



## EPISTOLARY COMPARISONS AND TRENDS

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### ABSTRACT

*The article investigates that it is a unique story, created by the author and inspired by events both real and fictional. However, these collections of letters have more in common with other forms of fiction than basic structure and means of inspiration. The authors of epistolary novels face similar challenges and embrace similar possibilities as other authors of fiction, but the individual works have their own sets of unique characteristics that span generations and connect works from age to age. The greatest of these connections lies in the appeal of the epistolary novel as a personal of expression.*

**Introduction.** The epistolary novel, like any other type of novel, tells a unique story, created by the author and inspired by events both real and fictional. However, these collections of letters have more in common with other forms of fiction than basic structure and means of inspiration. The authors of epistolary novels face similar challenges and embrace similar possibilities as other authors of fiction, but the individual works have their own sets of unique characteristics that span generations and connect works from age to age. The greatest of these connections lies in the appeal of the epistolary novel as a personal of expression. Every epistolary novel draws from attributes of the letter and other forms of the novel. Similarities are found in the authors' reasons for choosing the epistolary style as well as in the popularity of specific versions of the epistolary novel. Each author uses the same set of literary tools but uses them to create very different effects. The easiest comparisons to draw between the different epistolary novels used in this study are in their common attributes. Any fictional work that is primarily composed of letters qualifies as an epistolary novel, but the rules for the epistolary novel stop there.

**Methodology.** The epistolary author has the freedom to elaborate upon this basic structure. One of the most obvious differences between the works cited in this thesis is their length. The epistolary novel may be composed of as few as five letters, as in *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, or over one hundred letters, as in *Pamela*. The stories last only as long as the correspondences last or as long as the correspondents live, as in the case of Martin in *Address Unknown*. A second attribute easy to compare between epistolary novels is the divisions made in the book. Many epistolary novels do not have divisions other than the individual



letters, but for creative and dramatic effect, some epistolary novels have chapter divisions. Both *Dracula* and *Ella Minnow Pea* have chapter divisions that are specific to the events occurring in the novel. In *Ella Minnow Pea*, each time a letter or a couple of letters falls off the statue of Nevin Nollop, those letters become forbidden and a new chapter begins. Each chapter heading starts with a list of the twenty six letters in the

English alphabet, with an asterisk in place of the forbidden letters. The chapter divisions in *Dracula* are more complex. Each chapter includes letters and diary entries from one or more character, but the chapters vary in length from just a few pages to over twenty pages. The chapters divide the series of events occurring within the story and end with either a resolution or a cliffhanger. Just as epistolary novels and their chapters vary in length, so do the letters themselves. The letters in *Pamela* and in *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* are multiple pages long, and go into great detail describing what happened. However the letters in *Address Unknown* and *Ella Minnow Pea* are sometimes only one sentence long. This sentence brevity is particularly effective in these works to show urgency and to demonstrate the dangers posed by the antagonistic censoring of the letters. With a steadily disappearing alphabet, the Nollopians are forced to make up words with what little alphabet they have left and even resort to using numbers. Their linguistic creativity also decreases the length of the letters composed towards the end of *Ella Minnow Pea*, as is the situation in this letter:

“Ella, Pharewell. Pharewell. Tho we were not phrents 4 long, I will so miss ewe. Ewe are strong. It is goot that ewe are lepht. We wish ewe well with Enterprise 32. We wish ewe well with ephereething ewe trie to asheeph in these trying phinal taes. To asheeph 4 Nollop. 4 all we espatriot Nollopians. The Nollopian tiaspora!”

Aphetionatelee,

Tanea ant phamilee

PS. “H” has phallen. (Hee hee, ho ho. How totallee irrelephant to mie lieph now!<sup>1</sup>

**Results.** The letter is short, though direct and informative, because it has to be. However, it still shows the creativity of the author as well as the sense of humor of the characters. Brevity of letters does not necessarily mean sacrifice of quality or content. The novelistic plot of the story such as conflict, climax, and resolution provide differences in the number of characters as well as the level of involvement of the characters. Both *The Letters of A Portuguese Niin* and *The Screwtape Letters* have only one letter writer, but they both include numerous other characters. *Address Unknown* only has two letter writers, and *Dracula*, *Ella Minnow Pea*, and *Pamela* all have multiple letter writers. The number of letter writers does not limit the number of characters that may be involved in the story, but rather the type of story being told limits the number of characters. Far less obvious correlations may be drawn between the types or categories of epistolary novels. Novels are divided between hundreds of specific categories, but a few examples of the basic categories are mystery, adventure, historical, biographical, romantic, and political. The epistolary novel was a precursor to the novel form common today and many of these same categories are found in epistolary novels. Many epistolary novels even employ more than one of these basic

