifs of narrative in letters, relating to the very nature of the letter as mode of communication.

Altman defines epistolarity by whether or not meaning is created through characteristics inherent in the letter. She finds many examples of epistolary stories where the letters are not merely the vessels of passing on words, but where the existence of these letters as physical objects and devices of communication, and the implications they make about the relationship between the writer and her recipient(s), are a significant part of how the reader will interpret the story. Perry also notes the emphasis on separation and the longing for reunion that is so

frequently displayed in epistolary novels; frequently the relationship in question is either unwanted by some outside force, or outright illicit. The privacy of the letter was not only a convention, but a necessity; isolation, whether physical or social, drove the lonely letter-writer into putting her feelings down on paper. If the correspondence was secret, it was frequently the case that these illegal letters were not be limited to mere conventions of storytelling, but became objects that altered the flow of the plot as they were stolen or otherwise lost and read by the wrong eye; both Perry and Altman note how the physical letters often are treated as replacements for the absent writer in epistolary novels. As mentioned above, Perry believes that the lack of direct communication made the fictional letter-writers connect not directly with the person they are writing to, but with a personal projection of this person based on memory and interpretation of their letters. More than that: through writing about their love, the epistolary letter-writer are “seducing themselves”; the act of writing about their love for another person is in fact a major factor in keeping this love alive.

When the working definition of “epistolary fiction” is “fiction narrated through the form of documents”, there are obviously further distinctions to be made within the genre – a newspaper article will never be written in the same style and with the same intent as a private letter between husband and wife. The *Color Purple* is sometimes described as a diary novel, which is not surprising given the conditions under which Celie writes her letters to God in particular, but also to Nettie – they are in part written without expecting answers, and at least in part written without expecting to be even read. Celie does not think of her letters as anything else than just that, as written documents saying the things she wishes to tell the recipients she cannot speak to in person. But regardless of Celie’s presumed thoughts on the topic, common sense and studies of the two styles in fiction suggest that there are differences between the letter addressed to others, however intimate, and the diary addressed to the self, however unconscious.

Abbot has one stance: The letter strategy and the diary strategy are so similar that what can be said analytically about the one is frequently transferable to the other the difference, then, between a study of epistolary fiction and a study of diary fiction derives not from a strict semantic distinction between 'letter' versus 'diary', but from a difference in focus or emphasis. As he commences to discuss what he perceives to be the peculiarities of the diary style, Abbott includes novels usually regarded as “traditionally” epistolary (that is, letter novels) because of the above cited similarity of form, but difference in focus: the issue is not the the existence of the addressee, but “the degree to which the addressee is given an independent life and an active textual role in the work”. He illustrates by way of *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, where Werther's main correspondent, Wilhelm, is “unchanging, represented for us entirely through Werther's words, he is easily conceived as Werther's other self, the solid rational self that Werther seeks to override”. Altman (to whose study on epistolary narrative Abbott refers) considers the Wilhelm-type figure to be a “passive confidant” whose only purpose in the narrative is to receive information, to be told things that she cannot witness; she is, in Altman's words, “the sounding board to the hero's sentiments”. Lorna Martens says on the same example: “If the recipient in an epistolary novel is a confidant, an alter ego whose personality does not affect the tone or content of the letter writer's utterances, the fictive reader all but disappears”.

Altman is also quite clear on the differences in mentality behind a diarist writing for herself, and the letter writer who reaches out to her addressee:

The particular you whose constant appearances distinguishes letter discourse from other written discourse (memoir, diary, rhetoric) is an image of the addressee who is elsewhere. Memory and expectation keep the addressee present to the imagination of the writer. But it is not only on the level of the psychological state of the letter-writer/narrator that the existence of this other person is a crucial influence: the very rhetoric of letters – as opposed to diaries – relies on the presence of another person, and a unique, tangible relationship between the writer and the reader. Abbott defines the unclear relationship between the letter and the diary novel by terminology and association: “The term ‘diary’ evokes an intensity of privacy, cloistering isolation, that the term ‘letter’ does not”. A similar observation is made by Martens, who remarks that the diary evokes “not only a certain form but also a certain content, a particular context or specific accompanying circumstances, and an implicit purpose or legitimation”. As a counterpoint, what Abbott defines as the “diary mode” can be found in writing not defined as diaries or journals. Gerald Prince writes, it is not a superficial journal shape which particularizes a diary novel. I say this not only because a third-person narration respecting that convention, or a fictional log, a ledger, a cashbook, would not constitute a diary novel, but also because some well known diary novels do not adopt to that exterior shape.

Prince defines the diary novel as “a first first-person novel in which the narrator is a protagonist in the events recorded”, and in which the time of narration (Erzählzeit) is fragmented, where events are narrated as they happen rather than in retrospective. The lack of an addressee is no does not distinguish the diary novel from the letter novel, as there are many examples of diarists writing with one or more readers in mind. Prince concludes that “what makes a diary novel unlike any other kind of narrative is, rather, a theme – or more precisely, a complex of themes and motifs”. That theme is the very keeping of a diary, and all that is associated with it:

The origin of the diary, the circumstances of its publication, its physical shape, its dialectical relationship with the narrator: some or all of these problems, as well as others related to them are re-examined to a greater or lesser extent in every work considered to be a diary novel. Most of Abbot’s trademarks of diary fiction connect to the isolated individual consciousness that struggles with itself; he defines the difference between epistolary and diary fiction not as a matter of intention, but as a matter of the overall effect of the narrative: the strategic decision that the author makes is not the decision to have periodic entries in letter form or in diary form, but the decision to create cumulatively the effect of a consciousness thrown back on its own resources, abetted only by its pen. This effect is enabled by a proportional suppression of other writing, writing by narrators or correspondences This, in turn, is remarkably close to what Perry argues in her discussion on how isolation (social or emotional) affects the writers in the novel of letters. She claims that the process of writing letters well might be an act of communication, but that the recipient in the letter-writer’s mind is not so much the person that she has been separated from for days, months or years, but often a fantasy stand-in made up of the writer’s imagination as she has read the letters she in turn received, and her memories of this person the last time they were together: “This accounts for the uncanny tenacity of epistolary relationships, because events in the imagination often have stronger hold on a person than do physical experiences in the

material world". Writers in epistolary novels might write to another person, but they will often write for themselves, to settle their own feelings and find their own catharsis.

The isolation of the characters is essential to the epistolary formula because it throws the characters back into themselves, to probe their own thoughts, their own feelings what the characters enact in their seclusion is at the core of the epistolary novel: a self-conscious and self-perpetuating process of emotional self-examination which gains momentum and ultimately becomes more important than communicating with anyone outside the room in which one sits alone writing letters.

It has been hard to determine what exactly constitutes a diary, what defines diary fiction, where the line goes between diary fiction and letter fiction and how these two genres differ from each other. The closest consensus from the scholars discussed here is that letter fiction often is intensely focused on the existence of a reader, while diary fiction in its purest form is focused on the isolation of the self, and the self-consciousness in writing something that is directed at this self rather than recipients that cannot be reached with the spoken word. When dealing with two forms that are at once very much alike and essentially different from each other, it is likely wise to consider which expectations and prejudices the reader of such fiction brings along as she approaches the text. At the very least, the wish to make the distinction suggests that this distinction carries a meaning, however trivial it might appear in most examples.

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