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn, Mark. *Ella Minnow Pea*. First Anchor Books. New York: Random House, 2002.



categories. Dracula has qualities of mystery, romance, and adventure. The Letters of A Portuguese Nun is both romantic as well as political. Ella Minnow Pea could be considered an adventure and political novel. Address Unknown is obviously political, but also has a romantic as well as a historical side. Pamela is both political and romantic. The Screwtape Letters is primarily instructional, but the story line has an adventurous side as well. These basic categories of the epistolary novel provide for deeper exploration of the epistolary constants across the lifetime of the epistolary novel. Researchers can look at the evolution of the romantic epistolary novel or they can make comparisons between early adventure epistles and modern adventure epistles. By categorizing epistolary novels into distinct types it is easy to find similarities and differences in characters and plots and even the physical letter writing styles. Although the tastes of readers change with what is going on in the world around them, many qualities of the epistolary novel have remained the same over the last four hundred years.

The fundamental appeal of the form to both writer and reader is grounded in the idea that "letters in fiction are particularly fascinating because they add a third layer of complexity to a work: not only are there the perspectives of the writer and the recipient, but there is that of the author of the work".<sup>2</sup> The personal quality and intimacy of the letter is also certainly one of the most appealing aspects to writers and readers of the epistolary novel, and this quality has not changed with literary fashions or trends. Critic Debbie McVitty explains, "what links these [modern] novels to eighteenth-century novels is largely their implication that some form of truth or authenticity can be accessed through personal letters, or access to a secret, intimate narrative".<sup>3</sup> The simplest quality of the epistolary novel is also its most powerful quality. Letters are personal, simple, not intimidating, and that allows them to interest people of all time periods.

**Analysis.** Every book is held together by an organizing principle; it may be the author's reason for writing; it may be the author's desire to have readers respond in a certain way; and it is usually a combination of the two. The organizing principle is not only the theme of the book, but also the book's purpose. English students are taught that literature is a form of entertainment and pleasure, but it is also a means of informing and affecting. Specific trends and similarities in the themes of epistolary novels can easily be seen in these purposes of informing, affecting, and entertaining. Although most epistolary novels have a tendency to lean toward the sentimental and romantic hero and happy ending side, recent studies have emphasized the power of the "disruptive rather than personal" quality of letters, and therefore the disruptive rather quality of epistolary novel.<sup>4</sup>

This trend is evident in Address Unknown. Kressman Taylor selected the epistolary form because it was familiar but also strong enough to register emotion in her readers. One critic explains how the once sentimental style of writing has found a new home in the category of realism, in the "trend away from thematic and structuralist criticism and toward meticulous

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<sup>2</sup> Ludington, Townsend. "Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture." Biography Fall 2002: 685 (4). Gale. Student Resource Center-Gold. University of Mississippi. 23 Sep 2008.

<sup>3</sup> McVitty, Debbie. "Lives in Letters: epistolary fictions past and present." The English Review Feb 2007: 32 (3). Student Resource Center-Gold. Gale. University of Mississippi. 23 Sep 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Gilroy, Amanda. Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture. Ed. W.M. Verhoeven. Charlottesville, Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 2000.



cultural historicization: the epistolary generic contract is always revised in the light of changing.<sup>5</sup> The idea that the epistolary novel provides a means of social commentary is nothing new, but rather one of the strongest existing corollaries between early and recent epistolary novels.

One of the fundamental attributes of the epistolary novel is its possibility to comment directly and indirectly on social and political situations. Pamela and Address Unknown, though written hundreds of years apart, exemplify this version of social commentary. Although Pamela was written as a semi-instructional book for women on writing letters and Address Unknown was specifically written to make a statement about the dangers of the Nazi party, both works mount serious attacks on what was considered acceptable and normal to some groups of people.

**Discussion.** Katherine Kressmann Taylor chose the letter form to write her story because it showed how something as simple and seemingly harmless as a letter could cause extreme danger in severe situations. Kressmann originally planned to tell the story of the college students fearing for their lives and the two friends corresponding across war torn seas in a more conventional narrative complete with dialogue, but Kressmann decided the story must be told in letters because the form better conveys intense and honest emotion. Her husband even advised her to publish under a male pseudonym because the story was too strong to appear under the name of a woman".<sup>6</sup> The fundamental transparency of the letter form and the image of an "address unknown" letter on the last page create the feelings Kressmann desperately wanted from her readers. While Pamela was not designed as a direct social commentary, it inadvertently made drastic assertions about the treatment of servants, especially females, and the clash of poverty and wealth in 18<sup>th</sup> Century English society. Critic Amanda Gilroy explains that through his novels, "Richardson uses the epistolary form to challenge the dominance of the aristocracy: the novel is an agent of cultural revolution".<sup>7</sup> Pamela is a teenage servant girl, capable of expressing intelligent thoughts and driven by both her adherence to virtue and morality as well as her understanding of her worth as a human being. These novels were making historical social commentary whether or not they were intended to do so. Both Richardson and Kressmann turned the pen around to write socially disruptive novels using the epistolary form to challenge existing belief systems and to pave the way for forward thinking. The idea of a voice given to the voiceless has become one of the main effects of social commentary epistolary fiction. The physical character portrayed by Pamela would have been at the bottom of the list of people who are worthy of listening to by the reading class. Richardson used his knowledge of the treatment of the serving class in combination with his literary skills to write Pamela's story. The upper class of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century may not listen to a girl of Pamela's station, but through Richardson's novel they could read about her and secondarily witness her afflictions. The epistolary mode, previously

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<sup>5</sup> Favrel, Mary A. *Roman the Correspondence: Women, politics and the fiction of letters*. Ed. Marilyn Butler. James Chandler. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Perry, Catherine. "Guide to the Kathrine Kressmann Taylor (Rood) Papers." Gettysburg College Special Collections. July 2007 1-8. 19 Nov 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Gilroy, Amanda. *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction. Culture*. Ed. W.M. Verhoeven. Charlottesville, Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 2000.



mentioned, is particularly effective at involving the reader's emotions, and therefore portrayed Pamela's experience well, because she spoke directly to the readers. This effect has been repeated through epistolary fiction throughout the last four hundred years. The character of Celie, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, is a modern example of the effect of the letter giving an opportunity for the silence to be broken. A poor black female in the 1930's South was, socially speaking, voiceless. Celie is no exception to this voiceless population, however; she was educated in reading and writing and through her letters to God she is given the opportunity to express herself. Her self-expression is particularly effective because her letters are written in dialect which helps to develop her character as well as to transport the reader into the setting. Celie is, in society's opinion, a nobody, but her words are bold and vivid and her letters are full of emotion that the readers cannot help but feel. Kauffman explains how well this functions in the epistolary form, "Walker's hybrid blending of epistolary and slave narrative is uniquely suited to that process as process.. .a meticulous representation of the tensions that arise from estrangement from and in language".<sup>8</sup> Like Pamela, Celie's letters give her a strong voice to describe her situation and to evoke sympathy and action from her readers. Pamela and *The Color Purple* are just two of many examples of the epistolary form being used by a seemingly insignificant person to speak out to the masses, and it is a technique that has not faded with the evolution of epistolary fiction.

Alongside the ability of the epistolary form to give a voice to the voiceless is the trend of letters being associated with the female gender. Many studies exist that have associated the female voice with a particular talent for letter writing, "That a 'feminization' of letter writing occurred in ... the second half of the seventeenth century ... and by the early eighteenth century letter writing was widely regarded as a genre in which women excelled".<sup>9</sup> Deborah McVitty notes that one male commentator even called women "the Sex, who beat us all to nothing in Conversation and Letter-Writing".<sup>10</sup> Researchers attribute this to the innate familiarity and intimate nature of the letter form. Letters are by nature personal because they are written directly from one person to another, and historically, women were capable of writing about matters of the heart and home, and men wrote about everything outside of the home. This idea coincides with the development of the epistolary form of fiction. Critic Thomas Beebe calls this idea the "lettered woman," and explains, "the epistolary novel became an important cultural vehicle for giving women a voice, both as characters and as authors".<sup>11</sup> This trend is clearly exemplified through early epistolary novels, and particularly through modern ones.

Other trends in epistolary fiction are often a result of the ease of the epistolary style to lend itself to specific purposes of writing. These purposes include letters of advice, communication and pleasure. Another trend in epistolary fiction comes from the appeal of the

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<sup>8</sup> Kauffman, Linda S. *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Earle, Rebecca. *Epistolary Selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600-1945*. Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> McVitty, Debbie. "Lives in Letters: epistolary fictions past and present." *The English Review* Feb 2007: 32 (3). Student Resource Center-Gold. Gale. University of Mississippi. 23 Sep 2008

<sup>11</sup> Beebe, Thomas O. *Epistolary fiction in Europe 1500-1850*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. 1999.



letter as something that physically exists, an object involved in the story that combines the realistic with the created. Kauffman explains, "Letters have long functioned to defamiliarize the distance between fiction and reality by drawing attention to the fictiveness of the narrative act".<sup>12</sup> This idea of fictitious narration was thought have been avoided by the early employers of the epistolary novel. However, modern writers use the close distance between the characters and the readers to create, an "implied" narrator. The characters themselves, by instructing or expressing thoughts, are, in a sense, narrating the story, not to each other but to the reader. The narration style is omniscient because the story is progressing as the letters are being revealed to the characters. Epistolary novels do not physically have a central narrator, but rather a narrative style is created through the act of reading the letters. Researcher Thomas O. Beebee addresses this point as follows: "Like our own lives, epistolary novels may have no narrator at all, since the letters written simultaneously comprise elements of plot, and only become narrations when 'overheard' by the reader of the novel".<sup>13</sup> Writers of epistolary fiction have learned to use this natural effect to carry a theme or message throughout their story. Each author chooses the epistolary form based on something that it does well or something that it does uniquely. These strengths and challenges have been explored in the previous chapters, and the authors and readers adequately explain their justifications in choosing the epistolary form. However, one of the strongest appeals of the epistolary form, both at time of its creation and today, lies in its originality. It was new, and therefore appealing to writers and readers alike. Beebee explains how many authors liked to try on different styles of writing, and the epistolary form was not an exception to this:

"From Jane Austen to Fyodor Dostoevsky, used the form for juvenilia or other experiments before settling on their preferred form of omniscient narration".<sup>14</sup> This tendency and appeal is evident in the works of the modern epistolary novelists. When asked in an interview about his choice of the epistolary style for the novel *Ella Minnow Pea*, Mark Dunn replied:

"I look at letter writing as a form of conversation, you just have to wait a little longer to get the answer back. It allows me to use the voices of my characters in a very conversational style, albeit in this particular book I do put some pretty formal language restrictions on the characters. But dialogue, I think, is one of the strengths of my writing. I call it a challenge, but it was also incredibly fun."<sup>15</sup> Dunn points out what is at the heart of the epistolary form, language. The letters act as conversations, not only between characters, but between the author and the reader.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion I believe I have gained not only a better understanding of the epistolary form and its history, but also answers to the questions previously posed: "Why write through letters" and "Why do different authors use the epistolary method, and how do

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<sup>12</sup>Kauffman, Linda S. *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Beebee, Thomas O. *Epistolary fiction in Europe 1500-1850*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Beebee, Thomas O. *Epistolary fiction in Europe 1500-1850*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Dunn, Mark. *Ella Minnow Pea*. First Anchor Books. New York: Random House, 2002.



they use it to create different types of effects?" My studies support the idea that epistolary fiction is proficient at creating literature that centers around language and communication without sacrificing the plot usually associated with novels. Writers have a variety of reasons for choosing the epistolary form including writing for amusement, looking for a change or a challenge, and also writing to combine reality and fiction. Writers select the epistolary for these reasons, which are based on what the form does well, and what it offers to readers and writers alike. The strengths of epistolary fiction lie in the strengths of letters themselves. From salutation to signature, letters replace dialogue and character interaction with a personal expression of information, advice, or emotion. The epistolary form gives the characters and words the most power; characters are developed through their writing. Characters write not to tell a story to the reader, but to communicate between themselves. These words are not written to describe a narration of events that the reader witnesses secondarily, but rather the words are written as words that are supposed to be read. This creates a unique opportunity for authors to involve their readers in a role similar to that of the characters. Authors face specific challenges to using the epistolary form effectively, which derive from a number of sources such as tendencies of repetition, over-expression, and a difficulty to clearly separate events. The possibilities or strengths of the epistolary form, however, are what unites works of epistolary fiction since its creation. The effects created by the epistolary novel are seemingly endless, but among the different effects mentioned in this thesis one stands out. The epistolary form is personal. Because it is an expressive form of communication, each letter adds a depth to the characters that appeals to the readers in a personal nature.

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